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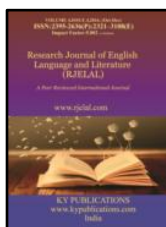
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STRUGGLES OF A WOMAN IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE GRASS IS SINGING*

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ABSTRACT

In a patriarchal society, women must fight a lot to achieve their identity. Writers have portrayed how women struggle to come up in life. Doris Lessing's novels deal with the struggles of woman. *The Grass is Singing* is a tale of subjection of a woman who is defeated and thwarted by the bullying of race, gender and other social discriminations. Mary Turner is the victim of such oppression. She is never being given any freedom. Isolation, mental, economic sterility and emotional vacuity dominate her whole life. After her marriage, she has suffered from laxity and meaninglessness of ill-matched marriage. She is forced by the society to accept loveless marriage. As she grows up in a broken family, alienation and non-involvement subjugate her. Her life is tossed by the wave of social insecurity, sexual dissatisfaction and vacuum. Her struggle in the turbulent wave is intensified when the clutches of race and patriarchy grab her. She is murdered by the black slave not because she is white but she is the weaker sex.

In a patriarchal society, women must fight a lot to achieve their identity. Writers have portrayed how women struggle to come up in life. Doris Lessing's novels deal with the struggles of woman. Lessing has placed the woman at the forefront where she plays major roles to improve on her status and her society. She has gone further to represent the woman as an assertive being seeking recognition and visibility in her society.

Loneliness, suffering and frustration in marriage sometimes cause disintegration and make some women even schizophrenic as Mary in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*. The novel is a poignant portrayal of Mary's disintegration and death because of her unhappy marriage. Mary who disdains the very idea of marriage is hastened into wedlock. The remarks of her friends conform that marriage is "the sole justification of her (a woman's) existence". For Mary's it is not the possessiveness, jealousy or cruelty of a man but mismatching which

is responsible for tragedy. "Indeed, she was hardly awake at all, moving about what she did in a dream of hope, a hope that grew so strong as the weeks passed that she would wake in the morning with a sensation of release and excitement, as if something wonderful was going to happen that very day" (GS 52)

Before they can understand and know the likes and dislikes of each other, Mary marries Dick. Loneliness is the only common point between the two, who have otherwise different pasts, different experiences and different backgrounds. "complete nervous breakdown was something anyone might have; most people did, at some time or another." (GS 75)

Mary's unwillingness is clear in her attitude towards marriage and sex. Although sentimental at weddings, she throughout her life feels a "profound distaste for sex. ... there had been little privacy in her home and there were things that she did not

care to remember; she had taken good care to forget them years ago." When she does marry Dick, she feels on the wedding night as "It was not so bad ... when it was all over: not as bad as that. It meant nothing to her, nothing at all. expecting outrage and imposition, she was relieved to find she felt nothing. She was able maternally to bestow the gift of herself on this humble stranger, and remain untouched."

Women have an extraordinary ability to withdraw from sexual relationship, to immunize themselves against it. This can make their men be left feeling down and insulted without having anything tangible to complain of. Mary does not have to learn this because it was natural to her, and because she has expected nothing in the first place. Mary finds the idea of normal sexual relations with Dick repulsive, both her subconscious, expressed through dreams and her psychotic state towards the end of her life demonstrate the extent to which an abnormal or unusual sexual manifestation is desired.

The sexual relationship of Mary and Dick is not very satisfactory from the beginning. While Dick purposely makes her a "sexual object by idealizing her, Mary can only accept him when he approaches her passively. Then falling back to him in a victim-like way expecting abuse and intrusion, she was comforted to find she felt nothing" (GS 122)

There by sex does not even draw them any closer, rather it divides them. Mary realizes that motherhood can give her some happiness and fulfillment, and at one stage she talks to Dick about having a child but Dick refuses because of his poverty. So, Mary tries to find meaning in her life by sewing, stitching and mending as if "fine embroidery would save her life. The gulf between the two keeps on widening and in their lonely home they were stunned, unfulfilled figures. Marriage closes doors for any career as well.

All the characters in *The Grass is Singing* maintain complex and ambivalent relationships to one another. These relationships have both intimacy and hatred. The most significant example of this can be found in the relationship between Mary and Moses. Mary has a severely racist, cruel attitude toward all black people and

treats the black farm employees in a sadistic manner.

The relationship between Mary and Moses is by intimacy and hatred. Mary's relationship to her husband, Dick mirrors and contrasts with her relationship with Moses. Dick is deferential to Mary, obeying her wishes even when they conflict with his own desires. Mary feels more affection and respect for Dick than she does for Moses, but is repulsed by him sexually and comes to regret marrying him. The early intimacy in Mary and Dick's relationship turns to hatred as Mary becomes increasingly harsh and stubborn, while Dick is weakened due to poverty and illness.

