
The Reality of the Fractured Psyche as Represented in “Grass Is Singing”

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Abstract: In her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, in 1950, Doris Lessing, a British writer borrows the title of this novel from T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* where she gradually unravels the apparent dreariness of romantic connotations of the title in reality. The novel, gradually unfolds the disintegration of the coherent “self” of Mary Turner, the protagonist, due to the interplay of several external forces on one hand and Mary’s insecure childhood, low self esteem and marital inadequacy on the other. It actually “traces her decay into death”. Heavily steeped in Freudian psychoanalysis, the psyche of the heroine is unfolded as the narrative proceeds further. The novel depicts the intricacies of human relations, social structures and racial prejudices in Rhodesian society. Not only does it speak against colonialism in Africa and has a feminist perspective but it also recognizes chaos and its consequence upon inner reality.

Keywords: Disintegration of Self, Infantile Ego, Lowered Self Esteem, Oedipal Complex, Repression and Perception of Death

1. Introduction

Portraying life in Rhodesia, Africa, the novel, *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing (1950) begins with a newspaper article titled “Murder Mystery” in Ngesi. The tragic murder of Mary Turner, a white woman, is reported thus making the readers awestruck at the very onset. This news, that this white lady has been murdered by her black servant Moses for money, acts like an omen for other white people living in that African setting. Thus, the narrative immediately shifts to a flashback of Mary Turner’s past life till her death in the hands of Moses.

Initially wrapped in awe, intertwined with a sense of uncanny, the narrative slowly unfolds the tragic life of a farmer’s wife, Mary Turner and traces the gradual disintegration of her psyche ultimately leading to “her decay into death.” The main focus of this novel is Mary’s psychological breakdown as a consequence of the society’s oppression and the repressed self. Mary’s death was a matter “simply not discussed....A bad business”-an incident that naturally was expected to fade into oblivion, an issue stirring people internally though no external ripples could be observed- as was Mary Turner’s gradual self disintegration- something not to be uncovered...not to be discussed, yet so

very personal and unique.

2. Mary-the Protagonist

Mary Turner, the protagonist of the novel is the daughter of an alcohol addict. Mary, since childhood has always witnessed poverty and a bitter attitude of her mother in pursuit of financial stability. Moreover, the values of the conservative English settlers in South Africa is enmeshed within her. Mary’s childhood experiences have been found to make her emotionally vulnerable if not cripple by the time Mary is twenty and achieves financial independence as a typist in a small town. She appears to be repelled by intimacy, preferring solitude. Little happens to her between the ages of twenty and thirty. However, during these years, her parents die leaving her unmoved and little, if at all affected- indicating a psychic stagnation and a defense mechanism of denial perhaps. Mary’s apparently uneventful life is reflected in the narrator’s voice as she says, “Till she was twenty-five nothing happened to break the smooth and comfortable life she led” The narrator also says: “She was very happy: that was perhaps her only positive quality, for there was nothing else distinctive about her, though at twenty-five she was at her prettiest”. But she receives a blow

when she overhears her friends discussing about her- "She was alone; and heard people talking in low voices, and caught her own name. She rose to go inside and declare herself: it was typical of her that her first thought was, how unpleasant it would be for her friends to know she had overheard". "She was stunned and outraged; but most of all deeply wounded that her friends could discuss her thus. She was so naïve, so unconscious of herself in relation to other people, that it had never entered her head that people could discuss her behind her back" This idea is better represented in these lines: "She was friend to half the town. And in the evening she always went to sun downer parties that prolonged themselves till midnight, or danced, or went to the pictures" This incident however, though appearing to be somewhat trivial, can be said to be a founding stone of her ultimate breakdown. Mary's blurred self concept and her vulnerability to criticism is reflected by her shattered image of herself which suggests her low frustration tolerance and perhaps an infantile ego strength. Mary's attempt to cope with reality is reflected when Mary starts to work hard in order to compromise between her wishes and the strict and stringent demands of the society. Thus, she starts changing her clothes and hairstyle in order to conform to the society's stereotypical expectations from a woman. This apparently insignificant incident reflects Mary's conscious attempt to adapt to the demands of life on one hand and of her emotional vulnerability and low self concept entirely shaped by the perception of others on the other.

3. Marital Relationship

Mary eagerly searches for a husband who rather is a means to regain her earlier eroded confidence according to the societal expectations and judgments.

She appears initially as "a busy and popular woman with a secure place in the social life of the town." Nevertheless, "people made her get married," as she says, and this is what makes her unhappy in her current life

However, she is oblivious of the fact that her 'aversion towards the personal things like love and passion' may destroy the success of any intimate relationship. In her desperation to mend her shattered and worn out self esteem, Mary marries Dick Turner-the first man she comes across. Mary chooses to leave the town and settle in the country with Dick who is a farm owner. Dick however, views marriage as a romantic voyage that is socially acknowledged and approved. Endowed and characterized by their typical emotional flatness, Dick and Mary Turner are worlds apart.

