



AN OBJECTIFIED SELF OF MARY TURNER: ANALYSIS OF DORIS LESSING'S *THE GRASS IS SINGING* THROUGH AN ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The character of Mary in the novel *The Grass is Singing* displays the plight of people who were moulded by rough and tough, uncompromising attitude of society towards the weak and marginalized section. She actually represents a cross section of the society who was denied of the basic freedom of living according to their own wish. They always suppressed their desires and wishes, hide their pains and struggles and were forced to live as an enactment of the play written by people around them. At last, after being tired of these suppressions, they began to act upon the orders of their own mind and then they were labeled as uncompromising and cruel. Mary, who is often portrayed as a fervent racist, gains sympathy when her character is analyzed with the aid of ecofeminist theory. There are persons like Mary who was labeled as worst by the society. But no one is ready to enquire about the reasons for such behavior. The detailed analysis of Mary's character in the light of ecofeminism enables the reader to understand how she became a fervent racist and what she actually was.

Keywords: Society, Nature, Racist mentality, Ecofeminism, Marginalised section.

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God created man in his own image. In the image of God, He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. (Genesis 1: 27-28)

The control of man over Nature starts from the very beginning of creation itself. God granted the supremacy of man over all the creatures in the earth. God gave this permission with an assumption that as humans are rational and able to think, they can easily look after Nature and its creatures and thus create a peaceful earth. But what happened actually was entirely different from God's calculations. Man used his power to exploit it. For the short-lived pleasure and immediate benefits, man began to encroach upon Nature and natural objects. He started commercializing Nature and its creatures. Man's dominion over Nature paved the way to the anthropocentric attitude. It regarded man as the chief point of reference in all reality and ascribed an autonomous role to human consciousness in cognition. Ecofeminism considers domination of women as model of other kinds of domination and it is also linked with domination of nature.

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s with an increasing consciousness of the connections between women and Nature. Doris Lessing who was mainly concerned with the lives of women, their children, had employed the aspects of ecofeminism in her novels. Doris Lessing's debut novel *The Grass Is Singing* is about the tragedy of colour bar in white dominated Rhodesia. It narrates the moving story of a complex relationship between a white farmer's wife and her black houseboy which ventures into the realm of a colonial taboo and its disastrous consequences. The novel seems to have an unusual beginning. The novel opens with a newspaper report relating to the murder of Mary Turner, wife of Dick Turner by her black servant Moses. The bulk of the novel is a flashback of Mary Turner's life up to her murder at the hands of Moses in the last chapter.

This novel can be viewed as a narrative following the physical and emotional growth of the protagonist Mary Turner and the disharmony in her marital relationship. The reader of this novel might blame Mary for her rude attitude towards her husband Dick and her racist mentality which made her to whip the natives physically and mentally. But the novel provides incidents to trace the reasons that carved the prejudices about men and blacks in Mary's mind. The reality of the life itself had enabled her to keep a distance from the male and black community. The picture of Mary being suppressed in each stage of her life and how it is clearly reflected in the nature is analyzed in detail using the ecofeminist theory.

Doris Lessing, in the novel, *The Grass is singing*, traced the picture of a woman who had submitted herself into the shackles of marriage. At the first glance, Mary is portrayed as a fervent racist and a woman who had no content with her husband. While analyzing the novel from an ecofeminist aspect, it is revealed that Mary is moulded so by the rough clay of social prejudices regarding both men and black natives. As Elizabeth Carlssare (223) says in her essay, "Essentialism in Ecofeminist Discourse", "... essence has been socially inscribed on women for the purpose of legitimating their domination by men".

The novel includes the hated childhood of Mary, her isolated, unmarried and carefree life as a single woman in the town, her marriage with the poor farmer Dick, her difficulty to adjust with Dick and servants, her relationship with Moses and finally the murder of Mary at the hands of Moses. It is said that the personality of Mary was shaped by the interaction between her personal situation and the larger social forces. In the essay "Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing: An Anatomy of a Female Psyche in the Midst of Gender, Race and Class Barriers*", Mohammed Kaosar Ahamed (13) says that, "Mary had an unhappy and disturbing childhood because of her drunkard father who would constantly torture her mother". Her little eyes had captured the recurrent scenes of quarrel between the father and mother regarding money to make the two ends meet. From these daily scenes, her little mind



engraved in it the disinterest towards family life. Later it is given clearly in the novel that:

When Mary thought of home she remembered a wooden box shaken by passing trains; when she thought of marriage, she remembered her father coming home red-eyed and fuddled; when she thought of children she saw her mother's face at children's funeral (Lessing 39)

Mary's hatred towards sexual pleasures and disrespect towards men were created from her family circumstances itself. Along with that the emergence of her dislike towards and dominating attitudes over black natives also had its origin from the social circumstances that surrounds her. Her restriction for the contact with the stores, which often functions as the symbol of South Africa and the denial for playing with their children, in fact, removed Mary from both Nature and Black natives. She also used to hear her father calling petty officials as 'sir' and shouting at the natives under him. These instances created in her, a disinterest and detachment towards black natives and made her to consider them as worthless beings. Later the life and job in the town created a transformation from an immature childish girl to a self-reliant responsible woman. She, as a human being, enjoyed that life because she was able to choose whatever she likes and no one or nothing restricted her. Her father and mother died during that time but that was, according to Mary, the absolute freedom because, that removed the link that bound her to the childhood that she hated to remember. She earned a good amount of money by working as a personal secretary of her employer. She had become a person on her own account. But as the narrator itself says "...but this was against her instinct" (Lessing 36). When she heard the gossiping of her friends, like every women, she too became disturbed and disappointed. After that, Mary set herself for getting married because she realized that no human being can live long without any other relationships or bonding. It was in that search for a partner that she found Dick Turner.

