

Socioeconomic Disparity in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract

The present study investigates the theme of socioeconomic disparity in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*. Economic inequality and racial discrimination are social problems that talk about the poor people's plight at the margin, away from the power structure's centre. It is a concern of contemporary relevance and, therefore, calls for a more in-depth investigation. The theme of socioeconomic disparity manifests the seamier side of civilization, but coping with these problems bring dignity. *The Grass is Singing* shows the horrific effects of socioeconomic disparity on both the white colonial rulers and southern Africa's black populations. The novel is a chronicle of apartheid and late capitalism in the life of Southern Rhodesian society. This novel is a tragic novel portraying a failed marriage, racial and economic discrimination in Southern Rhodesia. Lessing, as a writer, prefers to write about reality instead of creating some imaginary world. She has always been against the ill or inhuman treatment of whites to their black servants. She has tried to show the possession of economically weaker sections of society. The white people ill-treat the black labor class, and their male counterparts ill-treat the females. The present study focuses on the plight of economically more impoverished sections of Southern Rhodesia society.

Keywords: Socioeconomic disparity, economic inequality, racial discrimination, and inhumanity.

Introduction

The Grass is Singing is a tragic novel portraying a failed marriage, racial and socioeconomic discrimination in Southern Rhodesia. It is a story of a white couple Mr. and Mrs. Turner. Dick Turner is a failed farmer, and his wife Mary Turner belongs to the town and prefers to live the life of a sophisticated town girl. She hates the farms and the blacks. She even hates their way of living and doing the work.

Lessing's novel, *The Grass is Singing*, is such a "little novel about the emotions" seen through the Marxist lens. The book shows the horrific effects of socioeconomic disparity and racial prejudice on both the white colonial rulers and southern Africa's black populations. The novel's title has been taken from part 5 of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). The novel is a story of Lessing's personal experiences and the class struggle in South Africa, where the whites didn't accept blacks as humans and humiliate them in one or another way. Mary Turner, the protagonist, finally meets her doom because of the injustice done towards the black natives.

The Grass is Singing: A reflection of socioeconomic disparity

The Grass is Singing is a gloomy analysis of a failed marriage and the neurosis of white sexuality. The novel depicts the fear of black power that Lessing saw as underlying Africa's white colonial experience. The novel's treatment of Mary and Dick Turner fortune's tragic decline becomes a metaphor for Africa's real white presence.

Lessing, as a writer, prefers to write about reality instead of creating some imaginary world. She has always been against the ill or inhuman treatment of whites to their black servants. The whites are still superior to blacks. They were afraid of the natives and thought they could go for any strenuous activity for whites; they are savages, and Mary has the same thought about them. "In her childhood, she had been forbidden to walk out alone, and when

she had asked why, she had been told in the furtive lowered, but matter-of-fact voice she associated with her mother that they were nasty and might do horrible things to her." (Lessing, 59)

Lessing has shown white people's brutalities on the black laborers who ill-treat them both in the farms and the houses. She has also demonstrated the cruelties of men over women. She has tried to show the possession of economically weaker sections of society. The white people ill-treat the black labor class, and their male counterparts ill-treat the females.

Listen to me, said Dick curtly. 'I work hard enough, don't I? All day, I am down on the lands with these lazy black savages, fighting them to get some work out of them. You know that. I won't come back home to this damned fight, fight, fight in the house. Do you understand? I will not have it. And you should learn sense. (Lessing, 78)

Production and consumption are the basis of every society, and establishing a communist society can eliminate all these inequalities. Being a white, Lessing still hates the white rule in Africa because of its inequality and injustice towards the blacks. This rule of white colonials has badly haunted her from her childhood. The novel is a chronicle of apartheid and late capitalism in the life of Southern Rhodesian society.

In the novel, there is a depiction of the overarching racial and socioeconomic hierarchy. It is made up of an intricate web of smaller hierarchies that shows how each person is related to each other and how they are supposed to behave. As a woman, Mary, who is economically weaker, is subservient to her husband, Dick. As a white person, Mary has authority over the black workers employed on her land (overall black people). While Mary enthusiastically wields and abuses her power over the black population, she often fails to protect her husband's position.

Money is a culture where being rich provides superiority. Charlie Slatter is an example of such success. He uses his financial power to respect the community and take over Turner's farm. On the other hand, Turner's lack of money adds to the community's dislike of them. In this instance, their lack of funds reduces them to the level of the natives. For the sake of appearance, the community must pretend to support them.

