

**Application of Language in Women Representation in Post-colonial  
Literature: Illustrating from The Grass is Singing**

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**Abstract**

Language being the most vibrant, diverse and successful way to endorse a culture, a nation, a tribe or even a gender, can also play a vital role to annihilate the self-importance, supremacy, reverence and stature of a particular part of the society and disseminate that posture. Hence, this paper attempts to investigate how language has incredible authority to portray and influence the role / identity of women through illustrating from popularly read post-colonial English literary piece 'The Grass Is Singing' by Doris Lessing. This paper further argues in what manner and to what extent the besmirched depiction of women in various spheres has worked through different verbal/written structures of language in post-colonial literature. Finally, the paper turns to deliver a substantial stand-point to explore the challenges related to language in order to remodel the prevailing gender relations in all cultures of human civilization.

**Key words:** Language, Women, Depiction, Role/ Identity, Post-colonial

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### **1. Fore-word:**

Human beings are blessed with an adorable and unique attribute called 'language'. It is the most distinctive, dynamic, diverse and effective way to uphold a culture, a nation, or even a gender. At the same time, it can also play a vital role to put down the pride, power, prestige and position of a particular part of the society and perpetuate that stance.

Hence, the paper attempts to illustrate from popularly read post-colonial English literary piece in English departments in different universities in Bangladesh ('The Grass Is Singing' by Doris Lessing, for instance), and shows how language has tremendous power to depict and influence the role/identity of women. This paper further argues in what manner and to what extent the degraded portrayal of women in various spheres has worked through different verbal/written structures of language.

Certainly the socio-economic, political, cultural, technological scenario has changed a lot in last few decades, and we are now living in a globalized world with a global language. Nevertheless, we have not still been able to throw out all the so-called power-related suppositions. Therefore, the paper turns to provide a considerable stand-point to explore the challenges related to language in order to reshape the existing gender relations in society.

In this connection, a word of caution is necessary. The insight is what has seemed to the author to be compelling and may not be accepted by other researchers as such. ( In this respect, readers might like to read Harrison and Gough (1996) , a conversation between the two authors on what makes a piece of research compelling for one person but not another.)

### **1.1. Research Hypothesis:**

Language is a means of perpetuation of men-women power hierarchy.

### **1.2. Research Scope**

This paper attempts to focus that language is being used in such a way that it can play a vital role to annihilate the self-importance, supremacy, reverence and stature of a particular part of the society and disseminate that posture. It also aims to open up the scopes to carry out similar investigations on different literary pieces used throughout the world.

### **1.3. Limitations**

The researcher has gone through various criticism, comments, articles, books available on these topics, but did not make any survey; rather relied on own thoughts and observation.

## **2. Literature Review:**

According to Wikipedia, post-colonial literature often involves writings that deal with issues of de-colonization or the political and cultural independence of people. It is also a literary critique to texts that carry racist or colonial undertones. Post-colonial literature, finally in its most recent form, also attempts to focus on the social "discourse" that shaped it. In post-colonial writings struggling are often found with questions of identity, experiencing the conflict of living between the old, native world and the invasive forces of hegemony from new, dominant cultures.

The term post-colonial literature has taken on many meanings. One important subject includes 'Colonial abandonment and alienation' which is generally brought up to examine individuals and not the ex-colony as a whole -the individuals tend to ask themselves; in this new country, where do I fit in and how do I make a living? Same notion of alienation is found in Mary in this novel.

Cherry Clayton (1993) said, "It has been said that patriarchy was re-invented in the colonies. The complex inter weavings of racial and gender oppression in South Africa, despite the class and economic differences which separate white from black women, have made women a marginal group both in the traditional power structures of British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism and in the current restructuring of the South African polity. In the uneven transition to capitalist relations of production new forms of oppression emerged and the assumption of male authority over women was reinforced."

## **3. Methodology**

This paper aims mainly to be an **analytical** paper that breaks down the issue into its component parts, evaluate and presents them as part of a plain academic exercise. The researcher has not made a claim or just an opinion, but has tried to justify various points with specific evidence, and sometimes made recommendation to improve. The goal of the paper is to convince the readers that the claim is true based on the evidence provided.

For the purpose of the study, secondary data (article, criticism, book) along with the researcher's own observation are synthesized through the light of theoretical assumptions. Then it has been summarized, analyzed and interpreted to make the study meaningful. To make the study informative and useful, the materials of the paper have been presented systematically so that fruitful inference can be drawn from them.

