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Sexual-Political Colonialism and Failure of Individuation in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

By Sima Aghazadeh¹

Abstract

This article presents and interprets Doris Lessing's first novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950), as both a personal and psychological portrayal of its female protagonist, Mary Turner, from her childhood to death, and as a political exposure of the futility and fragility of the patriarchal and colonial society. This novel is Mary's failure of individuation in the confrontation of her psychological and cultural parts, shaped by colonial experience. Lessing, by depicting her protagonist in a particular British colonial setting, artistically reveals that her identity is negotiated and constructed by the social and behavioral expectations, developed through her racial role as a white woman colonizer and her gender role as a woman colonized in a patriarchal narrative of the same setting. In this article, I will discuss how the cross-hatched intersection of gender, class, and race through their relationship to each other operates in Mary's failure of her female individuation. Mary's attempt in achieving her own sense of self in this process of individuation fails and dooms her to death because of the same sexual and ideological factors, rooted in her family and culture.

Keywords: feminism, female individuation, sexual politics, colonialism, Doris Lessing, *Grass is Singing*

Introduction

The Grass is Singing (1950) is Doris Lessing's first novel which carries over some of the experiences and memories based on her upbringing, childhood and youth as a white settler in the Rhodesian (today Zimbabwe) veld. According to Ruth Whittaker, one of the readers of Lessing's works, this novel is "an extraordinary first novel in its assured treatment of its unusual subject matter... Doris Lessing questions the entire values of Rhodesian white colonial society." (28) The novel reflects its author's disapproval of sexual and political prejudices and colonialism in the Southern African setting through the life of Mary Turner, a white landowner's wife, and her fatal relationship with their black servant. On the surface, it seems a personal and psychological portrayal of a female

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protagonist from childhood to death but seen as a whole, it is the political exposure of the futility and fragility of the patriarchal and colonial society upon which the masculinity of imperialism has sustained itself. The whole novel can be seen as Mary's struggle towards individuation to preserve her authenticity and sense of self but it fails because of the psychological and political forces which furnish her little insight into her condition and threaten to crush her. This article discusses in full length that how Lessing portrays Mary's subjectivity as shaped and entangled within the ideological triangle of class, gender and race; and how the same sexual and ideological factors, rooted in family and culture, causes failure in Mary's achieving her own sense of self and dooms her to death. Mary is fragmented between two contradictory status: on the one hand she longs to be a subject of her life, to live in a way she desires, and on the other hand she unconsciously performs a role as an object of the white oppressive structure of a colonial society which extracts meaning of her personal self and imposes its values, forcing the individual to yield to the good of the collective. Mary's subjectivity and her behavioral patterns are shaped by the cross-hatched intersection of gender, class, and race through the operation of the sexual and political colonialism in the context of imperialism.

Subjectivity within Ideological Triangle: Gender, Class, Race

Gender & Class

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, nonetheless the complying victim of poverty. (Lessing 33) Besides sharing the pains of poverty and living in "a little house that was like a small wooden box on slits" and the 12-month-quarrel of her parents over money, Mary has been the witness of their sexuality and her mother's body in the hands of a man who was simply not present for her. (p.36) All her life, Mary tries to forget these memories but in fact she has just suppressed them with the fear of sexuality which comes up later nightmarishly in her dreams. By seeing her mother as a feminine victim of a miserable marriage, she internalizes a negative image of femininity in the form of sexual repression, inheriting her mother's arid feminism.

In order to escape from this tragic repetition and after her mother's death, Mary finds a job as a secretary in the town at 16 and begins a lonely life. By dropping her father, she seems "in some way to be avenging her mother's sufferings" and to cut herself from her past. (p.35) Her last relief comes after her father's death that nothing remains to connect her with the past. Trying to forget her traumatic memories, she remains a girl, choosing to live in a girls' club, wearing her hair in a little-girl fashion. Her childish clothing and immature behavior especially before men are her defense mechanisms against her fear of sexuality rooted in her childhood. She does not consider her shyness, immaturity and aloofness as weakness; as a matter of fact, she is unconscious of them.