Initially, Dick appears to be a typical submissive husband-"it had really been such an easy way to win mastery over him, the sort of trick women use to defeat their men". Dick Turner always ended up by "apologizing, abasing himself, and she forgiving him", even when they had trivial disagreements in spite of Dick being the provider and the man in charge of the farm. . Mary's initial superiority, however, does not last long: "She would have to sit like a queen bee in this house and force him to do what she wanted".

Apparently, there is "no real misunderstanding between them".

With the passage of time, however, she discovers lack of strength in Dick's personality and his aimlessness in life. This realization and pity towards Dick makes Mary hate him. This hatred is again directed often towards her own confused sense of self. Mary desires that Dick should work instead of assigning his constant failure on "Luck". Had Dick been a stronger man, Mary would have loved him more because somewhere deep within her unconscious, Mary had expected Dick to be instrumental in covering up her inadequacy. She had expected Dick to be an agent who would bring back her sense of lost control in life. Mary's constant attempt to reorganize the interior of their house can be understood symbolically as her futile desire to restructure and reorient her life so as to bring about a change in Dick's personality and her helpless life situation.

Dick feels aggrieved when he perceives lack of satisfaction in their lives and in the relationship: "He stubbornly went his own way, feeling as if she had encouraged him to swim in deep waters beyond his strength, and then left him to his own devices" turning Mary's dream into despair.

Mary's reluctance towards physical relationship with Dick is revealed as the narrative advances slowly. She dislikes the physical intimacy with her husband because she dreads that it may produce feelings that she does not want to experience-the feeling of love toward him. This ambivalence might be a manifestation of her repressed fear of relationships as she constantly perceives her marital discord as a reflection of her parents failed marriage. Somewhere, unconsciously, she discovers a resemblance of her mother's life with her's: "Mary, with the memory of her own mother recurring more and more frequently, like an older, sardonic double of herself walking beside her, followed the course her upbringing made inevitable". The narration continues, "She identified herself with her mother, clinging to her most passionately and pityingly after all these years, understanding now something of what she had really felt and suffered". When Dick is sick, she takes charge of the farm until he gets well though she dislikes the farm as she believes that it is the farm that is refraining her from leading the life in the town- "she said nothing of how she disliked the natives, of how the hostility that she could feel as something palpable coming from them against her, affected her; she knew he could be in bed for days yet, and that she would have to do it whether she liked it or not". Mary's sense of emptiness and impersonality are perhaps projected onto the African servants. She is infuriated by their object-like presence, 'as if he were not really there, only a black body ready to do her bidding'. She is shaken by any and every incident, like the heat, the primitive bathing facilities, the neighbours, Dick's successive failures as a farmer, which resulted in an increase in her level of her anxiety and feelings of alienation. She hates herself for hating Dick, and his desire to control everything in Mary's life. Mary is constantly struggling to resolve the conflict arising from the strong demands of her morality and her uninhibited impulses-

perhaps a struggle between her id and superego with her weak infantile ego mediating between the two.

Mary and Dick seem to victimise each other in refraining from each other's desire to have a child. Initially, reluctant of the idea of having a child because of her unhappy marriage, Mary, one day comes to her husband with a new look on her face, a look that he had never seen before, and asked if they might have a child. He still dreamed that one day, "when things were better," they could have children. And then his face became dull and troubled, and he said, "Mary, how can we have children?" "Other people have them, when they are poor." "But, Mary, you don't know how poor we are." Of course I know. But I can't go on like this. I must have something. I haven't anything to do".

4. Moses

At this juncture, Moses, the black servant enters Mary's life. Mary suffers a dilemma in her relation with him. Sexually drawn towards Moses unconsciously, she has an insatiable urge to control and subordinate the native. Mary identifies with the impersonality in Moses's character and perceives it as a reflection of her own. This further infuriates her thus Moses becomes her self-hatred, personified. Moses on the other hand, gradually is seen to gain control over her life and eventually engulfing her entity. As Mary gradually realises that she is losing control over him, she unconsciously bestows her entire power that is still remaining by imposing unreasonable demands on him. On one hand Mary is unable to cope with a sense of powerlessness and Moses's overpowering her and on the other she encounters a constant fear of losing him. This intense ambivalence and split in her emotionality possibly results in the gradual erosion in her psychic energy. She metaphorically refers to it as a "terrible dark fear" "It was like a nightmare where one is powerless against horror: 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". The fact that Moses calls her "madame" and not "missus" as the other natives does throw light on a personal intimate relationship between them. "He forced her, now, to treat him as a human being". Her latent fear related to Moses undergoes unconscious leakage through her dreams. In one of her dreams Mary even witnesses Dick's death, and she could even feel her sense of being relieved at his death. This dream can be interpreted as a manifestation of her unconscious attachment with Moses and her intense hatred and repulsion towards her husband. Mary also identifies Moses with her father. The dream supposedly suggests a representation her repressed oedipal attachment with her father whom she desired during her childhood. She dreamt of Moses, obscene and powerful, and it was not only he, but her father who was threatening her. He was consoling her for Dick's death, but at the same time it was her father, menacing and horrible, "who touched her in desire"-a dream inevitably suggesting a fused sense of two identities: her father and her servant Moses- "They advanced together, one person, and she could smell,