Indeed, every character in the novel is aware of the disparity and hierarchies that organize society and their place within the community. When Mary becomes aware of this inequality, she runs away from her house to regain her independence, and when Moses continues to drink water even after Mary asks him to go back to work. However, the most critical violation of any hierarchy of power comes when Moses kills Mary.

In white people's eyes, Moses commits the worst possible act by killing Mary Turner. At the beginning of the book, when Mary's murder is discussed, the narrator expresses that white people are not surprised by Moses's act. Black people are expected to behave in a "savage" immoral manner. Regardless of how black people behave, white people will treat them as brutal and violent. This fact invites violence against white oppressors and is thus one of society's central (and tragic) paradoxes.

The white characters in the novel behave in a far more brutal manner than any of the black characters. Even Moses's murder of Mary is arguably not an act of brutality but rather a reasonable response to the experience of racial oppression. Moses's act of cruelty is a response to the brutality he is subjected to as a native person living under colonial rule.

Lessing's exploration of feminine sensibility centers on Mary. She explores how (white) femininity becomes a conflict source in the novel's world. White women occupy a contrary position of power and powerlessness within a racist society. While they are oppressed based on their gender, they are oppressors within the racial order. The narrator clarifies that Mary oozes out her feelings of powerlessness and frustration upon the black workers. In this way, white femininity can become even more ruthless than white masculinity within the context of colonial society.

Mary becomes increasingly mentally unstable due to her treatments regarding sexuality,

maternity, and socialization in general. The suppression of her feelings can be seen through the nightmares she experiences both desires for Moses and her father's terrifying memory of her sexual abuse. This repression ultimately cannot hold and causes Mary to treat people around her with extreme cruelty and lose her grip on reality. In this sense, white femininity is presented as being a potentially poisonous and dangerous ideal. Through this novel, Lessing has depicted the plight of economically more impoverished sections of Southern Rhodesia society.

Since marriage is considered the final and only destiny for women, Mary is also forced into marriage by society's pressure. She accepts the proposal of Richard or Dick Turner, a struggling farmer. She marries Dick, but he might have been anyone because this marriage is not based on love and understanding but social oppression. Under social pressure, Mary does not lose her will to resist. Society pressures a woman to get married so that she can become economically stable. But the reality is entirely different. In the novel, before marrying Dick, Mary epitomizes a modern, independent form of womanhood; she is independent, pleasant, and pretty. But Mary's marriage to Dick turns into a disaster for many reasons. She imagines that she can attain her freedom and economic stability back if she returns to the town. Her dream to restore the past life is soon lost due to the conflict between individual and social forces in her psyche:

...she allowed herself to dream of the beautiful time when she worked in the office...and lives as she pleased, before 'people made her get married'...there was nothing to prevent her running away and going back to her old life...what would they say, breaking up a marriage like that? The conventionality of her ethics, which had nothing to do with her real-life, was restored by the thought of those friends, and the memory of their judgments on other people. (Lessing, 97)

In patriarchy, women are considered weak, and women's racial status does not permit them power over the opposite sex. As a woman, she has challenged Moses in trying to overrule him again and again. The thought of patriarchy in Moses's mind can be exemplified in Charlie Slatter's joke that "Niggers don't understand women giving them orders. They keep their women in their right places." (Lessing, 23) This statement provides much understanding about the conflict between race and gender identity, resulting in violence.

The resistance of Moses against racial oppression results in taking the form of the oppressor. He has discovered that without freedom, he cannot exist authentically. Although he desires authentic existence as a human being, he fears it because he lives in a society that runs on a strict behavior pattern. He knows that the acceptance of human relationships from Mary's side will not work longer, and the change in Mary's attitude due to Tony's presence in the house has proved this fact.

Moses, who has long worked to retain his humanity, internalizes the oppressor within himself. His last thought about Mary's murder is a resolution of the conflict of his choice between acting as an oppressor or an oppressed. Without hearing her excuse, Moses murders her:

And, at the sight of him, her emotions unexpectedly shifted, to create in her an extraordinary feeling of guilt; but towards him, to whom she had been disloyal, and at the bidding of the Englishman. She felt she had only to move forward, to explain, to appeal, and the terror would be dissolved. She opened her mouth to speak, and as she did so, saw his hand, which held a long curving shape, lifted above his head; and she knew it would be too late. (Lessing, 205)

Although Lessing has failed to give voice to Moses' character yet the few conversations and incidents of the novel prove that even after whipping, abuse, and criticism from her, he has tried his best to serve and please her. Moses has resisted the stereotypical identity of blacks. His long-repressed hatred for Mary and her whole community has culminated in his revenge. Yet, no one can deny his feelings of regret and pity for Mary because he has loved and respected her more than anyone:

