

Silenced Native Voices In Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*: A Post Colonial Reading

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to highlight the missing counter-discourse of colonized voices in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*. The novel takes place in the South African colony that is divided by race. The White masters have more rights than the natives. They exploit their fortune, natural resources and the labor of the oppressed indigenous population. The natives are also emotionally and physically abused and work in inhuman conditions. The white supremacy of Mary Turner, Dick Turner, Charlie Slatter and Tony towards the black natives results in the racial discriminative acts like having prejudiced notion about the caliber of the native, labeling the natives, usage of hurtful and unkind words. The indigenous people's agony and the racial trauma is convincingly absent in this novel which articulates the savage and stark indictment of South Africa's apartheid system. The contrapuntal reading of the novel *The Grass is Singing* presents evidently the racial tensions between the white and black.

Keywords: racism, white supremacy, discrimination, counter discourse, contrapuntal reading

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Introduction:

Postcolonial literature is a fast growing field of literary studies. The numbers of academic journals, of books, of monograph series, of conference proceedings brought out with the theme of postcolonial or postcolonialism are also rapidly increasing recent years. The word "postcolonialism" is made of two words: post and colonialism. The major element or the major component is the first word "colonialism" but the prefix that is attached to the word which is "post" is also a very important. And that prefix adds an important dimension to understanding the term. It could not simply indicate the period after independence from the colonial master. Postcolonialism would mean the sum total of all the various social, political, economic and cultural changes that started being perceived after the first impact of colonialism was felt. Reading literatures, in this light, offers a profound understanding. The main objective of postcolonial approach is that, it urges readers



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to consider the way colonialist and anti-colonialist messages are presented in literary texts. It throws light on the discrimination between Western Eurocentric culture which presents European values as natural and universal and Eastern ideas which are considered as inferior, immoral, or "savage."

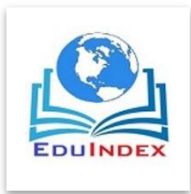
Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* is set in South Africa under white rule. On the one hand the novel tells the story of Dick Turner, a failed white farmer and his wife Mary, a town girl. It is a reverting chronicle of human disintegration. On the other hand the novel is a beautiful understated social critique. The postcolonial reading of the novel offers a passionate exploration of the ideology of white supremacy.

The novel opens with a newspaper article entitled "murder mystery". It describes the murder of a white farmer's wife by her black houseboy. Though the murder confessed the crime the newspaper article is titled as murder mystery. It reveals the institutionalized racism in 1940s Rhodesia. The unique structure of the novel is striking and full of terrifying touches of truth. In the beginning, the murder of the white lady by the native house boy and the local reaction to it are detailed and then the narration moves into an extended flashback in order to explain the circumstances behind the crime.

The Grass is Singing is a tragic novel. The novel largely revolves around Mary Turner. Mary is the daughter of white south African-born parents. Mary's childhood is unhappy because of her father's alcoholism and her mother's endless misery. After her parent's death, she starts to lead a joyful and fulfilling life in an unnamed town, with a wide circle of friends; she works as a secretary and attends social events every night. Because of her friends ill treatment towards her spinsterhood she is forced to search for a husband. At that time, Dick Turner, a struggling farmer enters into her life. The two eventually marry.

After marriage, Mary, a strong-willed, independent and remarkable feminist woman moves to Dick's farm house. The early year of their marriage is awkward. Mary, the city girl does not feel at home on Dick's rustic farm. Adding to it her treatment of native people becomes the biggest source of conflict in Mary's life. Mary's racism is unusually intense and sadistic; following it Mary suffers several nervous breakdowns. She develops an intimate, possibly sexual relationship with a native Moses, a farm worker. Despite it, Mary is murdered by Moses, as act of long cherished revenge for her. Toward the end Mary realizes that she is responsible for her tragedy. The main concentration of the novel is Rhodesian white culture with its racist and prejudiced attitudes. The system of gross racial injustice rules both the society and this story.

