

## Race, Legality, and Criminality: A Study of Doris May Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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### Abstract

When we do a contrapuntal reading of the novels *The Grass is Singing* by Doris May Lessing and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, it comes to our focus that both the texts are highly pregnant with the issues of racial disparities regarding the matters of criminality, and legality, and also these issues are interrelated with each other within the larger structure of colonial discourse. Though the texts are of two different writers belonging to two different cultures and nationalities yet their writing reveals certain commonalities in matters of representation of the coloniser and the colonised or the native people. Irrespective of the distance and difference in life experiences of both these writers - the first author is British – the race that perpetuates racial differences and the second author is an American who had first-hand experiences of such racial disparity as a resident of America - were able to reflect upon the issues of the colonial legal system which in fact sees any kind of crime through the prism of race and also show how any kind of crime in colonised society is viewed as an act of black race, and accordingly justice is delivered which obviously victimizes the indigenous colonised people of Africa and America. The present paper attempts to explore that the narrative of the colonial legal procedure and black victimhood was almost the same in both cases which results in racially prejudiced judgments and injustices. In this regard, David Spurr's 'debasement theory' from the book *The Rhetoric of Empire* will be applied in analysing the unflinching connection between race, criminality, and legality during colonialism.

By the end of the exploration, we will come to understand that the issues of race, criminality, and legality were the unavoidable issues when colonialism was at its peak. Also, it will provide us a clear pattern of victimizing the natives as criminals on one hand and how the subsequent legal procedures being racially prejudiced end up doing injustices to those victims on

the other hand. The legal proceedings in matters of the murder of white European lady Mary Turner by her black servant Moses in *The Grass is Singing*; and the rape of a white lady Mayella Ewell by black Tom Robison in *To Kill a Mockingbird* reinforces the colonised version of the incidents where both the accused are convicted and punished without any fault of their own.

**Keywords:** Race, Criminality, Legality, Prejudices, Injustices, David Spurr, The Rhetoric of Empire, *The Grass is Singing*, Doris Lessing, *To Kill the Mockingbird*, Harper Lee

## Introduction

. The issues of Racism, Criminality, and Legality were inseparable matters during the colonial era. For the white colonisers, hegemonic homogeneity is a cultural tool of colonial oppression, imposing savagery upon the Other. Randall Kennedy (1997) explains that the reputation of blacks has been “besieged” by beliefs about predispositions toward criminality that can be traced back to the enslavement of Africans in the United States (Welch 276). They consistently produce endless stereotyped negative images of the indigenous Black race to marginalize them as Other and to establish the supremacy of their own race and ethnicity. Homi. K. Bhabha pointed out this in his essay “The Other Question”:

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. (18)

These hegemonic discriminations were largely based upon the standpoint of race, ethnicity, skin colour, and ontology. Because the indigenous colonised people lack the white skin colour of the colonisers, they were taken to be uncivilized and evil. David Spurr's (1993) theoretical ideas in his work *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* particularly the chapter called "Debasement" effectively complement this colonial racism and its consecutive cruel issues. Shuv Raj Rana Bhat in his 2016 article called "Rhetorical Construction of West African Travels in West Africa" explains that the rhetoric of debasement is basically associated with filth and defilement of the native indigenous colonised race and its people. It is concerned with a text's reproduction of myths about the non-west that creates an image of a foreign place that is somehow abhorrent or dangerous to Europeans (210). As Spurr asserts: "It basically aims to illustrate the lowest qualities of the colonised peoples—"dishonesty, suspicion, superstition, lack of self discipline—are reflected more generally in societies characterized by corruption xenophobia, tribalism, and the inability to govern themselves" (76).

As a result of this colonial strategic debasement, if anything wrong would happen or any kind of crime would take place, it immediately was associated with the black race by the colonisers with collective solidarity and utmost confirmation. In describing evolving perceptions of Blacks throughout our nation's history, Marc Mauer (1999) explains that Whites have long viewed criminal behaviour as an inherent characteristic of Blacks (Welch 276). The very responses of the white colonisers happened to be as if their so-long beliefs were not wrong but rather came to be true and confirmed again, something had happened which had only been expected. In fact, perceptions about the presumed racial identity of criminals may be so ingrained in the public consciousness that race didn't even need to be specifically mentioned for a

connection to be made between the two because it seemed that "talking about crime is talking about race" (Welch 276).