#### **4. Analysis & Discussion:**

'The Grass Is Singing', a remarkable piece of work by Doris Lessing (1950), is a high-tension story of a woman whose life was changed by a few careless words. This novel is a powerful, psychological portrait about the bleakness of existence as opposed to living, tension (master vs. slave, white vs. black, female vs. male, that alternately repulsed and attracted), isolation, disillusionment, fear, prejudice, and madness. At times it is as violent and harsh as the brown earth and arching blue sky of the veldt in South Africa. At times, too, it is angry at the festering question of black against white which broods over the land like thunder. But above all, it is the story of Mary Turner as we watch her fall into an increasingly severe depression. It is the story of the powerlessness of women in a society that prescribes certain roles for them, and that places the real power of decision making with male/ men.

If we analyze the story, we find that set in South Africa under white rule, this novel is both a riveting chronicle of human disintegration and a beautifully understated social critique. Mary Turner is a self-confident, independent young woman who becomes the depressed, frustrated wife of an ineffectual, unsuccessful farmer. Little by little the ennui of years on the farm work their slow poison, and Mary's despair progresses until the fateful arrival of an enigmatic and virile black servant, Moses. Locked in anguish, Mary and Moses--master and slave--are trapped in a web of mounting attraction and repulsion. Mary can attain liberation from socialized identity if she allows attraction and if she overcomes the thin line between self and other. Their psychic tension explodes in an electrifying scene that ends Mary's life. As a matter of fact, "Moses threatens her with the liberator danger of the dissolution of her socialized identity" (Grogan 2011). Here we find, "Mary's sense of historical guilt becomes a debilitating form of abjection; it encodes and bolsters powerful form of agency." (Joy Wang 2009)

Now as we explore the language of the novel, we notice that language is acting as a medium through which men- women power hierarchy is moving on and on perpetually. The story opens with the murder of a white woman, Mary Turner, in a remote farm somewhere in Rhodesia. The beginning was like this: "Mary Turner, wife of Richard Turner, a farmer at Ngesi, was found murdered on the front verandah of their homestead yesterday morning." So in the very beginning we find that a woman is introduced by a man. It seems that without a man's identity a woman's identity is at a risk.

Mary Turner is found murdered on the porch of her home. But no-one is really surprised or particularly upset; though she is well-known in the area. Rather "they pitied Dick Turner with a

fine fierce indignation against Mary, as if she were something **unpleasant** and **unclean**, and it served her right to get murdered.” So the treatment of people is really harsh. It seems that she is not a human being; rather an unpleasant, unclean thing. As readers uncover the motives, desires, and faults of the characters, the gap between **"the facts"** related in the initial newspaper account and the **"truth"** from various perspectives becomes apparent. Although one might easily discern who killed whom, the blame of who is at fault is less clear. In one way or another, the whole cast of characters implicate themselves in wrongdoings and this is a crucial matter to be pointed out.

Before marriage, Mary is found living very happily in the city and working as a secretary. We find such description in the novel: “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... Her friends would have described her as a slim blonde: she modeled herself on the more **childish-looking** film stars.” This projection is to put down someone’s self-esteem and social stature.

Mary Turner who was a victim of conflicting forces within herself set up by a few casual, overheard words. Even though she leads a somewhat limited life in her sleepy South African town, she is happy until she overhears some friends say that she would never marry. One of her friends says, “She’s **not fifteen** any longer: it is ridiculous! Someone should tell her about her **clothes**.” Moreover, we find someone saying, “**She’ll never set the rivers on fire**.” Again, “She should marry someone years older than herself. A man of fifty would suit her...” These remarks are very insulting for a woman. Such brutal remark can shatter one’s self-confidence and self-respect, and eventually, Mary starts thinking herself to be **“useless, a failure, a ridiculous creature whom no one wanted.”**

At those words, her delicately balanced little world overturns, and she suddenly realizes that it is desirable to have a husband, to be like the rest of her circle. Unconsciously she begins to look for a man to marry, and she finds one. He is a farmer - a hard-working sensitive man with an intense love of his land, a stubborn pride - but with a fatal weakness. Though he is a constant failure in his farming endeavors, we don’t find any such harsh comment on him. Dick married to reduce his solitude and Mary married because she was restrained in terms of norms and notions of the society: a kind of ideology that according to Althusser (1971) is “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group”.

