

## RACIAL POLITICS IN THE NOVEL *THE GRASS IS SINGING*

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*Abstract: This paper studies Doris Lessing's first novel The Grass is Singing, highlighting the exploration of the relations between black and white characters. Lessing clearly presents the typical racial relationship between white farmers and their native workers and she analyses how and why the whites continued to oppress the native workers. Raised in Southern Rhodesia, the author knew such relationships and recognized the injustices. The novel is written from the third person omniscient point of view with a somewhat limited perspective. The narration almost completely focuses on the thoughts, feelings and motivations of its white characters. The black characters, who are secondary in narrative importance, receive little or no attention from the narration.*

*Keywords: race, relationship, black, white people.*

### Introduction

*The Grass Is Singing* is the first novel of the prolific British Nobel Prize-winning contemporary writer, Doris Lessing. She has written for more than fifty years dissecting a number of recurring themes that appear in her fictional work. By thoroughly exploring various power struggles on the African continent of the early twentieth century, Doris Lessing established herself as a writer known for her politics.

The story of the novel takes place in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), in southern Africa, during the 1940s and deals with the racial politics between whites and blacks in that country (which was then a British Colony). The novel created a sensation when it was first published and became an instant success in Europe and the United States.

### A strange relationship

When reading *The Grass Is Singing*, one focuses immediately on the psychological drama of the characters but simultaneously, on the theme of race relations, the economic and social conditions "beneath the motives and the wish". Thus Lessing illustrates the essential Marxist principle that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." (Draine, 1983: 14)

This novel presents the basic conflicts of white colonialism in African culture and the reader is prompted to question its values.

The novel *The Grass Is Singing* describes exceptionally the relationship between white and black people in Africa. During the '40's, the black people were treated like animals and not like human beings. They were servants and they worked on the white people's fields and they were paid almost nothing.

"Doris Lessing recognizes, however – with some frustration – that when racism is one of the story's themes, not only it dominates attention, it usually requires a solemn voice." (Klein, 2000: 139)

"The unity between the opening and conclusion of this novel serves the function of making a powerful statement about the issues treated in this novel. Both opening and conclusion show the murder of Mary by Moses, the black servant, together with the immediate reaction from the white population." (www.skool.ie)

*“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.”* (The Grass Is Singing, p. 9)

People do not discuss the reasons of this murder, they only think about them but they never mention them. This was one of the rules of the time:

*“Whom should it concern, if not the white farmers, that a silly woman got herself murdered by a native for reasons people might think about, but never, never mentioned? It was their livelihood, their wives and families, their way of living, at stake.”* (The Grass Is Singing, p. 11)

White people hated black people and this is the reason why, when there was a murder they were almost glad they could hang a black person:

*“When you have been in this country long enough, you will understand that we don’t like niggers murdering white women.”* (The Grass Is Singing, p. 22)

When Moses is taken by the policemen, all white people have the same thought: they saw him as the representative of black people who would always be thieves, rappers or murderers:

*“The three men looked at the murderer, thinking their own thought, speculative, frowning, but not as if he were important now. No, he was unimportant: he was the constant, the black man who will thief, rape, murder, if given half a chance.”* (The Grass Is Singing, p. 25)

People suspect that there might have been a relationship between Mary and Moses but they would never say it or admit it publicly:

*“... ‘white civilization’ which 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. So, above all, it cannot afford failures, such as the Turner’s failure.”* (The Grass Is Singing, p. 26)

There were no interrogations, they did not want to find out the real reason of Moses’ crime and they suggested that he wanted to steal something:

*“It was suggested that the native had murdered Mary Turner while drunk, in search of money and jewellery.”* (The Grass Is Singing, p. 29)

This is how the investigations concluded and this was the white people’s opinion that black people can only kill because they want to steal something. Then the novel tells Mary’s story and how she ended killed by Moses.

Mary’s first encounter with Moses was on the plantation, while Dick was ill and she was managing the farm. She whips Moses without a plain reason, just because he asked her for some water and because the other people laughed (and she thought they laughed at her).

The whipped native controls his impulse to strike back immediately, but it is he who murders her two years later.

Then, Moses becomes her houseboy. He enters Mary's life when she is almost totally broken, listless, indifferent, no longer energized by her various projects – chickens, a tobacco crop, a store, having a child, and so on – still recovering from her failed flight back to town to reclaim her old job and life. At this critical point, Moses is hired as a houseboy. Their relationship changes gradually from one in which Mary was in power to one in which Moses gets the power and she has to obey him. Mary cannot forget the moment she whipped him and she is afraid of him because *“she was unable to treat this boy as she had treated all the others, for always, at the back of her mind, was that moment of fear she had known just after she had hit him and thought he would attack her”* (*The Grass Is Singing* p. 162)

Mary becomes obsessed with him and she is afraid of him. From that moment on, she is completely obedient to him. “Her death seems the only resolution to the dialectic that ties her to Moses” (Sprague, 1987: 24)

*“They were like two antagonists, silently sparring. Only he was powerful and sure of himself, and she was undermined with fear, by her terrible dream-filled nights, her obsession.”* (*The Grass Is Singing*, p. 167)

“The pathological white fear of black is nowhere better demonstrated than in the fear Moses continues to excite in Slatter and in other whites even after he has voluntarily given himself up to the police”. (op. cit, p. 24)

The writer does not completely describe their relationship and the reader is left wondering whether there was a physical relationship between Moses and Mary. There is only one scene in which Moses dresses Mary and this could be interpreted as a continuation or a result of a physical relationship.