Frantz Fanon in his work namely *Black Skin, White Masks* has rightly pointed out this connection between evil and crime with the black skin colour and the problems of being from a black race:

As I begin to recognise that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognise that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it. I try then to find value for what is bad--since I have unthinkingly conceded that the black man is the colour of evil. (197)

The short story, "Dry Winter" (1931) by William Faulkner at its core reflects stereotyped connections of crime and the black race made by the white colonizers as an alleged accusation of rape is made where the victim is a black man and the accuser is a white lady (Milică 103).

And such kind of stereotyped response was not only bound to the common space of life only, rather the legal procedures regarding criminal offenses were made to respond in the same prejudiced and stereotyped way. As a consequence, the colonial criminal law and its legal procedure never bothered itself to find out the actual reason and truth behind a crime by investing various dimensions and possibilities of it. It never suspected a white man of any kind of crime, and if a white man had come out as a criminal then the penalty for him was very light and low. But in case [which mostly had happened] the suspected black man was innocent there was no such space where they could even have a single chance to prove their innocence, all the

transparent and comprehensible shreds of evidence were even deliberately ignored to put the white skin aloof from any kind of accusation and punishment. The racially prejudiced criminal legal procedure could never become able to provide unbiased judgments and justice to the victims rather always ended up in racial and judicial injustices. A real-life incident of Scottsboro Boys of Alabama is the result of such prejudiced and stereotyped accusations against the black race and its subsequent miscarriage of justice. The article, called “ACLU History: The Tragedy of the Scottsboro Boys” writes about this incident:

Nine young black Alabama youths – ranging in age from 12 to 19 – were charged with raping two white women near the small town of Scottsboro, Alabama. Their trials began 12 days after the alleged crime and, despite ample evidence that they were innocent, eight of the nine were found guilty by all-white juries and sentenced to death in the electric chair. As national outrage over the convictions grew, numerous organizations came forward to assist with appeals, including the ACLU.

The Scottsboro defendants were ultimately saved from execution, but they languished in prison for years. Even after being released, most never fully recovered from their ordeal. (ACLU, N. Pag.)

Martin Luther King Jr. has also reflected upon how the racial injustices made the law and legal system prejudiced and biased in the case of the black race and thus resulting in "unspeakable horrors of police brutality" (N. Pag.): “We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality” (N. Pag.).

### **Literary Survey, Research Gap, and Objectives**

Doris May Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950) and the other one *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee have been subjects of several critical inspections. A plethora of literary works on these two novels have been worked out under the purview of postcolonial, racial, and feminine perspectives.

After a critical review of those literary works related to the intended topic, we find out that what Mohammad-Javad Hajjari has done on the text, *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing in the recent year of 2015 namely "Double Effect and Black Revenge in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*" is close to the topic. Here he has brought to light that the murder of the White lady Mary Turner by the black houseboy Moses is nothing but the result of the 'double effect', 'black revenge' and 'black honour'.

In the case of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Iulia Andreea Milică (2012) in her article namely "Racial Violence in William Faulkner's *Dry September* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*" has brought into focus how racial discriminations make the black Tom Robinson victimized by the white colonisers because of his race. Also Dlnya Mohammad in the recent article of 2020 namely "Racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*" has mostly reflected upon the issue of racism in this novel.

However, up to the knowledge of the researcher, none of the studies listed above focalizes on how criminality and legality are inherently interlinked with racial prejudices at the high peak of colonialism through a comparative study of these two texts. Correspondingly, this study attempts to elucidate through a comparative study of the two texts *The Grass is Singing* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* how criminality and legality are inseparably linked with racism when colonialism was at its peak.

### **Introducing Both the Texts and Authors:**

Doris May Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* are the most enriched postcolonial texts to point out the racial discriminations, segregation, and marginalisations that the black indigenous African and American people had to go through constantly. Both the texts were almost contemporary- *The Grass is Singing* was published in the year 1950, and the latter was published in 1960. The first one tells us the racial disparities and injustices with its dehumanising consequences on the black race of the Southern Rhodesia in the colonised Africa during the 1940s, and the latter one is about the same conditions of the black race in the Southern States of America during the 1930s.

*The Grass is Singing*, the first novel by the British writer Doris May Lessing got immediate success after its publication. And *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written by the American author Harper Lee with an autobiographical touch in it. This novel reflects to a great extent, the author's real-life experiences of the racial injustices and its deadening consequences as her neighbour black men after being falsely accused of murder were convicted and inhumanly hanged. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is narrated from the perspective of a girl namely Jean Louise Finch, better known as Scout - how she responded and was affected by the trial of a black man

accused of raping a white female. Scout was believed to be based on Harper Lee herself and Atticus on Lee's father.

