

**PATRIARCHAL POWER STRUGGLES ENACTED THROUGH THE
SEXUALIZED (WHITE) FEMALE BODY: A REVIEW OF DORIS
LESSING'S *THE GRASS IS SINGING***

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Abstract

*'Woman', as Eva Figes rightly points out, is largely a 'man-made' category, and an ideologically-fabricated state of being which has been deployed in the self-interests of patriarchy. Patriarchal discourse, in fact, appropriates the physical female body and mythicizes it as the locus of some 'intrinsic womanhood'. Being thus appropriated by the patriarchal discourse, the objectified female body assumes the status of an indispensable mythical signifier within the patriarchal semiological system. In its function as a mythical signifier, the 'essentially womanized' female body becomes a site where the diverse patriarchal power struggles are fought out. Indeed, the aim of this paper is to discuss how a woman's self-identity and her individuality are erased in the process of being forcibly appropriated by the patriarchal order, by drawing upon Doris Lessing's novel, *The Grass is Singing*. I wish to examine how Mary, the novel's female protagonist, falls victim to the patriarchal and racial ideologies which appropriate her 'womanhood' for its own narcissistic ends.*

Key words: patriarchy, discourse, body, womanhood, site, appropriate

Higher Education &
Research Society

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The Western epistemological tradition, which is predicated upon a system of positive/negative binaries, has been instrumental in perpetuating the patriarchal order. The dichotomous pair of the 'masculine Self' and the devalued 'female Other', fabricated through the binary logic of Western metaphysics, forms the ideological premise of patriarchal hegemony. The phallogocentric discourse which privileges the male as the possessor of the potent phallus, establishes him as the norm against which the female is defined. Set against the 'phallic male', female sexuality comes to be characterized as a conspicuous 'absence', or 'a lack'. For instance, the patriarchal attempt at casting female sexuality as an 'inherent lack' is clearly reflected in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic inquiry into 'how a woman comes into being' (Freud 116). Referring to Freud's conceptualization of, what he terms, the 'female penis envy', Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore explain:

The little girl, he argued, glimpsing the penis of the little boy, instantly recognizes her own inadequacy. As she matures, she becomes reconciled to her inevitable condition of inferiority, and learns to replace the desire for the penis with the wish for a baby. (04)

Further, commenting on the patriarchal representation of female sexuality as an 'inherent lack', as in Freud's psychoanalytic projection of 'womanhood', Jingchao Ma points out:

It is not her being feminine that the little girl discovers when she recognizes the difference between her sexual organ and that of little boys, rather it is her not being a man, not being born with the important penis and thus complete. (05)

This phallogocentric tradition of representing the man as phallic 'presence' and the woman as phallic 'absence', then, places the two categories of man and woman in a hierarchical relationship. The 'inferior non-phallic female', it is implied, is not a complete self on her own, and her 'lacking' sexuality has to be satiated and rendered complete only through sexual intercourse with the 'superior phallic male'. Thus reducing the woman to a mere sexualized corporeal body, patriarchy exploits her ideologically-fabricated 'womanhood' for its own narcissistic ends. In fact, the sexualized female body often

becomes a site through which the diverse patriarchal power struggles are fought out. Hence, the aim of this paper is to examine how a woman's self-identity and her individuality are erased in the process of being forcibly appropriated by the patriarchal order, by drawing upon Doris Lessing's novel, *The Grass is Singing*. Using Lessing's novel as a reference, this paper intends to discuss how, within the colonial context, the power relations between the 'superior phallic White man' and the symbolically emasculated Native male are forged through the medium of the sexualized (White) female body.