Although Dick survives his illness, Mary has a dream in which he is dead. Mary's relationship with Moses is too emotionally turbulent to survive. The combination of intimacy and hatred is again shown to lead to death first on a symbolic level, and then on a literal one. Then he carefully takes the glass from her, puts it on the table and sees that she stands there dazed, not knowing what to do says, "Madame lie down on the bed." She did not move. He put out his hand reluctantly, loathes touching her, the sacrosanct white woman, and pushed her by the shoulder; she felt herself gently propelled across the room towards the bedroom." It is like a nightmare and the touch of this black man's hand on her shoulder fills her with nausea. As they approach the bed, the soft touch still on her shoulder, she feels her head beginning to swim and her bones going soft. "Madame lie down," he says again and his voice is gentle this time, almost fatherly.

He approaches slowly, obscene and powerful. It is not only he, but her father who is threatening her. They advance together, but she can feel the unwashed smell of her father. It fills the room like animals. Half-conscious, she leans back against the wall for support and nearly fell through the open window. He puts his hand on her arm. It is the voice of the African she has heard. He is comforting her because of Dick's death, consoling her protectively. At the same time, it is her father menacing and horrible who has touched her in desire. "He said easily, familiarly, "Why is Madame afraid of me?" She said half-hysterically, in a high-

pitched voice, laughing nervously: "Don't be ridiculous. I am not afraid of you." (GS 98)

Mary is bored. Each day is like another. Nothing new has happened with her. She doesn't know what to do. In the end, she doesn't want to do anything. She is reading books, lying on the sofa and dreams about her life in the town. The new life is far away. She hopes that one day everything will change, and she will be happy. In such a situation, the life turns into a dream.

Life is full of sorrows and extreme sorrow often breaks even the strongest. Mary and Dick are broken. Mary knows that nothing good is going to happen and there is no room for hope. She falls ill, she has lost her desire to live. "Complete nervous breakdown' diagnosed Tony, but what does it mean? For Mary, it was the end, the end of all hopes and dreams, it was the time, when she understood her impending doom – nothing can be changed". The most important thing is to stay strong and realize that everything depends on us.

The Grass is Singing is a tale of subjection of a woman who is defeated and thwarted by the bullying of race, gender and other social discriminations. Mary Turner is the victim of such oppression. She is never being given any freedom. Isolation, mental, economic sterility and emotional vacuity dominate her whole life. After her marriage, she has suffered from laxity and meaninglessness of ill-matched marriage. She is forced by the society to accept loveless marriage.

As she grows up in a broken family, alienation and non-involvement subjugate her. Her life is tossed by the wave of social insecurity, sexual dissatisfaction and vacuum. Her struggle in the turbulent wave is intensified when the clutches of race and patriarchy grab her. She is murdered by the black slave not because she is white but she is the weaker sex. Failing to endure Dick she speaks "in a new voice for her, a voice she had never used before her life. ... It was not the voice of Mary, the individual ... but the voice of the suffering female, who wanted to show her husband she just would not be treated like that." (GS96)

Throughout her life, Mary has been isolated. This isolation has created in her a feeling of non-involvement in the lives and feelings of

others that she calls "freedom". Her real freedom, she believes comes only after her parents' death. But she is unhindered from her personal pursuit.

As years pass, Mary's friends get married and have children. But Mary remains single, happy and carefree. She is in denial about aging and still dresses in "little-girl fashion." She feels no desire to get married. One day she overhears some married friends of hers gossiping cruelly about the fact that she is not married. She is horrified to realize that this is what people think of her. After this point, she becomes engaged to a 55-year-old widower, but calls it off when he has tried to have sex with her.

This informs us that a woman is not supposed to take lead. She must be calm, sit and listen without any objection to what the man says. All these, push the men to dominate women even in close relationships. So, the women since time immemorial have always been running after the man. In an argument with her husband, he is always right and any woman who stories to dominate her husband is considered a monster.

When a woman tries to win an argument over her husband, it is regarded as a "He woman" So, a man feels his position threatened whenever a woman tries to put him on the right footing. He does everything to grasp his position. Gender becomes a social construct. Margaret Mead in a web based article confirms this by saying that "Gender is a social construct specifying the socially and culturally prescribed roles that men and women are to follow." (GS 102)

The women have always lower status than men for a very long time now. We should also bear in mind that black women have suffered a sort of double segregation too. They have suffered first as blacks and secondly as women. This has made them to be stranded for they have been taught to fight against racism than to put up a worthless fight against sexism.

This explains why in the 19th century America, when the white ladies stand up for their rights, the black women are caught in a dilemma. They are caught between joining the white women in the fight for their rights or joining the men to put a strong fight against sexism.

Lessing's women have won the battle for equal rights but they are still plagued by conflictual tensions born out of their relationship with their children and lovers which render them helpless. They realize they are despite their status still locked in a hopeless dependence on men. Instead of being the subjects of their own stories, they invariably find themselves as objects of somebody else's narrative most often a man's. Notwithstanding its vivid portrayal of gender oppression, the novel stresses women's vulnerability.

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