She does not “care for men”, and has “a profound distaste for sex”. (p.39) Her men friends treat her “just like a good pal, with none of this silly sex business” (p.40) because whenever she thinks of home, she remembers “a wooden box shaken by passing trains”; whenever she thinks of marriage and children, she remembers “her father coming home red-eyed and fuddled... or her mother’s face at her children’s funeral”. (p.39) So Mary’s sexuality or lack of it is developed through her encounters with the social system of her family when both parents carry out the socially imposed roles on their children. Mary wants to forget the burden of her past by ignoring her gender role as a woman in need of a protecting husband and her class as a poor girl from a poor family in which the death of her siblings has meant fewer mouths to feed. But very soon, Mary is brought face to face with “that impalpable but steel-strong pressure to get married” which her culture imposes on all women. (p.40)

Mary is not able to sustain the role she desires to make for herself as different from that of her mother, not depending on a man emotionally and economically, because she cannot transcend her gendered subjectivity. She finds it “impossible to fit together what she wanted for herself and what she was offered” (p.44) and this disintegration begins when one day she overhears her friends deriding her for her clothing and that she is unlikely to marry because “she just isn’t like that, isn’t like that at all”. (p.40) In order to prove herself otherwise, Mary decides to marry whoever comes in her way. Then she meets and accepts Dick Turner, but “it might have been anybody”. (p.44) In fact, Mary bases her new identity as a white landowner’s wife on collective expectations rather than on her own nature. Her marriage is what the patriarchal culture expects every woman to perform to preserve the patterns of male domination in family. Under the infective influence of her own father, she denies sexuality but the cultural father (patriarchy) demands her to function otherwise.

In Mary’s hasty decision to marry, the narrator clearly demonstrates the limitations and enforcements of gender roles that an individual woman feels through the cultural mechanisms of suppression. The narrator tells us that Dick’s decision to marry is a way to escape from his loneliness because he thinks that it is “essential for him to love somebody” (p.48) and to have a wife, and more than that children. His first sight of Mary is in the cinema in “a shaft of light fall from somewhere above” which seems to him as “the curve of a cheek and a sheaf of a fairish glinting hair. The face ... yearning upwards, ruddily gold in the queer greenish light.” (p.46) When he sees Mary, he cannot connect this ordinary girl in trousers with the image in his mind under the trick of light in the cinema. In his own old-fashioned way of thinking, he does not consider the women in trousers as feminine at all, but very soon begins to like this not very attractive girl who, he believes, can change to “a practical, adaptable, serene person who would need only a few weeks on the farm to become what he wanted her to be.” (p.50) Mary is chosen as an object of Dick’s gaze, though a false one, and based on his masculine expectation of her to be whatever he desires which recalls the old story of the sex-economic rules of patriarchal society at work which organize femininity as an adaptation to men’s world. Mary is expected to marry and to play her gender role as “a practical, adaptable and serene person” which refers to her unconscious internalization of her mother’s characteristics and in a deeper sense, the internalization of the cultural norms. So Mary’s marriage entails broad cultural forces which insist that women exist only in terms of

marriage. Their marriage, not based on love or mutual understanding, is a mutual exploitation and self-delusion in their use of the other to satisfy their own deficiency, and deceive themselves about the other one's nature. Mary uses Dick to prove herself not "a ridiculous creature whom no one wanted" (p.49) and Dick uses her as a way to escape from his loneliness.

Mary's marriage not only proves her inability to transcend her gendered subjectivity, but also her inability to escape from her class. The first night after their marriage, seeing Dick's house as "tiny stuffy room, the bare brick floor, the greasy lamp" (p.53), she feels weak and disappointed as if "her father, from his grave, had sent out his will and forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother lead". (pp.54-5) She sees the inadequacy and narrowness of her family's life follow her in her marriage. The narrative links poverty and gender in analyzing Mary's new situation, which do not allow her to move beyond the codes of behavior. Poverty from which Mary has always tried to escape tracks her in her ill-matched marriage. The narrator depicts this failure through Mary's sexual identity and the clearly inadequate sexual relationship between her and Dick: "women have an extraordinary ability to withdraw from the sexual relationship, to immune themselves against it, in such a way that their men can be left feeling let down and insulted without having anything tangible to complain of. Mary did not have to learn this, because it was natural to her". (p.55) From the first moment she steps into Dick's life, she finds out their marriage is a failure. She despises Dick because he is a failure himself at farming. She sees Dick as a loser, dreamer, a weak, "Jonah" as the other farmers call him for his bad luck. Dick lacks that financial self-interest Mary needs to escape from the stinting poverty which she feels is destroying both of them. In her argument with Dick over money concerns, she finds herself speaking in a new voice, as if taken from her mother, "not the voice of Mary, the individual, but the voice of the suffering female..." (p.79) She has to spend all day inside a house without ceiling under the direct sun heat because Dick cannot afford to put up a ceiling.