However, both the texts point out the same issues and conditions involved in African and American racial policies and concepts and how these racial issues of the colonial period resulted in the collective solidarity among the white race about the stereotyped and prejudiced conception that the indigenous black people could only be evil and criminal but not any individual from the white race. They very successfully even capture how this kind of stereotyped and prejudiced racial standpoint led always to the accusation and victimisation of a black man on the one hand and simultaneously to the prejudiced legal procedures with unfair judgments that ultimately ended up by providing injustices in form of death to those black victims.

**Pointing out Unflinching Connection between Race, Legality, and Criminality in *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing:**

The novel, *The Grass is Singing* begins with the utmost grim incident in the newspaper cutting which informs its readers that the white lady Mary Turner is murdered by their houseboy Moses who is from the black race of Southern Rhodesia in South Africa, and ends up with the imprisonment of Moses through a very callous and stereotyped legal procedure.

In the very beginning Chapter of the novel namely, "Murder Mystery" the most striking point that draws the researcher's attention is the fact that as soon as the news of the murder of white lady Mary Turner by a black houseboy Moses reaches the ears of the White race; they immediately with collective solidarity agree in silence and with utmost confirmation. Their very reaction is as if these kinds of criminal activities are only to be expected from the indigenous native people of the black race; as if there is inseparability between any kind of crime and the

black race. The novelist also reflects on this same issue in her writing where she writes that the white people all over the country must after having a look at the sensational heading of the murder had felt “a little spurt anger mingled with a sense of satisfaction” (Lessing, N. Pag.) as if their so long beliefs came to be true and confirmed again, something happened which had only been expected. To quote Lessing:

The newspaper did not say much. People all over the country must have glanced at the paragraph with its sensational heading and felt a little spurt of anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction, as if some belief had been confirmed, as if something had happened which could only have been expected. When natives steal, murder or rape, that is the feeling white people have. (Lessing, N. Pag.)

Right at this point, the crucial question which should necessarily be reflected upon is - does a black man being part of a race other than white race, really born with a criminal mindset? Here in the case of Moses this hypothesis becomes completely abolished. In contrast, Moses being from the black race though is someone with more humbleness, dutifulness, and values of life and humanity than people like Mary Turner, Charlie Slatter, etc. from the white race. One evidence of such quality is that in Chapter 7, when his white master Dick Turner became ill severely, as a house boy he restlessly and dutifully nursed him with needed care and attention and consequently Dick got a fast recovery. So, what Mohammad-Javad Hajjari in his recent article of 2015, “Double Effect and Black Revenge in Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*” has claimed seems quite disagreeable because if Mosses would kill the white lady as a result of

double effect, black revenge and black honour, he would never give life to his white master rather would always be in search of an opportunity to kill him.

Moreover, in Chapter 7, there was an incident when Mary Turner brutally whipped Moses without any serious reason. In the reaction to such an incident, other co-workers of Moses became furious and tried to protest violently but Moses being terribly injured still didn't think of revenge. If he would have any criminal mindset, abhorrence, and revengefulness for the white race he could murder Mary Turner right at that point as Mary was all alone among the black workers. But instead, he protected her from the fury and violence of his co-black workers by stopping them.

Moses had killed Mary not out of revenge and black honour but because he was betrayed by her in a love relationship. Though Mary out of her sense of hegemonic racial supremacy and consequent prejudiced mindset used to hate Moses and torture him in so many ways both physically and mentally, still because of Moses' humbleness she couldn't help herself from being attracted to this black man. There grew an emotional dependence and an intimate relationship as well between Mary and Moses. But Tony Marston was the trigger for Moses to murder Mary as he had snatched that place in Mary's life which happened to be of Moses. Mary herself, being confirmed about the fact that she was going to meet her end soon, had reflected that she had "betrayed Moses" (Lessing, N. Pag.). He didn't have any criminal history as well. Instead of such dimensions of the case, the moment Moses after killing Mary stood up on the symbolic place of ant-heap as a traditional sign of accepting his guilt, none was there to ask whether he had really committed the crime or not. As soon as the policemen reached the place, they were immediate to take him into captivity. They wholeheartedly believed that it was indeed normal for Moses to murder the white lady because he belonged to the black race and thus was a criminal.