It came: a prolonged drench of light, like wet dawn. And this was his final moment of triumph,

a moment so perfect and complete that it took the urgency from thoughts to escape, leaving him indifferent... Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say. (Lessing, 206)

At the beginning of the novel, the news of 'Murder Mystery' informs the contemporary society as well as to the readers that Mary Turner, the wife of a white farmer Richard Turner, is found murdered by her native servant Moses for valuables and the native is caught and has confessed his crime. Anyone, who will go through the text, will find out that both Mary and Moses were performing the gender, class and racial roles defined in the Western texts. With this instance of textualization of reality, Lessing wanted to focus upon texts' power in mystifying the Orient. It is the text more than the fact that it affects the psychology of society. Charlie Slatter, the 'personified Society for the Turners' is portrayed as saving the white civilization by confirming myths about the Blacks. It is he who is suspected of sending the news to the newspaper and coercing society to remain silent about the matter. People's cold reaction even at the death of a white woman justifies some ideology "as if some belief had been confirmed, as if something had happened which could only have been expected. When natives steal, murder or rape, that is the feeling white people have." (Lessing, 9).

Moses's silent resistance to the myth of a thief about himself is also crushed under the common belief that he did not escape because he knew that even to touch a white woman was liable to punishment. Only Tony Marston, the believer in progressive ideas, knows the reality of the murder and has pity for Mary, Dick, and Moses. He wants to disclose the secret of the matter, but he knows well that Sergeant Denham and Charlie Slatter will not let the truth come out. He soon realizes that Moses would be hanged because he had committed a murder. It is useless to fight for principle if he wants to survive in that country. His understanding of the whole matter can be summarised as:

...it was 'white civilization' fighting to defend itself than had been implicit in the attitude of Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant, 'white civilization' which will never, never admit that a white person, and most significantly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or evil, with a black person. For once, it admits that it crashes and nothing can save it. (Lessing, 26)

Lessing has deliberately written this novel in the flashback to challenge the Orientalism of the news. It is a journey from conclusion to reasons to make us understand the ambivalent relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and between a white woman and a black man. She has provided us various dimensions of oppression that construct an 'Other' in the written texts. Her novel is a resistance to the mythical reality of both the oppressor and the oppressed.

The end of the plot justifies the concept of oppression and resistance in the best way. Mary, who represents the white race, plays the role of both the oppressor and the oppressed. From the beginning, she suffers from social, gender, race, and class oppression and tries to resist them according to the situation. From the perspective of gender, she was lucky like other heroines of Lessing. All the men in her life are either marginal or defeated. Her father, the cause of her miserable childhood, was a cipher in the home. Dick's weak personality, lack of love, and poverty consciously put him in a powerless condition. She feels disgusted when he calls her boss and takes her suggestion over the matters of the farm. Moses displays a different kind of inferiority. He exhibits physical and emotional power over her but fails against his racial, economic, and political identity. Her search for identity dismantles due to her much traditional thought about what the people will say. The pressure of society makes her descend into the hell of marriage and consequently accept her husband's class status.

There is no similarity between Mary Turner and Lessing's other female protagonists who achieve a certain degree of freedom in their lives due to their will power. They explore the various opportunities open to them without sticking to stubborn ideologies while Mary

denies herself such commitments, making her life sterile like the wasteland. Her early life description does not show any color conflict in her life, but her direct contact with the natives disturbs her life after the marriage. She becomes a victim of the colonial conflict to decide between cruelty and humanity. It is too late when she recognizes her marriage mistake, repressed sexuality, economically sound life, the guilt of white superiority, and the importance of humanity. Still, by her feigned madness, she tries to create a space for her liberty.

Through Mary's character, Lessing gives a viewpoint that one must have the time to explore herself even if that sense of self is not socially acceptable. Like Virginia Woolf, she believes that women must have a room of their own to spend some time discovering their real identity and aim of life. Moses stands as a representative of both the Blacks and the patriarchal society in her feminine psyche. He murders Mary to take vengeance on the whites and the female sex, but his acceptance of the punishment resists the myth that the natives are rapists and thieves. Through the narrative structure of the novel, Lessing questions the reality hidden beneath Orientalism. She tries to justify the action of Mary and Moses in their different contexts. She also describes how a poor white, like Dick, struggles in his life in the lack of money, power, and success. Like Mary and Moses, he has no identity if he cannot conform to his social, gender, racial, and class identity. Thus, we can conclude that Lessing is not only concerned about the social, racial, and class conflict of contemporary society but has also tried to describe these problems from a socioeconomic point of view. Her study does not stick to external events but explores the psychological state of the characters too.

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