Living in a small impoverished farm and in a poorly-equipped house with an obsession of the suffocating heat "like an enemy" (p.129), and quarreling over money, Mary sees no future for both of them and no environment for herself on this farm. She leaves Dick and returns to the town, hoping to resume her old life. But very soon she realizes that all those sufferings and disappointment have changed her: her crinkled and brown hand that she has to hide under her bag in front of her previous employer, her old and dirty shoes red with dust. She is not admitted into the girls' club because now she is married, and she does not have the money to dress her hair or to pay her hotel bill. Facing "innumerable humiliation and obstacles" (101), she sees no other way than meekness and submission when Dick collects her within a day. The narrator reveals the connection between Mary's assuming gender role and her class in this scene. In order to leave Dick and take up a new personality, Mary needs both money and the courage to overcome the obstacles. She needs both the economic and psychological support in her present situation. But lacking both, she has no other choice than "following the course her upbringing made inevitable. (p.90) Without money, she is locked and has to sink into an enduring role, realizing that "the women who marry men like Dick learn sooner or later that there are two things they can do: they can drive themselves mad, tear themselves to pieces in storms of futile anger and rebellion; or they can hold themselves tight and go

bitter.” (p.90) The quotation suggests the limitation in which Mary is trapped. It gives her just two limiting options because her class upbringing and gender roles do not allow her to see beyond these deterministic restrictions. She takes up the latter role and begins an exiled and embittered life on the farm which brings her closer to the former one. Mary sees no power in herself even to argue with Dick which, for her, “would have been like arguing with destiny itself”. (p.94)

Race & Gender

The narrator exposes that the Turners’ failure at farming and their poverty and reclusiveness have made them disliked in the district. The Turners’ primitive condition of life is irritating for other white settlers because they do not like the natives to see themselves live in the same manner as the whites, which would destroy that *spirit de corps* “which is the first rule of South African society”. (p.11) This anxiety is more political than economic based on the opposition of white/black. In this way, another complex clash of value system, besides gender and class, is added to the narrative structure of the novel and that is the matter of race. Jean Pickering, in her analysis of this novel, summarizes these three issues of class, race and gender in this African colonial setting: “Although the white settlers grew up in a class society...the class attitudes of the collective have simplified into consideration of us, the Whites, and them, the Blacks. But there is another value system that complicates the issue. In white settler society men outrank women even more than they do at “home” in middle-class England.” (19) Thus the Turners, by sinking below that essential economic level, may threaten the whole dominant white community in the politics of colonialism.

Colonialism is based on the white men’s spirit of venture for missionary and farm life through their settlement in the third world countries and harvesting their resources by establishing the imperial authority over the native people. The white men, by enslaving the native men on the lands they have in fact stolen from them and feminizing some others in their house chores, preserve their own position as masters in the center and the natives as “Others” in the margin. They use race and gender, two inseparable qualifiers, to access their privilege of power in the imperial hierarchy and legitimize their actions. Gender and race- sexism and racism- are components of this hierarchy by which the white settlers and interlopers attempt to establish their own rules and security in the alien land.

The binary of white/black reminds us of race difference which itself is linked and dependent on other differences, more importantly gender. White women are objectified as unattainable property of white men through stereotyping the native men as violent, savage and sexually threatening. These double strategies both take the individuality from white women and colonize them as sexual objects always in danger and in need of the heroic protection of their white men, and help the white men overcome their fear and jealousy for the superior sexual potency of the black men. The dominant White culture projects “all of those qualities and characteristics which it most fears and hates within itself” on the natives which creates for the subordinate group “a wholly negative cultural identity.” (Walsh 7) Similarly Jan Mohamed notes that: “the native is cast as no more than a recipient of the negative elements of the self that the European projects onto him.” (85) In order to affirm the values of culturally established norms, the colonial discourses

of gender and race need to designate the unknown “Other” by a set of values through necessary gendering processes which implicitly reveal the fear of miscegenation in this so-called civilizing mission. The patriarchal myth of white woman as white man’s property and symbol of his power and the “forbidden fruit” for black man expels women from subjective roles by imposing on them the view that they are unable to handle the black laborers. Therefore the white women are convinced that they cannot share power with the white men especially in the farm life which is the current context of masculinity-tough work, action, challenge beyond domesticity. So they are confined in the domestic sphere and considered shiftless. Charlie Slatter, the most successful and powerful farmer of the district in this novel, makes a joke of it: “Needs a man to deal with niggers. Niggers don’t understand women giving them orders. They keep their own women in their right places”. (p.23)

In such colonial discourse, the black natives, employed whether as domestic servants in feminine sphere or as impoverished agricultural workers, are represented as wild, violent, potential rapists, and threatening the white women who need the white men’s protection against the natives. In this way, white patriarchy makes a heroic scenario for itself. In the sexual politics of the colonial myth, white women are victims as the native subjects are in the racial politics. A woman who is privileged racially can simultaneously experience gender limitations and class difference within her own category, like in the case of Mary Turner. Mary fails to preserve her individuality because she is not able to resist the strong master narratives of the false colonial and patriarchal myth of superiority of her culture through the discourse of gender and race which place her firmly in a predetermined position.