The actual reason behind and about the crime would never get a chance to come out. The judiciary was so rigid and stereotypically prejudiced towards such cases where the people of the black race are accused of a crime as if everyone knew what they could do or could not do. From the explanation of the Native District Commissioner on the query why Moses didn't escape, a clear picture can be visualized of such prejudiced legal procedures as a result of racial injustices:

The laws were strict: everyone knew what they could or could not do. If someone did an unforgivable thing, like touching one of the King's women, he would submit fatalistically to punishment, which was likely to be impalement over an ant-heap on a stake, or something equally unpleasant. 'I have done wrong; and I know it,' he might say, 'therefore let me be punished.' Well, it was the tradition to face punishment, and really there was something rather fine about it. (Lessing, N. Pag.)

Even, if by any chance, there would arise a thought in the native policeman that Moses might not have killed Mary, then he would be immediate to "tend to think in terms of the past" (Lessing, N. Pag.).

Also, there were others like Dick Turner and mostly Charlie Slatter who were closely connected with Mary's life just like Moses and thus needed to be taken under proper investigation if it were a just legal procedure. But as Doris Lessing points out that "policemen, do not lay hands on white flesh" (Lessing, N. Pag.); both Dick and Charlie Slatter were not to be taken under any kind of suspicion regarding the murder case. If one thinks from a neutral standpoint then it can be said that considering Dick's previous humanly behaviors and present

madness because of Mary's death; it is justified that he is not investigated. But when it is the turn of Charlie Slatter, the legal system comes under the question of racial prejudices and injustices. Though Moses murdered, there was a high chance for Slatter to commit such criminal activities because “He had once killed a native in a fit of temper” (Lessing, N. Pag.) and “It hung over his front door, like a motto on a wall: 'You shall not mind killing if it is necessary’” (Lessing, N. Pag.).

However, as a result of racial prejudices against the black race, all such shreds of evidence were kept aside only to prove a Black man as the sole criminal. That's why Moses being well aware of his ultimate fate as a part of the black race surrendered himself in the traditional symbolic way and by saying: “Here I am” (Lessing, N. Pag.).

Another evidence of racial discriminations and judicial injustices in the colonial society is that because Charlie was a “white flesh” (Lessing, N. Pag.), his murdering of an indigenous black man was not a big issue in the eyes of the white race and the racially prejudiced legal system. That is why, his punishment for the murder was minimised, “He was fined thirty pounds” (Lessing, N. Pag.).

### **Pointing out Harper Lee’s Elaboration of the Legal Procedures Left Indicative and Untouched by Doris Lessing:**

The same kind of racial injustices and prejudiced judicial system in case of a crime where the black is being falsely accused by the white people is reflected by Harper Lee in her novel *To Kill the Mockingbird*. In the case of Moses the novel ended open-endedly, where Moses standing on the symbolic ant-heap was waiting for the police to come. No in detail legal procedure was provided by the novelist unless the news had shown that Moses was being arrested. Doris

Lessing knew it very well that the ultimate destiny for the black Moses is known to all her readers as such racial injustice and the prejudiced legal procedure was very common in that colonial era. But, here in the novel *To Kill the Mockingbird*, Harper Lee went one step forward providing a detailed picture of the prejudiced judicial system of the time. She provided an opportunity for the readers to visualize what ultimately was destined to happen in a racially prejudiced legal procedure even if the case of the black man goes through trials after trials and there were found shreds of evidence in support of the black man's complete innocence; whether it is Tony Robinson or other black men like Moses.

**Focusing on the In-depth Reality of Race, Legality, and Criminality Resulting in Ultimate Prejudiced Judicial Injustice in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee:**

Here the rape case of Tony Robinson, a black man from Alabama was brought into the courtroom and was defended by the lawyer Atticus Finch, a white man. Here also just like Moses, Robinson was a decent man with utmost humanity and humbleness. Atticus almost proved here that Robinson didn't rape the white lady Mayella; rather she being attracted to the black man tried to tempt him. This truth about the rape case became clear to all including the white and black people and the readers as well from the honest confession of Robinson:

““Jumped on you? Violently?”

“No suh, she—she hugged me. She hugged me round the waist.”

.....

“She reached up an’ kissed me ’side of th’ face. She says she never kissed a grown man before an’ she might as well kiss a nigger. She says what her papa do to her don’t count. She says, ‘Kiss me back, nigger’”. (Lee, N. Pag.)

Robinson also confessed that he did not rape her:

“Tom, did you rape Mayella Ewell?”

“I did not, suh.”

“Did you harm her in any way?”

“I did not, suh”. (Lee, N. Pag.)