Contrapuntal Reading:



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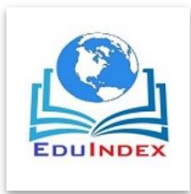
The story at the core of this novel, *The Grass is Singing* is about race and the racist attitudes of society at that time in Southern Rhodesia. The novel is not a mere psychological portrayal of a female protagonist from childhood to death. It is a political exposure of the futility and vainness of the patriarchal and colonial society. Through the novel, Doris Lessing questions the entire values of Rhodesian White society. The documentation of Mary Turner's life conveys that the author is displeased with the discrimination, disparity and the racial inequality in Southern Africa. All the white characters in the novel are overtly racist. At the outset the novel does not record the native black experiences of living in a society burnt with oppression, prejudice and unequal opportunities. Though Doris Lessing exposes the Rhodesian apartheid society and the racial discrimination and its consequence she cares little to register the anxiety and distress of native blacks. Contrapuntal reading of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* brings out this idea. Contrapuntal analysis is developed by Edward W.Said. It is used in interpreting colonial texts considering the perspective of both the colonizer and colonized. This type of analysis is helpful and necessary which makes important connections in the novel. Contrapuntal interpretation is interpreting different perspective. It is reading with "awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and those of other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse act"¹

As a courageous truth teller Lessing did not hesitate to criticize the apartheid system and racism. But she is unaware and ignorant in echoing the voices of native black. The white supremacy of Mary Turner, Dick Turner, Charlie Slater and Tony towards black is vehemently is chronicled right through the narration. The several forms of racial discriminative acts like the use of racial offensive words, blind accusations, hurtful commands, excessive domineering acts and labeling things to be associated with certain race are portrayed in detail. The omnipresent narrator slips in documentation and reverberation of the sufferings and torments of the indigenous natives. The narrator bothers little to emphasize the emotional upheaval of the native blacks.

The Toothless Black Authority

The opening of the novel describes the murder of Marry Turner who is the wife of Dick Turner a farmer. A house boy has confessed to the murder it is believed that he has murdered to steal valuables. The narration further illuminates the rules that governed life in Southern Rhodesia. After Moses, the black house boy, has arrested, Dicks comes up through the bushes muttering crazily. The native police man leaves him because "black men, even when policemen, do not lay hands on white

¹ Said, Edward. W. Culture and Imperialism. London: Vintage, 1993.p.51



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flesh.”² While the native police men are given an official position of authority, they cannot even lend a hand to support a white man in his grief. This highlights the extreme bias of the criminal justice system in the country. Black police men have no authority over the white people. The native black police men lamentation over the hypocrisy is omitted.

Writers such as J.M.Coetzee, Wilson Harris, V.S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Patrick White, Chinua Achebe, Margaret Atwood, Jean Rhys are prominent postcolonial writers. The reason behind the labeling is that they have attempted to defend against and correct the existing direction of postcolonial subjective and position. Helen Tiffin calls it “Canonical counter-discourse” in which “a post-colonial writer takes up a character or character, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text and unveils those assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purpose”³. In this tragic novel there is no room for the counter discourse which is written from the perspectives of the colonized rather than the hegemonic power.

The neglected voice of Samson:

Mary, the white lady, like the most Rhodesian women is a racist. As all the Whites she too believes that white should be the masters over the native blacks. From her childhood onwards she had never come into contact with natives. She is forbidden to talk to her servants. Indeed Mary is afraid of them. She is taught that natives were nasty and might do horrible things. At this mindset, after the marriage when she comes in contact with the native black she considers it as a ‘business of struggle’. Her first encounter with the native man explicitly exposes her racist attitude.

‘This is the new missus,’ said Dick to him.

‘This is Samson, Mary.’

The old boy kept his eyes on the ground and said, ‘Good morning, missus.’ Then he added politely to Dick, as if this was expected of him, ‘Very nice, very nice, boss.’

Dick laughed, saying, ‘He’ll look after you: he is not a bad old swine.

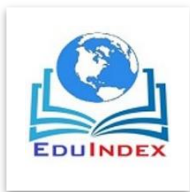
Mary was rather outraged at this casual stock market attitude;⁴

Dick and Mary have different reactions to Samson. It highlights the complex relationship between white settlers and native people in Southern Rhodesia. Mary is immediately disdainful of Samson’s informal manner. But both Dick and Mary share the view that the native people are lazy and they have no work ethics. Dick is

² Lessing, Doris. *The Grass is Singing*. (London: Fourth Estate, 2017) p.12

³ Helen Tiffin. “Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse.” *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge 2003. p.97

⁴ Lessing, Doris. *The Grass is Singing*. 2017. p.57



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committed to upholding the racist fantasy even in the case of his relatively genial relationship with Samson. In spite of his fairness in his treatment of native workers, Dick dehumanizes him by calling him a “swine”. Mary, meanwhile overreacts to the actions of the native people. Mary furiously insists that she will detect two shillings out of Samson’s wage- one pound per month. After learning this Samson simply gives his notice.