Mary’s Failure of Self-Recognition: Sexual-Racial anxiety

Mary’s gradual mental and emotional deterioration is intensified by the presence of the natives whom she has been brought up to fear and distrust. With little contact with the natives before, she cannot cope with her servants now. She has been forbidden to talk to her mother’s servants or to walk out alone because of the unspeakable threat of rape and murder by the natives. The “native problem” means to her as “other women’s complaints of their servants at tea parties”. She is afraid of the natives as “every woman in South Africa is brought up to be” under the influence of the cultural discourses of race and gender. (p.59) Surprisingly, even those white families in a lower class position like the Turners or Mary’s parents, are required to have black servants at their service to preserve the hegemony of the whites and show a united pose to the blacks, not to upset the racial status quo of the colonial myth. Mary treats her native servants in accordance with the fixed ideas that the colonial culture has constituted within her. In common with most other whites, she believes that if the natives are left alone they would steal or rape or murder. She sadistically abuses and punishes her servants and cannot keep them for a long time. Once during Dick’s sickness and taking over the responsibility of the farm, she treats the workers cruelly as the mimicry of the societal reaction: “the sensation of being boss over perhaps eighty black workers gave her new confidence; it was a good feeling, keeping them under her will, making them do as she wanted”. (p.112)

Mary’s obsession to gain control over the natives as “Other” human beings is a kind of compensation for her sense of being a feminine and weak “other” for the

masculine “self” of the white man and the empire, which make her unable to wield power over her own destiny. When Mary takes over the management of the farm for the short time of Dick’s sickness, she not only rages at the incompetence of her husband’s farming practice, but also she shows contempt for the workers, finding them disgusting and animal-like. She reduces their break time and takes money from their pay because she believes they do not have work ethics. On the farm, she takes up the role of a cruel colonizer. She wants to gain control/power as her defense mechanism for her own colonized state in the patriarchal culture. Her hatred results in her whipping the face of one of the workers who speaks in English to ask for water: “He spoke in English, and suddenly smiled and opened his mouth and pointed his finger down his throat.” She hears the other natives laugh at the scene which drives her mad with anger, but above that “most white people think it is “cheek” if a native speaks English” (p.119) The whites find it “cheeky” because it blurs the differences between them. So it is better to keep this distance by not allowing the “other” to speak the language of the “self”. To keep this distance, the black men are taught not to look directly at the white women; in fact the privilege of “gaze” is taken from them. They are looked at but are forbidden to look in the same way that they are forbidden to speak freely. It is considered as a “part of the native code of politeness not to look a superior in the face”. (p.68) Mary’s hatred towards the natives comes from her participation in the English imperial project. She is in a patriarchal society which dictates that she should be a sexual object, passive and dependent for a white man; and at the same time she is in a racist society which dictates that she should sustain a system of white supremacy. Therefore, whatever she is or would be is the contextual portrayal of her character in the intersection of race, class and gender.

Another reason that leads Mary to the stage of rage against the natives is her denial and repression of sexuality. She projects much of her unconscious on the natives, whether those who work in her house or on the farm. The natives are the target of her rage as the projection of her inner painful conflict and unacceptable feelings which her ego tries to ward off. She denies the colonized persons by considering them as “filthy savages” (110) or “black animals” (120) and hates them for their smell that for her is “a hot, sour animal smell”. (115) Mary’s hatred towards the natives arises from her fear of sexuality. Her use of projection is an attempt to negate this fear which is mostly obvious in her reaction towards the black women:

If she disliked native men, she loathed the women. She hated the exposed fleshiness of them, their soft brown bodies and soft bashful faces that were also insolent and inquisitive, and their chattering voices that held a brazen fleshy undertone. She could not bear to see them sitting there on the grass, their legs tucked under them in that traditional timeless pose, as peaceful and uncaring... Above all, she hated the way they suckled their babies, with their breasts hanging down for everyone to see; there was something in their calm maternity that made her blood boil. Their babies hanging on them like leeches... She thought with horror of suckling child. The idea of a child’s lips on her breasts made her feel quite sick. (pp.94-5)

Mary attempts to negate her sexuality and femininity which are rooted in her childhood trauma but she does not have self-consciousness to analyze and recognize them. She watches the native women who are associated with nature and natural drives of maternity and child-caring as “others”, as the site of “abjection” from a distance.

Racial Ramification of Abjection

Abjection, defined by Julia Kristeva, is a desire to expel but powerlessness to achieve it. It is the mark of the first differentiation of the subject from the maternal body, preceding the opposition of self and the other. It is “directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.” (Kristeva 2) Mary is not able to explore herself as a sexual being and cannot even articulate it within her own body; therefore, she cannot stand it in “others” which mirror her own confining or contemptible picture of herself, her phobia of non-differentiation from her mother. For her it is “not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me.” (Kristeva 2) Once again the private and public are interlocked in Mary’s case because her misrecognition of self, abjection and its projection in denying recognition of “others” are parts of a colonial discourse dominant in her culture.