but the unwashed smell of her father".

Mary Turner's sexual desire has been revealed in many instances. She watches Moses bathe: 'Remembering that thick black neck with the lather frothing whitely on it, the powerful back stopping over the bucket, was like a goad to her.' Sexual ambivalence is reflected here. Later, when Tony Marston watches Moses dressing Mary, the narrator remarks: 'The attitude of the native was of an indulgent luxuriousness.' However, she constantly is engaged in repressing it and thereby struggling to resolve the conflict between the desires of the id and the moral restraints of the superego as might be viewed from a psychoanalytic perspective. Mary's after this terrifying nightmare has problems to "separate dream from reality".

5. Mary's Psychic State

Mary Turner's psychic degeneration is slow yet gradual. Her isolation from everyone and her alienation characterized by pessimism leads her to a state of depression where she unknowingly fades into a phase of speechlessness as if her train of thought is getting derailed. She would start speaking a sentence and eventually become silent without completing it. Her incoherence in speech and her 'face becoming suddenly null and empty, lapsing into silence' was only comprehensible by Dick. She starts talking to herself aloud. Even "once she was aroused by a noise and realized it was herself talking out loud in the living room in a low angry voice".

Mary loses her orientation of time as well. "She doesn't seem to care -she doesn't care about anything, she simply sits and does nothing"-a bizarre state where the borderline segregating reality and fantasy overlap each other. A "loss of contact with reality".

She avoids her friends, the Slatter Family and her town because the discrepancy between how she imagines her life and her actual one would become evident to her. The narrator says: "it was impossible to fit together what she wanted for herself, and what she was offered". A state where she is unable to distinguish personal subjective experience from the reality of the external world.

Her psychic state is also narrated to the readers through the eyes of two other people-Mary Turner's white neighbour Charlie Slatter and Tony Marston whose external perspectives also focus on Mary's disintegrated self.

She speaks to Charlie Slatter, her white neighbour, in the same way as to Moses, her servant. Charlie is astonished: "... she was speaking to him with exactly the same flirtatious coyness with which she had spoken to himself" .Charlie Slatter has internalised the law of white South Africa, which is: 'Thou shalt not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point; because if you do, the nigger will see he is as good as you are' .He is disgusted with Mary as she seems to violate this indelible norm. A second external perspective is supplied by Tony Marston, who opines that Mary's behaviour and speech are often incoherent. He draws an analogy between Mary's incoherence and a Russian empress 'who thought so little of her slaves, as human beings, that she used

to undress naked in front of them'. He considers Mary to be 'mad as a hatter' on one hand – and on the other admits to himself that 'she can't be mad. He feels she lives in a world of her own, where other people's standards are just different... In one incident, most indicative of Mary's psychic aberration, Tony sees the servant helping Mary in her dress, a situation which infuriates him. Mary's vulnerability and her terrific fear of Moses are echoed in her desperate endeavour to seek protection from Tony. She apprehends that Moses will kill her during the night. However, when Moses is fired, Mary undergoes a breakdown. Sobbing, she lets out her agony and says, "He's gone", she cried, "he's gone, he's gone!" Her voice was hysterical with relief. And then she suddenly pushed him away, stood in front of him like a mad woman, and hissed, "You sent him away! He'll never come back! It was all right till you came!" The severity of Mary's suffering is indicated by Tony's concern when he suggests Dick that Mary needs to consult a psychiatrist - "As for Mary, while he was sorry for her, what could be said about a woman who simply wasn't there? "A case for a psychologist," he said again, trying to reassure himself".