Moses reawakens Mary's unresolved incestuous feelings for her father and her identification with what the authorial voice calls her mother's “arid feminism”. “Social clichés expect the virile black male to lust for the white female and the white female secretly to return that desire. What Moses in fact reawakens are the only strong sexual feelings Mary has ever had, and they are connected with her father, not with her husband, to whom orthodox psychoanalysis says they should have been transferred.” (op. cit, p. 22)

Moses is an active presence in Mary's many troubled dreams. She is seized with terror that he will touch her in her dreams. When Dick has malaria, Moses insists on staying overnight so that Mary may sleep. That night her dreams of childhood explicitly connect Moses with the father figure and recall, for the reader, Moses' voice, “firm and kind, like a father commanding her”, on that remarkable day when Mary permitted the barrier between white and black to break down, the day she sobbed in front of Moses and allowed him to put her to bed.

“The father and the native eventually are joined in one dream image of simultaneous fear and attraction. When she suddenly awakens from one of these dreams and the native observes the look of fear she directs toward him, their relation is worsened. Now he can act without concealing his attitude of familiarity, insolence and dominance. “(Draine, 1983:14)

The theme of inevitability is reintroduced: *“But she felt as if she were in a dark tunnel, nearing something final, something she could not visualize, but which waited for her inexorably, inescapably” (The Grass Is Singing, p.198)*

“The name “Moses” connotes both paternity and deliverance, and Moses indeed functions as both father and deliverer in the novel.” (Sprague, 1987: 23)

Moses kills Mary out of jealousy and hate against the white people’s behaviour towards the black ones. He was dismissed by Tony, the farm administrator, who was holding Mary in his arms.

This is Moses’ revenge against a white world in which the black people could not find a place where they should not be treated like objects that do not have any feelings or emotions.

After he kills Mary he passes by Dick’s room ignoring him because he *“was unimportant, since he had been defeated long ago.” (The Grass Is Singing, p. 206)*

He does not kill Tony who is his “enemy” because by killing Mary, Moses thinks he has “outwitted” Tony.

*“His enemy, whom he had outwitted, was asleep.” (The Grass Is Singing, p. 206)*

The last two paragraphs picture the characters’ “breakthrough”: Mary finally discovers her guilt towards Moses (and all black people) while Moses eventually understands his betrayal by Mary (and all whites). Both of them have gone beyond their conditions and they have reached a new level of understanding, probably predicting Doris Lessing’s Sufi novels. The lightning that accompanies Moses’s revenge representing a holy sign that justice is being done. Like in ancient tragedies, both characters pay because they have achieved forbidden knowledge.

*“It was black, too dark to see. He waited for the watery glimmer of lightning to illuminate, for the last time, the small house, the veranda, the huddled shape of Mary on the brick, and the dogs who were moving restlessly about her, still whining gently, but uncertainly. It came: a prolonged drench of light, like a wet dawn. And this was his final moment of triumph, a moment so perfect and complete that it took the urgency from thoughts of escape, leaving him indifferent.” (The Grass Is Singing, p. 206)*

This last paragraph of the novel portrays Moses being content with what he has done. He succeeded to punish the white people for what they do to his people even though he knows he would be punished in his turn. But his punishment does not matter to him, all that mattered was his “final moment of triumph”.

By the end of the novel, Moses is presented as a human being who has achieved his revenge but he may have thoughts of regret or pity:

*“Though what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say.” (The Grass Is Singing, p. 206)*

## Conclusions

“At the end of the novel, both Mary and Moses are helpless and solitary before their personal fates, but in the realm of consciousness they have attained freedom and dignity. The

novel ends neither in the false euphoria of a utopian reconciliation nor in the devastating despair of disaster without knowledge.” (Draine, 1983:25)

Moses succeeded in everything he had proposed: he proves that a white woman could obey a black man, that she could fear and respect a black man and could treat him like a human being. This is all the black people wanted: to be rightly treated.

“Lessing has been faulted by some critics for not making Moses a fully realized person. She defends herself by saying she was trying through this anonymity to show how white people really view blacks: as having very little individuality. If she had made him a distinct personality, the balance of the novel would have been quite changed – and it would have been a completely different story.” (Klein, 2000: 121)

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