By applying Kristeva’s notion of abjection which is rooted in the oedipal narrative in Mary’s sexual identity, Lessing explores its political-racial ramification. Through abjection, Mary establishes herself as pure and good and considers her racial “others” as impure and disgusting. Mary’s personal lack, her sexual repression (which is itself, as said before, rooted in her family and the patriarchal upbringing), and her fear of non-differentiation from her mother projected in the form of disgust towards the maternal bodies of the “natives-others”, are the mechanisms that the colonialist vision of imperialism has provided for its people. In other words, her self-misrecognition has implications beyond the personal sphere; it is formed by her culture which projects its own fears and prejudices on the colonized “other” under the white mask of civilization and dominance. Her self-hatred and repressed desire is reflected as hatred for “other” native men and particularly women to “not think of herself, but rather of these black women, as strange; they were alien and primitive creatures with ugly desires she could not bear to think about.” (p. 95) Mary, being “other” in a male-dominant order of things, parallels what blacks experience in a white-dominant one, but she is not able to recognize this “other” in order to understand or define her “self” because her culture limits her path to self-knowledge.

Shadow-Confrontation

The culmination of Mary’s despair and vulnerability is when Moses, the new servant, enters her life. Moses is the same worker whom Mary struck with a whip two years ago. The fear of being attacked or revenged has remained in Mary from that time: she is “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. She felt uneasy in his presence.” (p.142) Yet most notably, there is an element of sexual attraction in her towards Moses. His powerful, broad-built body

fascinates Mary. Once Mary sees Moses half-naked washing himself; he stops and stands upright with his body “expressing resentment of her presence there” (p.142), waiting for her to go. Mary is filled with hysterical anger “that perhaps he believed she was there on purpose; this thought, of course, was not conscious; it would be too much presumption, such unspeakable cheek for him to imagine such a thing...” (p.143) She thinks that “the formal patterns of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant” has been broken “by the personal relation” (p.144), because Mary, who has seen the natives so far as inferior beings “no better than a dog” (p.143), now sees in Moses a *man* with “the powerful back stooping”. Yet as the narrator details for us, she knows this colonial rule that: “when a white man in Africa by accident looks into the eyes of a native and sees the human being (which is his chief preoccupation to avoid), his sense of guilt, which he denies, fumes up in resentment and he brings down the whip.”(p.144)

The *man* Mary sees in Moses threatens both her sexual and cultural identity. She feels she must do something to restore her pose; she asks Dick to dismiss this boy too but Dick, tired of the endless dismissing of the servants because Mary could get along with none of them, insists that Moses should stay. Mary, little by little, loses her balance with the knowledge of being alone with Moses in the house and becomes, in Ellen Brooks’ words, “prey to violent emotions which she can neither understand nor control, stemming from deeply embedded psychological repression”. (330) She feels “once of strong and irrational fear, a deep uneasiness, and even- though this she did not know, would have died rather than acknowledge- of some dark attraction”. (p.154) When Moses himself announces that he wants to leave, she breaks down to sob in front of him and begs him to stay. He treats her hysterical behavior with calm authority, “like a father commanding her”. (p.152) He makes her drink water and lie down. Thereafter there is a change in their relationship; Moses appears to be the embodiment of her sexual fears and desires, her Shadow in Jungian terms, whose dark attraction weakens her struggle against him as the ethic of her colonial culture demands of her. Mary is aware that her act of crying before Moses has upset this colonial ethic because the power relation between them has been upset; she feels “helplessly in his power” (p.154) and resigns her authority.

Mary is sexually attracted to Moses which is culturally unspeakable and even unthinkable, a taboo. She, who has always avoided emotional attachment, is now suffering the pains and desire for an intimate relationship with Moses. She is both afraid of and fascinated by him. Her fear of Moses is both fear of a black man, the unknown Africa in Conradian terms, and fear of the dark continent within, her Shadow in Jungian terms, “a terrible dark fear” (p.152). As Michael Thorpe notes, Moses intrudes “not as a mere symbol of color conflicts, but as the agent of a disruptive life force” and triggers Mary’s long-repressed emotions to act out her traditional female role, helpless and dependent on him. (12) In Mary’s mind, Moses embodies the sexually masculine (his naked body is a memory always with her and she cannot forget) in contrast to Dick whose “lean hands, coffee-burned by the sun” seems to her trembling and weak. She fears even to look at Moses, “watching him covertly, not like a mistress watching a servant work, but with a fearful curiosity” (p.156); on the other hand, she is attracted by his strength, energy and grace. Moses’ acts of kindness and caring, and his desire to please Mary, for instance bringing her breakfast tray with “a handleless cup with flowers in it” (p.154) oversteps the unwritten law concerning the relationships between white and