Having witnessed her mother's suffering which largely stems from the latter's unhappy marriage to her alcoholic father, Mary, the female protagonist of the novel, finds herself disinclined towards marriage. Moreover, her phobic aversion to male sexuality, which ensues from her problematic relationship with her father, further dissuades her from any thought of marriage. Accordingly, following her mother's death, Mary is quite content to sever her contacts with the father and adopt the carefree life of spinsterhood. However, Mary is not allowed to continue in her 'comfortable carefree existence of a single woman' (33) for long:

All women become conscious, sooner or later, of that impalpable, but steel strong pressure to get married, and Mary, who was not at all susceptible to atmosphere, or the things people imply, was brought face to face with it suddenly, and most unpleasantly. (39)

The single woman is deemed a threat to patriarchy's attempt of controlling female sexuality by imposing upon a woman the norms of compulsory heterosexuality. To cite the critic, Carol P. Christ, for example:

The control of female sexuality through the institutions of patriarchal marriage is not incidental to patriarchy, but rather is central. The customs that surround patriarchal marriage including the requirement that wives must be sexually faithful to their husbands, and the enforcement of these customs through shaming, violence, and the threat of violence, all have one purpose: to ensure the male power over the female. (73)

Thus, Mary is eventually forced into marriage by that same patriarchal social system which seeks to appropriate every woman within the institution of marriage. Having overheard a conversation among her female friends, Mary, for the first time, grows conscious of society's tendency to denounce the unmarried woman:

'Why doesn't she marry? She must have had plenty of chances'.

There was a dry chuckle. 'I don't think so. My husband was keen on her himself once, but he thinks she will never marry. She just isn't like that, isn't like that at all. Something missing somewhere'. (39)

Mary is thus interpellated by the patriarchal discourse which reduces the woman to a mere sexed body. Having succumbed to the overarching patriarchal value system that defines a woman merely in terms of her sexuality, Mary is compelled to prove her 'womanhood' by giving herself (her Self) away in marriage. Though, out of compulsion, she finally gets married to Dick Turner, a poor rustic peasant, she is unable to overcome her inhibition against the male body. Yet, Mary is expected to perform her 'wifely duties' by offering her body to her husband. Mary, therefore, forces herself to go through the ritual of sexual intercourse for, as she comes to realize, it is the indispensable function that is socio-culturally inscribed upon her sexualized female body:

It meant nothing to her, nothing at all. Expecting outrage and imposition, she was relieved to find she felt nothing. She was able maternally to bestow that gift of herself on this humble stranger. (56)

By entrapping her within the institution of marriage, patriarchy, then, successfully eliminates the threat posed by her spinsterhood. Mary is forced back in to the very life she wants to escape:

She got to her feet with an awkward scrambling movement, unable to bear it; possessed with the thought that her father, from his grave, had sent out his will and forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother lead. (56)

Having been overpowered and absorbed by the pervasively patriarchal society, Mary realizes that the influence of the father's/patriarch's will is something she has not been able to shake off. She, indeed, never recovers from the damage caused to her psyche through patriarchy's forceful appropriation of her body and her individual Self.

Moreover, Mary's marriage to Dick Turner renders her position further vulnerable for she gets drawn into the socio-historical power struggle between the White colonizer and the Native male. White female corporeality is, in fact, a construct supposed to serve the White patriarchal interests. White patriarchy seeks to assert its supremacy over the Black male by mythicizing the gendered White female body as the ultimate object of desire for the Black male. The much desired White female body is projected as something which is beyond the reach of the 'inferior' Black man. The symbolically-constructed 'impotency' of the Native male is, indeed, based upon the premise that the latter cannot have access to the coveted White female body which is the exclusive possession of the White male:

'White civilization' will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it. (22)

Brought up in a society where she has been taught to regard the Black man as someone who is below the status of a human being, and therefore, more akin to an animal, Mary feels nothing but contempt for her Native servants. She continues to remain insensitive to the fact that her Black servants are thinking, feeling human beings till her convictions are finally shaken by her encounter with the Native, Moses. Despite her initial loathing and apprehension of Moses, which spring from the racial prejudices she has internalized through her White patriarchal society, Mary comes to develop an attraction to Moses. Contrary to her aversion to the touch of her White husband – which, of course, undermines the White man's alleged right over the White female body, Mary finds herself attracted to the powerful physicality of Moses:

She used to sit quite still, watching him work. The powerful, broad body fascinated her...One morning she went out to the fowl-runs, which she often forgot to do these days; and when she had finished a perfunctory inspection of the nesting-boxes, and her basket was filled with eggs, she was arrested by the sight of the native under the trees a few yards off. He was rubbing his thick neck with soap, and the white lather was startlingly white against the black skin. (164)

Mary, however, cannot acknowledge her growing attraction to the Native for such a conscious acknowledgement of her fascination with the 'Othered' Black male is a violation of the deep-rooted biracial sexual taboos of her society. Mary is constantly nagged by her social conscience which demands her loyalty to the racial norms laid down by the White patriarchal society. Consequently, Mary is torn between her desire for Moses and her socially-inculcated racial ideologies which prohibit any liaison between the White woman and the Black man:

He approached slowly, obscene and powerful, and it was not only he, but her father who was threatening her. They advanced together, one person ... It was the African's voice she heard. He was comforting her because of Dick's death, consoling her protectively; but at the same time it was her father menacing and horrible, who touched her in desire. (192)

It is possible to engage in a Freudian reading of Mary's dream. Indeed, it is Mary's rejection of Dick, the legitimate White patriarch, which she cannot openly express, that manifests through her dreaming of his death. Following Dick's death, his place is taken up by Moses, a substitution which expresses Mary's repressed or subliminal desire for the Native. Meanwhile, the recurring image of the 'menacing' father who appears alongside Moses in her dreams embodies the powerful presence of White patriarchy which seeks to appropriate the White female for itself by strictly denouncing any form of human, let alone sexual, relationship between the White woman and the Black man. The merging of Moses and Mary's father into one person, then, signifies the dual forces of White patriarchy and the sexually desirable Moses which simultaneously drag her in the opposite directions. This

merging of Moses and the White father figure symbolically enacts how Mary – the sexualized White woman – falls prey to the patriarchal battle between the White man and the Native male, the former trying to maintain the ideologically-enforced racial hierarchies and the latter attempting to resist.

Nonetheless, by gradually acknowledging the sexual desirability of Moses, Mary unsettles the power structures that govern the colonial setting. Her fascination with Moses' sexually appealing body destabilizes the hegemony of the White patriarch established through the symbolic emasculation of the Native male:

When the native came to clear away the dishes there was an incident that caused him to grind his teeth and go white with anger. They were sitting over the sordid relics of the meal, while the boy moved about the table, slackly gathering dishes together. Charlie had not even noticed him ...It was Mary's voice when she spoke to the native that jarred on him: she was speaking to him with exactly the same flirtatious coyness with which she had spoken to himself. (208)

Mary's growing intimacy with Moses is consequently met with hostility from her White community. In fact, she cannot resist for long the pressure exerted upon herself (her Self) by the intersecting discourses of patriarchy and colonialism. Mary gets caught up between these intersecting discourses, and is forced to compromise her individuality and her self-identity in being drawn in to the tug of war between the White patriarch and the Native male. The psychological rift in Mary caused by the sexual and racial restraints imposed upon her female body is evident through her gradual metamorphosis from a cheerful, dynamic individual to a bitter, frustrated woman. She is finally killed by Moses, and so, she pays with her life for subverting the normative racial relationships prescribed by the White 'civilization'. Her death epitomizes the tragic fate of the female subject who gets appropriated by the power politics of gender and race.

Finally, the omniscient narrator in the novel breaks ranks with her community by unveiling the details of Mary's death which it wants to hush up. Her decision to recount Mary's story is a subversive response to White patriarchy's attempt to silence the voice of a woman who has proved the hollowness of its values. The narrator highlights White patriarchy's complicity in Mary's death. Lessing's novel, then, levels criticism against the White 'civilization' which is built upon a gendered and racialized bedrock, albeit a fragile one.

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