Other than this confession by the victim, there were lots of inconsistencies in the claim and shreds of evidence that didn’t go properly with the allegation of rape. Atticus showed that the way the rape was described was not possible to be committed by Robinson because his left hand was useless as Robinson explained: “I can’t use my left hand at all. I got it caught in a cotton gin when I was twelve years old. All my muscles were tore loose” (Lee, N. Pag.). Even no Doctor was called to verify whether Mayella had been raped or not because here the accused one was the black man, but not a white man; and such bitter reality was reinforced from the words of Sherriff: ““It wasn't necessary, Mr. Finch...Something sho' happened, it was obvious”” (Lee, N. Pag.). It was obvious that a black man only could be a criminal and so any allegation that was being brought against him needed not any verification; “wasn't necessary”” (Lee, N. Pag.)

That is why, to keep their race as the supreme one by covering the truth that a white lady tempted a black man, Bob Ewell, and Mayella Ewell, simply chose the traditional way to put the blame of rape upon the black scapegoat Robinson. They knew it very well that this accusation

must be accepted by all at any cost because it had been the way through which so many black men were taken to be the scapegoats by the white race on whom any false blame of crime could be put on easily. These racial discriminatory beliefs and injustices eventually came to be the reality; because as a result of such deeply embedded racial injustices in the legal systems, instead of all such shreds of evidence that pointed out the actual truth about the accusation of rape, innocent Robinson had been ultimately declared as the convict by the jury and thus was imprisoned. Atticus expressed such grim and cruel truth of the racial injustices and the prejudiced judiciaries to Jem by saying that "when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins (Lee, N. Pag.)." The same view about the judicial prejudices and injustices was again confirmed by Miss Maudie's distastes about the trial and the reactions of the mob: "no business with the court...t's morbid, watching a poor devil on trial for his life. Look at all those folks, it's like a Roman carnival'" (Lee, N. Pag.).

Such dehumanising prejudiced racial and judicial injustices were the inescapable reality because of which the innocent black mockingbirds were destined to be destructed by the white race again and again. Such racial discriminatory mindset of the white race against the black race was so intensely entrenched, as Harper Lee pointed out throughout the novel that even if a white man stands beside an innocent black victim, he and his family was also destined to be marginalised along with the black race by their own white race. That is why, as the white man Atticus wholeheartedly had chosen to defend a black victim, going against his race, he and his children were marginalised with the constant taunting word "Nigger-lover" (Lee, N. Pag.) and also had to go through several threats from the white race. And such racial injustices were such cruel fates for the black race that as Jem confirmed to Scout, ""around here once you have one drop of Negro blood, that makes you all black" (Lee, N. Pag.).

## Conclusion

On the whole, this paper has very pin-pointedly reflected upon the interconnectedness between race, legality, and criminality in the colonial era through the comparative study of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It shows that the fate of Moses and Robinson was the ultimate fate of each individual belonging to the black race of Africa and America from which they never found a way of escape. It became a universal truth and meta-narrative that the black man must be accused of any crime; and then ultimately would face the judicial injustices as a result of racial injustices, and thus finally would face the ultimate destiny in form of death by lynching and hanging. That is to say, this article has pinpointed the fact that the colonial judiciary system had its own drawbacks being influenced by racial prejudices as it always failed to provide fair justice to the black victims because of their race. There is always a narrative of victimhood where for any kind of crime the black man is to be blamed. The colonial judicial system is nothing but a mere formality where the proceeding will go on and on but at the end of the day, the judgment is the same.

Nevertheless, it is to be brought to light that though in the twenty-first century it apparently seems as if racism is in its marginalized state; it's not the true picture of reality. There is an undercurrent of racial prejudices in its mutated form that is highly politically mobilized. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were indeed the era of rising Liberalism and Left Wing thoughts and as a consequence, there occurred several movements to resist these kinds of prejudiced treatment of the black race by the white race. One such cry for an end to racial injustices and inequalities are made by Martin Luther King Jr. on August 28, 1963, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right down in Alabama little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today”. (N. Pag.)

And such movements and endeavours partially succeed in bringing positive changes in the condition of black people. That is why in America, Barak Obama belonging to the African American black race though had been elected as president two times, first in 2008 and then in 2012. But this is only one side of reality. To consider another side of the coin we may say that alongside this positivity, it is unfortunate that Conservatism and Right-Wing thoughts again are becoming the elements of mainstream politics throughout the world which is bringing back racial prejudices in a modernized format. The consequence is realized when we are witnessing the death of an African American black man namely Geroqe Floyd while he was in the custody of a white policeman in the same USA of Barak Obama, the Black African American President.

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