black. Michael Thorpe remarks that: "since 1903 in Rhodesia, it has been a criminal offence for a black man and a white woman to have sexual intercourse but no such law applies where a white man and a black woman are involved." (12) The narrator exposes a similar discriminating point by making the reader compare Charlie Slatter who once "was fined thirty pounds" for killing a native "in a fit of temper" and Moses who is "as good as hanged already" for killing his mistress. (p.14) The natural relationship between a dominant man and a subordinate woman in a patriarchal system becomes problematic just because the man is black and the woman, white. This disturbs *spirit de corpse*, causing a tension in colonial culture by blurring the line between "us" and "them".

In Mary and Moses' progressive relationship, the boundaries between "self and other" fluctuate, but more than that the patriarchal colonial status is put in danger. Mary sees herself in an irresistible and irrepressible situation which reverses the colonial hierarchies. By Mary's resigning her power to Moses, this is Moses who takes the role of powerful dominating over her and respectfully forces her "now to treat him as a human being". (p.156) In simple words, Mary is racially dominant but psychologically and sexually is dominated by Moses, and this attraction implies her confrontation and breaking two taboos: sexual and colonial. The first has been broken by making personal contact with Moses as a man and the latter by violating the power relation between them. Mary, unconsciously, deconstructs the colonial doctrine of her culture and becomes the matter of "a bitter contemptuous anger" from her white fellows. (p.26) But the white civilization, "fighting to defend itself", does not let its profits slide down, and "cannot afford failures such as the Turners' failure". Emphatically the narrator expresses that "the white civilization 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 man." (p.26) Katherine Fishburn comments on this colonial status quo that "rewards those who conform to party line (Slatter) and punishes the one poor soul (Mary Turner) whose own psychological failings make it impossible for her to conform with the dedicated thoroughness that her repressive society requires of its members". (2)

The displacement of anxiety about the degeneration of her position as a colonizer and the life-long repression which places her now in the position of a subordinate leads Mary into madness, in a position as a victim who lacks agency to resist the status quo. Mary's madness and loss of control over her action and especially over her speech and later her silence is due to her inability to express herself by the existing discourses. Her silence is a symptom as well as an effect of the cultural neurosis; her vulnerability is that of the colonial regime. Her experience which is difficult or even impossible to be articulated (as we see it is concealed and distorted by the other whites) threatens her physical, emotional and spiritual integrity. She begins to behave "simply as if she lives in a world of her own, where other people's standards don't count. She has forgotten what her own people are like. But then, what is madness, but a refuge, a retreating from the world?" (p.187) Moses assumes greater and greater importance in Mary's life while she "faded, tousled, her lips narrowed in anger, her eyes hot, her face puffed and blotched with red" can hardly "recognize herself". (p.146)

Mary's sexual attraction and her sense of disintegration are revealed in her dreams. In her dreams, where her repressed unconscious reveals itself, the nightmares of

her childhood trauma and oedipal repressed feelings are triggered. In one of her dreams she sees:

Her father, the little man with the plump juicy stomach, beer-smelling and jocular, whom she hated, holding her mother in his arms as they stood by the window. Her mother was struggling in mock protest, playfully expostulating. Her father bent over her mother, and at the sight, Mary ran away. (pp.162-3)

Or in another dream, she sees herself playing with her sister and brother when her father catches her head and holds it “in his lap with small hairy hands, to cover up her eyes” and she can smell the sickly odor of beer and the “unwashed masculine smell she always associated with him.” (p.163) In her later dreams, she confuses Moses with her father, with mingled feelings of horror and desire. In one of these nightmarish dreams, she imagines Moses murdering Dick and then approaching her “slowly, obscene and powerful” but she sees that the threatening figure is not just Moses but “her father who was threatening her. They advanced together, one person.” (p.165) Moses starts to become her father figure: “his voice, firm and kind, like a father commanding her.” (p.152) The color bar does not admit her dark desire for Moses as the only man who could stimulate her sexually and this law is so strongly internalized that this desire seems inadmissible to herself, in the same way that the infantile oedipal conflict is inadmissible in society. Both Moses and her father are the source of fear and attraction that must be still repressed. Her dreams are the show case of the terrifying power of her upbringing. They demonstrate the inexorable link between her private life and the public problem of her institutionalized racism in this native land.