Mary's claustrophobia is symbolically represented by the room where she stayed. Her gradually pervading isolation and detachment from the surrounding world is manifested in the narrator's words: "the sky shut down over her with thick yellowish walls of smoke growing up to meet it. The world was small, shut in a room of heat and haze and light." "Balance in mid air", Mary's fragmented self is manifested by the successive encroachments of rats, beetles, rain, grass, bushes, branches, trees, toads, worms etc. "She felt as if a touch would send her off balance into nothingness; she thought of a full complete darkness with longing". The words "nothingness" and "darkness", speak of her destined cessation-her death, slowly approaching in the hands of Moses as he fails to handle the agony and insult associated with Mary's last attempt to bid freedom from him.

6. Death

Moses realises that Mary's unquestionable surrender to him is being threatened by the existence of not only Tony Marston but by Mary herself. Moreover, when he finds out that Dick and Mary are leaving the farm forever, he becomes desperate to regain his lost sense of power over Mary and yearns to take revenge on the submissive who has dared to be herself once more. He aches to inflict the ultimate form of punishment on her-death. When she speaks with Tony, she reveals her psychic state and laments: "It's a long time since I came here. [...] So long that I can't quite remember...I should have left long ago. I don't know why I didn't. I don't know why I came. But things are different. Very different. ... I don't know anything. I don't understand. Why is this happening? I didn't mean it to happen. But he won't go away, he won't go away".

She does not have to undergo her intense seclusion and suffering for long as she awaits her ultimate freedom-death calmly. 'The sky was luminous; but there was an undertone

of cold grey; the stars were bright; but with a weak gleam'. She feels overwhelmed for a short time and perceives "the world was a miracle of colour and all for her, all for her"! She could have wept with release and light hearted joy.'

She could hear the footsteps of death approaching and encroaching upon her stealthily-as if the shrill voice of the first cicada intimating of her long awaited freedom. Mary recalls her mistakes in life and realizes her passivity, her being distant from life. She discovers her detachment from the trees, the surrounding though she had spent so many years amidst them. She experiences the ultimate indifference-her indifference towards her own life, as if "There was nothing new in her death". Rather, Moses and her nearing death seem to her to be the only means of rescue. She passively chooses to accept the coming death. The elated feeling of being rescued suddenly changes into helplessness and Mary once again realizes that nothing and no person can save her: "There was no salvation: she would have to go through with it". She has been reduced to an entity with 'nothing left'. Now it seemed as if the "night were closing in on her, and the little house was bending over her like a candle, melting in the heat. She could hear the crack, crack: the restless moving of the iron above and it seemed to her that a vast black body, like a human spider, was crawling over the roof, trying to get inside....She was shut in a small black box, the walls closing in on her, the roof pressing down" . Mary is helpless in front of Moses, helpless of his power and seethe, awaiting her death. She realises that she has dared to control man's life being a woman and that this control will bring turmoil in her own life and destiny. She is horrified by Moses; yet she has been waiting for him, waiting for her tragic death all the night long. Not a word does she utter, not a voice for rescue -she is terrified and she has been waiting this destiny since firing him.

Listening to the gong that announced "the last day "he too listens to the indelible voice of death.

In her desperate struggle to fight with complete submission and oblivion, Mary Turner is constantly seen to wage a war between the real and the unreal in the last part of the novel. Moses personifies the borderline between sanity and insanity. "She remembered that Moses had gone: relief flooded her". "She could concentrate on the one thing left that mattered to her now". Aware of the fact that somewhere Moses is awaiting her, to kill her-kill her of her little remaining senses.... "that between her and the fatal darkness was a short strip of daylight." From somewhere deep inside her psyche is echoed the words, "the evil is there, but what of it consists, I do not know....For the evil was a thing she could feel: had she not lived with it for, many years? But what had she done? Nothing of her own volition". In her relentless struggle to regain her entity and her lost sense of control over her own life, Mary Turner is undergoing severe turmoil where at some junctures she desires to submit to her fate." She ran outside: what was the use of sitting there, just waiting, waiting for the door to open and death to enter"? "She walked straight into the bush, thinking: 'I will come across him, and it will all be over'".

“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. All her past slid away, and her mouth, opened in appeal, let out the beginning of a scream, which was stopped by a black hand inserted between her jaws. But the scream continued, in her stomach, choking her; and she lifted her hands, claw like, toward him off”.

Moses kills his prey and awaits people to come and arrest him. Dick is seen to become insane at the end which again is suggestive of the blurred borderline between sanity and insanity, between real and unreal and between integration and disintegration of the psyche.

Death represents her ultimate means of escape.

“But then, what is madness, but a refuge, a retreating from the world?” .Mary’s fate is heard to resonate in the words of Tony Marston. Death here can be symbolically represented as Mary Turner’s ultimate psychic degeneration as she fades away in complete oblivion and passivity thus signifying absolute detachment from reality. Mary ceases into a state of complete non entity. -“The aim of every life is to die”...Freud’s words seem to echo in Mary Turners fate.

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