

## DORIS LESSING'S *THE GRASS IS SINGING*: A PORTRAIT OF RACIAL CONFLICT

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### Abstract

*Doris Lessing, winner of Noble prize; holds unique place among twentieth century women writers for her versatility. Being a brilliant British novelist, Lessing has emerged as a great contributor to the contemporary world literature. She has written around three dozen books. She pens down what she perceives and experiences in the social and political spectrum of the world where she lives in. While Lessing's work is true picture of her literary craftsmanship and feminist ideas; through her works she exhibits her inner most felling against discrimination is it gender, racial, social or communal. Her fictional characters are the mouth piece of personal experiences of writer. She pours her wrath against the prevalent social, political disparity. Her fictional characters became the mouthpiece of writer's personal experiences.*

**Keywords:** *Doris Lessing, gender, racial, social or communal...*

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**D**oris Lessing, winner of Noble prize; holds unique place among twentieth century women writers for her versatility. Being a brilliant British novelist, Lessing has emerged as a great contributor to the contemporary world literature. She has written around three dozen books. She pens down what she perceives and experiences in the social and political spectrum of the world where she lives in. While Lessing's work is true picture of her literary craftsmanship and feminist ideas; through her works she exhibits her inner most felling against discrimination is it gender, racial, social or communal. Her fictional characters are the mouth piece of personal experiences of writer. She pours her wrath against the prevalent social, political disparity. Her fictional characters became the mouthpiece of writer's personal experiences.

Doris is chiefly known as the narrator of her own reminiscences but at the same time she also exposes the real condition of social deformity. One can notice Lessing's own interest towards politics, cultural and true spirit of that time. Lessing lived on a farm in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) from 1924 to 1949 before settling in England and beginning her writing career. Just after one year in 1950, Lessing debut with her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, narrates the feeling of revolution against the cultural, social and gender bias. It created a sensation when it was first published and became an instant success in Europe and the United States.

Her work has strongly influenced by her experiences in Africa; which became the plot of her other novels too. Impact of her childhood memories and problems are also visible in her fiction. The paper presents the conflict of cultures, racial inequality, the struggle of individuals and society also.

The story of the novel takes place in southern Africa, during the 1940s and deals with the racial politics between whites and blacks in that country (which was then a British Colony). Being raised in Southern Rhodesia, Lessing closely witnessed such relationships and recognized the injustices. Apart from autobiographical influence, it narrates the social condition of Rhodesian people and makes a portrait of racial discrimination of that time.

The novel starts with the loveless marriage of Mary and Dick Turner. Mary protagonist of the novel has an independent life in the beginning of the novel. Further Lessing highlights human relations, social structures and cultural conflict in Rhodesian society.

The novel examines the relationship between Mary- a white farmer's wife and her black servant. The novel is written with the major theme of superiority of whites over blacks, not only at the level of social and economic condition but on civilized grounds too.

The story presents a shift in behaviour and point of view of Mary Turner. Before she came to Dick's farm, she had never had any direct contact with natives, but as she starts to take care of the farm, racial conflicts arise between her and the natives. She remains uncomfortable with the presence of natives. She has always tried to avoid being in contact with the natives in all possible ways and cannot manage their presence and closeness, 'She had to crush down violent repugnance to the idea of facing the farm natives herself' (113-14). She even refers to them as, 'evil-smelling creatures' (100), 'filthy savages' (116) or 'animals' (121).

Frederickson (2002) author of *Racism: A Short History*, says about racism:

But racism as I conceive it is not merely an attitude or set of beliefs, it also expresses itself in the practices, institution, and structures that a sense of differences justifies or validates. (6)

Mary's feelings towards natives shout her hatred for blacks very loudly. She does not treat them as human beings at all. Even their sight of working on farm fills her with disgust:

She hated their half-naked, thick-muscled black bodies stooping in the mindless rhythm of their work. She hated their sullenness, their averted eyes when they spoke to her, their veiled insolence; and she hated more than anything, with a violent physical repulsion, the heavy smell that came from them, a hot, sour animal smell. (The Grass is Singing 121).

Mary's disgust, about the blacks is result of supremacy of whites over blacks. It is defined by John W. Cell (1982) in his book regarding white supremacy that:

The association of blackness with all things evil, ugly, and satanic and of whiteness with all things pure, beautiful, and godly was fundamental to their psychology, to the way medieval and early—modern Europeans (Especially northern Europeans) perceived and organized the world. In the conditions of southern Africa and northern America this color syndrome acquired immediacy and relevance. (4)

In the present work of art Lessing exhibits the racial relationship between white farmers and their native workers. Apart from this she investigates the grounds of racial discrimination. 'When it came to the point, one never had contact with natives, except in the master-servant relationship. One never knew them in their own lives, as human beings'. (19).

In above mentioned text, picture of true racial discrimination has sketched, it is not the bias on the basis of black and white but gender bias is very much prevalent in the novel. Due to Dick's illness Mary goes to farm, but natives' revolt as they don't want to work under a lady. The natives' bitterness might be ascribed to the fact that they would expect their master to be a man, not a woman, according to the conventions of the society.

The natives naturally fight back, for, 'they resented her, a woman, supervising them'. (116). As a result, they are hesitant to work and she is at a loss about how to teach them obedience. Once, she uses force, with one of her servants Moses, and it proves a major incident of the story.

Working under a lady also seems odd Dick also, 'He did not like to think of Mary close to those natives all day; it was not a woman's job'. (118). Here Dick's perspective also clears the clash of gender and color both. In fact we can assume illustration of Mary's complex personality;

although Mary feels hostility towards the natives, supervising them makes her satisfied, ‘The sensation of being boss over perhaps eighty black workers gave her new confidence; it was a good feeling, keeping them under her will, making them do as she wanted’.(118).

The most significant moment of the novel is when Moses, one of the servants on the farm, with whom Mary had previously a personal conflict, becomes a servant in their house. The complexity of their relation is the central theme of the novel. Their relationship turns into a personal one and it becomes extremely complicated for both of them to live together under same roof, ‘What happened was that the formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant had been broken by the personal relation’. (152)

Further Mary’s fascination for Moses slowly makes her go mad. It is important to consider the fact that she has virtually no one to talk to, not even Dick. Mary sinks in utter loneliness; Lessing craftily presents the psychological breakdown of the protagonist.

Mary submits as to a ‘terrible dark fear’ and she adds: ‘the touch of this black man’s hand on her shoulder filled her with nausea; she had never, not once in her whole life, touched the flesh of a native’. (159).

Mary and Moses developed a unique personal relationship with each other as Moses calls her “madame” (161) and not “missus” as the other natives does. This personal and emotional bonding is threatening the established societal taboos. In fact, Moses is gradually rising to a higher social position and thus endangering Mary’s position as a white woman. Consequently, she is forced to reevaluate her attitude to Moses, ‘he forced her, now, to treat him as a human being’. (164).

Now instead of existence of Moses it’s presence of Dick which discomfort her

This alteration in situation and status; creates the result of clash between a white and black. Moses, the black slave, killed Mary to take revenge on the White as well as the opposite sex.

Lessing elegantly shows how the protagonist of the novel suffered and was killed in the twister of gender and race. Thus Mary is not only the victim of loveless marriage, and social pressure, but also suffers as a woman and ultimately killed due to racial conflict. The novelist aptly presents a portrait of breaking social taboos and racial discrimination of Rhodesian society.

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