On one of his rare calling on the Turners’ farm, Charlie Slatter sees something which makes him react according to “the dictates of the first law of white South Africa, which is: ‘Thou shalt not let your fellow white sink lower than a certain point; because if you do, the nigger will see he is as good as you are.’” (p.178) The role of Charlie Slatter is that of the agent of social order who must impose a definition of the situation to maintain the required hegemony. Charlie’s first irritation is caused by Mary’s appearance and the broken-down and faded furniture in Turner’s house. But for him, more shocking is Mary’s flirtatious manner of speaking to him and unforgivably to Moses at dinner time: “it was the tone of Mary’s voice when she spoke to the native that jarred him: she was speaking to him exactly the same flirtatious coyness which she has spoken to himself.” (p.177) Slatter, the epitome of the white patriarchal colonialism, has to act now by driving the Turners away from this scene. He, who has always wanted to gain Dick’s farm, suggests that he buys it and employs Dick as the manager, but first they must go away for a holiday. Slatter’s attempt to get Mary off the farm by giving a good amount of money to Turners is not for love or even pity for Dick, nor does he care for Mary. What matters is that Mary has threatened the existing order through her relationship with Moses.

Charlie hires Tony Martson, to manage the farm while Dick is away. When Tony enters Turner’s farm, he sees Mary and Dick’s marriage has already disintegrated; he finds out that they no longer even recognize each other’s existence let alone their pains or

conflicts. Dick notices nothing about the relationship between Mary and Moses, but Tony sees clearly the attraction and repulsion between the two, particularly at a crucial time when he witnesses just by chance Moses helping Mary to dress and buttoning her and watching her brush her hair with an attitude of “an indulgent uxoriousness”. (p.185) Tony is shocked by this intimate relationship. Although he is a new comer and not completely accustomed with the colonial rules, he cannot comprehend this white woman’s easily evading the “sexual aspect of the color bar” (p.186) and only justifies it in his own mind that Mary is mad, “a complete nervous breakdown”. (p.184) When Mary sees Tony there, she is scared, seeming cut off from his concern. She said suddenly: “‘they said I was not like that, not like that, not like that.’ It was like a gramophone that had got stuck at one point... ‘not like that.’ The phrase was furtive, sly, yet triumphant.” (p.187)

On this occasion, by the intervention of another white man Mary reacts negatively towards Moses and dismisses him, while Tony is putting his arms around her shoulders to comfort her. Tony realizes that Mary is asserting herself and using his presence “as a shield in a fight to get back a command she had lost”:

“Madam want me to go?” said the boy quietly.

“Yes, go away.”

“Madam want me to go because of this boss?”

“Get out” Tony said, half-choked with anger. “Get out before I kick you out.”
(p.188)

From the moment Moses goes, Mary knows that he will return and take revenge. The last chapter of the narrative is the last day of Mary’s life, while she is epiphanically aware that she will be murdered at the end of the day and slides down into her tragic end.

Death: The Price of Ideological Pressures

Mary’s realization of her sterile situation is too late and has no other remedy but death. Her recognition is in her death. On the last day before their journey from the farm and also the last day of her life, she walks off the paths into the bush for the first time since she has been living in the district. Suddenly she becomes aware of the beauty of nature that morning, “with a mind as clear as the sky” she stands there “watching the sunrise, as if the world were being created afresh for her, feeling this wonderful rooted joy” and she feels herself “inside a bubble of fresh light and color, of brilliant sound and birdsong.” (p.192) Her attitude towards nature, seeing the pastoral beauty and vitality of the wild bush for the first time in her life, can be the sign of her sexual awareness, acknowledging the vital “other” within and “out there” in the bush. Standing among the bush, she knows that somewhere among the tress, Moses is waiting for her. She sees herself as “an angular, ugly, pitiful woman, with nothing left of the life” that can do nothing in front of the “fatal night”. (p.194) She sees herself as “that foolish girl travelling unknowingly to this end” who is waiting “for the night to come that would finish her” (p.195), then she walks straight into the bush “thinking: ‘I will come across *him*’ and it will all be over”. (p.197) She does not seek help from her husband who is “a torturing reminder of what she has to forget in order to remain herself”. (p. 191) There in the bush propelled by fear, but also by epiphanic knowledge of her death and that it will

rain after her death, she encounters Moses who attacks and murders her: “her mouth opened in appeal, let out the beginning of a scream, which was stopped by a black wedge of hand inserted between her jaws...and then the bush avenged itself: that was her last thought.” (p.205)

Mary Turner’s death seems the only possible resolution of her conflicting impulses and also that of the white colonialists to fulfill their missions and become heroes, and here it becomes obvious why the white community try to keep silent in response to Mary’s death. The narrative, which has opened the novel with a newspaper extract, announcing the murder mystery of Mary Turner by her black servant “in search of valuables” (p.9) and then looked a long way back to the personal and chronological account of Mary’s life until the day she is murdered, returns full circle to unlock the secrets. Under the influence of Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant from the police station, the white hide the truth by accusing Moses for stealing and rape. Charlie has this power to distort or even falsify the truth. Mary is lost in the gap between what other people read in newspaper about her murder and what the truth is about this tragedy. Thus the reader gets the acute awareness of the falsity of the news which reveals the conflicted ideology that underlies British imperialism which uses its worst excesses to justify itself. What others know or pretend to know is what white patriarchy and imperialism construct to run the power lines. It proves that even reality is constructed by ideology, particularly if it concerns with women and their sexuality. The reader, like the reader of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, becomes aware of the lie behind the dehumanized picture of the natives modeled by whites to save their faces, just as Marlow does at the end of Conrad’s novel. Mary’s tragedy is not her choice; it is the tragic consequences of the imperial authority over both the oppressed and the oppressor.