Mary and Dick live a solitary life together. When Dick took her to his farm in the veldt, Mary steps into a life completely different from anything she has ever imagined. She hates the stuffy little house; she hates the natives; she hates Dick at times and most of all she hates the burning heat and the loneliness. After one attempt to return to her life in town, she stays on the farm, listening to the strident din of the cicadas. In fact, she gets married out of desperation and societal pressure, and begrudgingly attempts to live as a farm wife. Instead she becomes really bored and despondent. So we find **how life can change and how devastating impact language can have on us** as we see that the careless, casual verbal mockery of Mary’s friends changed her

life completely, and ultimately pushes her to death. Recent writings testify many subtle forms of silencing, an internalizing of male norms, a depiction of conventional colonial marriage as a prison (a key early text here was Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*: Cherry Clayton (1993)).

In *The Grass is Singing*, Lessing reveals the consequences of a protagonist's failure to reconcile personal experiences and aspects of her personal identity with the dictates of wider collectives. For example, Mary does not consciously seek to explore her past, even though she makes every effort to live an existence different to that of her mother. The early sketch of Mary's characterization entails a subjectivity negotiating between gender and class positions. Mary's early childhood is shaped under the influence of an oppressive father who wastes his money on drink while his family is living in misery and poverty. Her mother, "a tall scrawny woman with angry unhealthy brilliant eyes" who "made a confidante of Mary early...and used to cry over her sewing, while Mary comforted her miserably", is her first model of gender role: a passive and helpless woman, dominated by the overwhelming masculine patterns (Sima Aghazadeh, 2011). We find: "Sometimes her mother worked herself into a passion of resentment, and walked up to the barman, complaining that she could not make ends meet, while her husband squandered his salary in drink. Mary knew, even as a child, that her mother complained for the sake of making a scene and parading her sorrows: that she really enjoyed the luxury of standing there in the bar while the casual drinkers looked on sympathetically."

As life treats Mary harshly, she grows progressively more unreasonable and unbalanced herself. She whips a farm worker, getting pleasure out of her power. If a man had done this, it wouldn't have given such exposure as whipping a farm-worker by its master is quite usual. But this incident becomes exceptional as it is committed by a woman. Later, when the same African is employed as houseboy, she is alternately terrified and fascinated by the alien male. Eventually, the native man stabs her to death. **It is proven that men are stereotypically strong and subservient and the stance of women is mercilessly penetrating.**

In this novel, we have many male characters, like- Dick Turner, Marston, Charlie Slatter, Moses, Sergeant Denham, etc. The depiction of all the male characters is very strong. We notice that Slatter is portrayed as **"a crude, brutal, ruthless, yet kindhearted man."** Again, "Slatter was a shortish, broad, powerful man, with heavy shoulders and thick arms." Moses is described as **"a great powerful man**, black as polished linoleum, and dressed in a singlet and shorts, which were damp and muddy."

## **5. Recommendation:**

In this novel, attempts have been taken to depict women at their actual condition in society. Two points can be given importance here - **'quantity'** and **'quality'**. 'Quantity' refers to what extent degraded portrayal of women has been projected, and 'quality' refers to the way language is used – like the choice of diction, the type of mockery, ridiculous expressions, etc. What to be emphasized here is that the way women are portrayed and the diction that had been preferred to

depict women are not same as men were described. It is woman who is always put down- whose power, pride, prestige, position, everything is at stake. So if we keep on depicting women as weak, tortured, shaken- we can't have sympathy any more, in contrary, we are establishing the power of men. And it will become a trend of society that wretched women are dominated or murdered or they commit suicide at last.

Therefore, the suggestion could be to represent both men and women with dignity in valuable as well as in vulnerable roles; not just to put down one's stance. Let us use such language in representation of both men-women that celebrates life, establishes relationships, glorifies beauty and ensures our existence in a right way which will lead our new generation to a better understanding of the world.

## **6. Conclusion:**

The Grass is Singing is neither a feminist piece of writing, nor against women; rather it is appreciable that the author created a wonderful psychological vortex in the hot and arid lands of the African bush without being afraid to take it to its ultimate conclusion. Lessing does not like the idea of being pigeon-holed as a feminist author. When she was asked why, she replied:

“What the feminists want of me is something they haven't examined because it comes from religion. They want me to bear witness. What they would really like me to say is, 'Ha, sisters, I stand with you side by side in your struggle toward the golden dawn where all those beastly men are no more.' Do they really want people to make oversimplified statements about men and women? In fact, they do. I've come with great regret to this conclusion.”

Doris Lessing, *The New York Times*, 25 July 1982

Therefore, we should take a substantial stand-point to resolve the challenges related to language in order to remodel the prevailing gender relations in all cultures of human civilization.

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