Marriage was actually a turning point in her life. After marriage, the life of Mary was closely linked with Nature. More often Mary's reflection was visible on Nature. The analysis of Mary's life after her marriage traces her original character in the midst of her enactment as a cruel master and uncompromising wife. Along with that, it also traces how she is getting oppressed by others whom she believed as inferior to her. Mary and Dick moved from the town to Dick's farm. They reached the farm at night and this itself had great significance. The entering of newly married couple into the home actually indicates their entrance into the new life. Here this happens in the night and it symbolically says that the life of Mary after marriage is going to be dark like the night. It is important to know that at the first glance, the images coming to Mary is of negativeness. The dim shapes of low trees, cracked sky etc were the indications of Mary's dissatisfaction in the beginning itself. While everyone views the stars in the sky at night as a beautiful sight, Mary views it as a cracked sky which is seamed with glittering stars. Nature witnessed the arrival of new bride with great anxiety as viewed by their relatives. The moon had gone behind a great luminous white cloud and it slowly slid out from behind the cloud and drenched the clearing with brilliance. The trees blew out the cold breath, innumerable little noises rose from the bushes as if colonies of strange creatures had become still and watchful at the coming of Mary. Even though she was irritated by the strong musty animal like smell inside the house and the smell and flame of paraffin lamp, she forced herself to smile at Dick. She suppressed her dislike and pretended to be happy and pleasant for the sake of Dick. The skins of animals which used as mat on the floor can be connected with the usual patriarchal trait to claim or establish their supremacy over the fellow beings.

When she woke in the morning, she felt alone in the bed. As she watched outside, she saw the tender gold light of the trees through the window and faint rosy patches of sun lay on the white walls. In the daylight she found that the home is barer than it was at night in the dim lamp light. When this is viewed from an angle of ecofeminism, we can analyze that the Nature throwing light over the



barrenness of not only the room but symbolically over Mary's mind too because it is as though Nature is showering light over the loneliness that is going to embrace her. Mary found an intimacy with Nature and what was strange to her in the last night became astonishment to her in the morning. The hazy cracked sky had become the vivid arching blue sky, the dim shapes of low trees became tawny grass shining gold in the sun. The nocturnal sound of the bird that frightened her in the night became a shrilling and cascading sound. She found it strange and lovely with the dull green foliage.

Though Mary is portrayed as an unkind mistress, her femininity is seen to be invoked several times. When Dick went to the farm, the native servant Samson offered her to show the kitchen. It is mentioned there that: "... she had hoped Dick would show her round" (59). She felt a heat of desire for the presence of Dick. The deepening heat had silenced birds in the early morning itself. Mary too sweated due to the intense heat of her mind in the beginning of her married life itself. Dick often tried to express his disappointment but Mary always tried to hide such emotions in her mind itself.

While nothing to do, she would rather wander on to the verandah to sit watching the lights change on the distant blue kopjes... and watch the heat waves beat up out of the hot stone, where the heat-lizards, vivid red and blue and emerald darted over the rocks like flames... (Lessing 66-67)

While looking at the changing blue kopjes she might be reminded of the different shades of life at each stage. The colorful light of her self-identity dims after marriage and the color still goes on changing. Mary's frustration of 'nothing to do' can be connected with the heat waves beating up the hot stone. Mary's temper, disappointment and dissatisfaction glows as flames. When Dick quarreled with Mary for assigning to the servant the job of cleaning the bathroom, she opposed him. She said that she could not use the bathroom till it is clean because it was so dirty and filthy. Dick became very

angry and he went out of the home without eating food. Even though, Mary reassures herself that she had done the right thing and there is no need of regret about it, she actually feels a type of satisfaction because she could speak out her own opinion. When she looked at the sky, the clouds had gone and sky looked like a sonorous blue dome with an undertone of sultry sulphur colour indicates the pain of ignorance from the one she loved. It is said that: "the pale sandy soil in front of the house dazzled up waves of light and out of it curved the gleaming stems of poinsettia bushes bursting into irregular slashes of crimson" (Lessing 74). The dazzling heat waves enabled the sight of irregular slashes of scarlet leaves that covered the yellow flowers of poinsettia. Here also the yellow flowers indicate the self satisfaction of Mary and the slashes of the scarlet leave indicate her painful hardships and emotional lamentations behind the satisfaction. Mary's emotions of pain and satisfaction are reflected in Nature.