The position of native in their home land is very pathetic. Their voice is silenced. Though Samson is a kind-faced respectful old native he is continuously neglected by Mary. Mary and Dick often share the view that the natives have no work ethics. Dick directly scolds Samson: “Old fool has let those dogs go again. he is too damned lazy to feed them.”⁵ This way of thinking clearly exposes the discourse of Orientalism which presents the Orient as dark and unregenerate. Orient is backward and therefore the British rule in Africa is ultimately beneficial for them. This unconscious stance of white is echoed in the portrayal of Mary.

Voiceless Unnamed Servant:

The portrayal of unnamed servant is another negligence of the native. He is the third native person whom Dick and Mary employ to work in the house. Unlike Samson and the servant before him, this servant is accustomed to working for white women. He is able to put up with Mary’s abuse. Not only Mary, Dick too mistreats the servant saying abusing terms.

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 fights, fight, fight in the house. Do you understand? I will not have it and you should learn sense. If you want to get work out of hem you have to know how to manage them. You shouldn’t expect too much. They are nothing but bad savages after all”.⁶

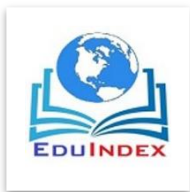
The unnamed servant is an example of the indifferent attitude of the author in rejecting the identity of the black. The omission of his name too contributes to hide his individuality. In the point of view of the whites blacks are savage race.

The broken voice of Moses:

Moses is a young, strong and terrifying native. The presence of Moses is stamped both opening and conclusion of the novel. When Moses is arrested by the policemen all the white people share the same opinion: “The Three men looked at the murder, thinking their own thought, speculative frowning but not as if he were important now. No, he was unimportant; he was the constant the black man who will

⁵ Ibid. p.60

⁶ Lessing, Doris. *The Grass is Singing*. London: Fourth Estate, 2017.p.67



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thieve, rape, murder, if given half a chance.”⁷ There were no interrogations. The white people did not want to find out the real reason of Moses’ crime and suggested that he wanted to steal something. They concluded that the native had murdered Mary Turner while drunk, in search of money and jewelry.

Mary’s first encounter with Moses was on the farm. He is educated in a missionary school. He has a large muscular physique. During Dick’s illness, Mary controls the farm. In this time only she strikes Moses across the face. Indeed Moses is not rude to Mary; he is only not afraid of Mary and refuses to abide by the social conventions. Moses’ inner life is not portrayed. The education he got from the missionary school has a great influence on his character. It seems to advocate the civilization mission. Then Moses becomes her houseboy. He enters into Mary’s life when she is almost totally broken. All Mary’s attempt to settle financially becomes failure. It seems to advocate the civilization mission. Then Moses becomes her houseboy. He enters into Mary’s life when she is almost totally broken. At this critical juncture, Moses arrival makes complex the problem. The relationship between Moses and Mary changes gradually from hatred to affectionate. Mary becomes obsessed with him and she is afraid of him.

She was unable to treat this boy. She had treated all the others, for always at the back of her mind, was that moment of fear she had known just after she had hit and thought he would attack her.⁸

The relationship is not described completely. At the end of the novel, he approaches Mary on the veranda and stabs her to death. He waits under a nearby tree until morning. Murdering of his missus was his last moment of triumph. It is impossible to say what he felt after it – regret or pity, but he stayed calm, as always, and remained there, waiting for the police to arrest him.

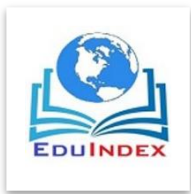
Moses experiences a new wave of humiliation. Moses’ murder of Mary is questionably not an act of brutality but rather a reasonable response to the occurrence of colonial oppression. Instead of throwing light on the colonial injustice, the murder of Mary provides a threat to the white civilization in Southern Rhodesia. It is justified as the brutality of the natural landscape and indigenous population.

Conclusion:

Many European texts like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* establishes the idea that African people are uncivilized

⁷Ibid. p.25

⁸ Ibid.p.162



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and savages. The bold attempt of Doris Lessing to voice for the voiceless to promote justices to the subjugated native black has not hit the target properly.

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