In the struggle between life and death during the last hours of her life, Mary finds ease in self-annihilation through death rather than self-affirmation. Even her end is a gendered one; being taught to be selfless, she feels guilty in her attempt to find her true sexual self and does not see the power to complete herself so her search ends in self-annihilation: “she is unable to protect herself against pain and punishment because she has been taught that resistance is useless- to be a woman is to be powerless, at least in relation to a man”. (Hunter 148) Her gender role makes her act the role of a sacrificial victim by permitting “the bush”-Africa or Moses- to revenge the whole colonialism on her. Her readiness for self-sacrifice signifies her stereotype gender role. Her life and death show that she has been imprisoned in her culture’s image of woman-dependent, helpless, a sacrificial colonized. Mary’s subjectivity is a “subjected being” who “submits to the authority of the social formation represented in ideology” which in her case is the ideology of colonialism. (Belsey 49)

Failure of Mary’s Individuation

Mary’s triumph is her awareness of the emergence of her repressed sexuality; she disproves the sexual aridity because of which her friends have ridiculed her. She can acknowledge herself and her sexuality not through her marriage but through her sexual relationship with Moses which shows her true self. As mentioned before, Moses represents the shadow of Mary’s personality, her repressed sexuality. But this triumph of shadow-confrontation, which is an essential stage in Jungian process of individuation, is

not sufficient to fulfill her individuation. She is able at last to confront the dark side within symbolized through Moses, yet as a woman still living in a colonial and patriarchal setting she is not able to get mastery over two important discursive obstacles: gender and race. Neither the problem of race nor that of gender can be subordinated to the other: Mary is a white woman who is dominated by Moses' masculinity and oppressed by her patriarchal culture and Moses is a black man with the superior masculinity but racially inferior and oppressed. In fact, both of them are oppressed in the dominant white male British culture. When witnessed by the white man Tony, she still wishes for him to come and save her from this situation. On the last day of her life, she realizes but too late, that all her life she has been dependent on outside help to save her from herself. She gets conscious of her conflict but is engulfed by gender and racial pressures.

Mary attempts to preserve a sense of self against the threatening psychological and physical forces; she can acknowledge the "evil" as her own shadow, as lack of concern for and exploitation of "Others" in her final epiphany. On the last day, disappointed with coming of any saviors, she understands that she must take the responsibility for the condition of her existence and finds that what is threatening "out there" is inside of her own self and in a larger scope inside of the imperial self. In her advance towards self-definition, she can overcome her psychological (personal) obstacles but not the stronger cultural ones. She cannot act because she is still the prisoner of the cultural commitment as the false basis of white civilization, as the second epigraph of the novel indicates: "It is by the failures and misfits of a civilization that one can best judge its weaknesses." Therefore, Mary's failure of individuation is personal which is highly political.

Conclusion: An Accidental Heroine

Mary Turner is not able to grasp her own identity because her identity is compounded by the overpowering colonial and gender narratives in which she is knit. The colonial ruling power dictates that she as an individual has to behave according to the terms imposed by her imperial identity. Even her disintegration must be silenced because it threatens the whole authority of the dominant category. Mary fails in her journey of self-quest but she is the heroine of this novel because she reverses the social, racial and cultural orders of her society though unconsciously. As in Katherine Fishburn's words, she is as an "accidental rebel" who at least dissolves the dichotomous orders and consequently reveals for the reader the fear and falsity of the white civilization whose indictment is the division between privileged white and the dispossessed black. (Fishburn 4) By her death, Mary paves the way for the native (Africa/Moses) to take a subjective action. She cannot guarantee her own identity since she does not have any antidote to loneliness, poverty and gender limitations, but she foreshadows a change in Imperial attitudes. *The Grass is Singing*, through its circular narration from a collective perspective of Mary's murder to an individual account of her personal life, completes an indictment of its central character's life in the center of a closed white colonial society in southern Africa in which the linked discourses of class, race, and gender bring her into exclusion, isolation, break down, and finally to death. Mary's failure of individuation is

the failure of patriarchy and colonial culture to satisfy its female member to find fulfillment within this status quo.

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