The interaction with the native servant Moses was actually a crucial incident in Mary's life. The inner conflicts happening in Mary's mind between her as a representative of the master class and her female psyche which got attracted with both the physical structure and personality of Moses is clearly described in the novel. Mary's first encounter with Moses can be seen when she took control over the farm while Dick was ill. While she was inspecting the works of natives, she noticed that one of the boys was not working. While asked he said he was thirsty. She behaved harshly towards him and compelled him to get back into work. When he asked for water in English, the other boys laughed at him. But Mary misunderstood that they are laughing at her femininity. That enraged her anger and "... involuntarily she lifted her whip and brought it down across his face in a vicious swinging blow; she did not know what she was doing... (Lessing 119). This incident can be viewed as the beginning of clash between her own inner self and the mask of dominant class which she wore. Mary being a victim of oppression knowingly or unknowingly made her mind more rigid so that it had turned to another level which wants to suppress others.



That incident ended there. But it was after a few days that she happened to meet him again. Dick assigned him as the new houseboy and she could not refuse Dick's order. Even though she felt discomfort in his presence, she was in need of his presence. When Moses informed her that he was leaving in the end of the month, she involuntarily told him not to go. At this moment, we were witnessing Mary's "oppression transmuted into submission" as Tapan. Ghosh and Abhisek Bhattacharya (90) said in their book *Critical Analysis of Doris Lessing's "The Grass is Singing"*. Here also we are reminded about the conflict between her body or head and mind. "At all this time she was filled with shame and mortification because he was seeing her cry" (Lessing 151).

That cry was actually the resignation of her authority and submission as a woman before Moses. In her dream, she saw an instantaneous dropping of a black curtain. It actually signified the removal of the wall drawn between Moses and Mary. It was his great concern for her that attracted her to him. "Every day he looked after her, seeing what she ate, bringing her meals without her ordering them, bringing her little gifts... or a twist of flowers from the bush" (Lessing 156). Even though Mary was fascinated with Moses, she feels reluctant to trust him wholeheartedly. She feels disturbed when Moses voluntarily took responsibility to look after Dick and allowed her to sleep. The conflict again arises in Mary and that conflict is clearly visualized in nature:

... The tiny night noises from the bush outside sounded suddenly as loud as her own thudding heart. From the trees a few yards away a bird called once and insects creaked. She heard the movements of branches as if something heavy was pushing its way through them and thought with fear of the low crouching trees all about... (Lessing 160)

Mary heard the "... dry sound of horny feet moving over thin matting and a clink of glasses being moved, a low mutter from the sick man..." (Lessing 161). This can be compared with the tiny night noises

of Nature. Then she heard the feet move close and a sidling movement as the native settled himself down on the sack between the cupboards. This can be connected with the movement of branches. The last part of the novel describes the death of Mary Turner. On the advice of Charlie Slatter, Dick decided to go out of that place along with Mary. Mary did not offend him. But on night when they decided to go, she awoke suddenly. When she looked through the windows she found stars moving and flashing among the tree boughs. She found an undertone of cold grey on the luminous sky and a weak gleam with the bright stars. It was a moment where both the daylight and moonlight mingled together. All these symbolically signifies the mixing up of tensions and relaxation, happiness and sad, freedom and slavery. It points out to the contact of contrasting things. These images of Nature were the absolute reflection of Mary. It is said that "her mind was clear... and cradled in ease" (Lessing 190). But the contrasting thing that we have to notice is that even though her mind is clear and calm, "...she felt as if she must weep. She could feel the tears running down her cheeks" (Lessing 190). The contrasting images of Nature we mentioned earlier can be connected with these indifferent mannerisms of Mary. She was suffering from a strain "as if she were stretched taut between two immovable poles..." (Lessing 191). It indicates the mental conflict going on in her mind to make a decision to choose either Dick or Moses. While Moses is viewed as a cure for the slashes of her mind, Dick appears as a "... torturing reminder of what she had to forget in order to remain herself" (Lessing 191).

Moses came to her with a piece of sharp, pointed metal which penetrated into her body. The mouth that opened to appeal began to scream. Suddenly the trees advanced in a heavy voice of thunder. Mary fell down to the floor. Soon after her death the rain began. That was the rain which she was actually hoping. Even though the murder is viewed as a revenge of Moses, it could be understood as Mary's freedom from her body. Her body always acted against her mind's will. There was always a clash between her body and the mind and through the murder she got a freedom. The rain



falling after her death is also a symbol of her independence. The rain is actually the bursting of clouds. When the rain falls the clouds are no more. Similarly, Mary's soul had burst out from the body and it entered into the new world of freedom where there are no shackles.

The character of Mary displays the plight of people who were moulded by rough and tough, uncompromising attitude of society towards the weak and marginalized section. She actually represents a cross section of the society who was denied of the basic freedom of living according to their own wish. They always suppressed their desires and wishes, hide their pains and struggles and were forced to live as an enactment of the play written by people around them. At last, after being tired of these suppressions, they began to act upon the orders of their own mind and then they were labeled as uncompromising and cruel.

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