

Mary Turner's Marriage life in The Grass is Singing

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ABSTRACT

The Grass is singing by Dorris Lessing delves into numerous socio-cultural, political, gender, feminist and psychological issues. The most important theme of the novel is Racism. Psychological aspect is also presented mainly through the protagonist, Mary Turner. The distressed undergoes and oblivious accretions of Mary cause her much anguish and soreness in her adult life. This study is an effort to study about Mary Turner's marriage life in the novel. It aims to pour light on Mary Turner's sufferings in her marriage and her resistance towards it. The theory of existentialist feminism is used to analyse the women's existence especially Mary's which makes her subordinate to men. The notion of marriage is used to examine the marriage rules that makes Mary struggle and feel unpleasant in her marriage. Social pressure leads to unhappiness in Mary's marriage. Moreover, she lost her identity and had suffered to find herself in her marriage life which makes her fight back to situations she is not comfortable with.

Keywords: Marriage life, struggles, unwanted marriage, woman's existence, feminism.

INTRODUCTION

In the twentieth century, or the Victorian Era, women's position was always lower than the men. Women had no rights to be more prominent than men. Women were expected to marry and have children. Most of the people in the society believed that women, especially married women, should stay at home, take care of the children and do the house works. Women at that time could only put on makeup on their faces and dress up well for the men to be good housewives. Women did not get proper education or job like men did just because of a false belief that women were inferior to men. The feminist thinkers in that era were always vocal about the equality of status between men and women in every possible way hence the emancipation of women exist today. The literary works of the Victorian era portrays how the women suffered from their marriage life during that era. Doris Lessing's The Grass Is Singing is the reflection of the woman's life in her marriage during the twentieth century. This study is

an analysis about the protagonist, Mary Turner's marriage life in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*. Mary Turner's condition in the novel portrays the women's suffering from their marriage life with all sorts of rules and false beliefs in the society at that time. Mary had to marry her husband without love just because of the pressure from the society which torments her in her unhappy marriage. The concept of marriage and theory of existentialist feminism will be the two aspects that will analyse the circumstances.

METHODOLOGY

This article relies on library studies, textual discussion and analysis. It follows the descriptive and the analytical method. *The Grass Is Singing* by Dorris Lessing is the primary source of this paper.

ANALYSIS

Relationship between husband and wife in the early 1900's was analogous to master and slave. Women had the least role in marriage. The women's place was in the house; raising the children, cleaning the house, and doing other "womanly" tasks. Women were subordinate to men and became men's property. Feminist activist often assert about the historical, legal and social inequalities in marriages and family life.

"The institution of marriage is the chief vehicle for the perpetuation of the oppression of women; it is through the role of wife that the subjugation of women is maintained". - Marlene Dixon in 1969

"Marriage offers women contentment, tranquility, and security, but it also robs women of the chance to be great." (Tong, 1998:184)

The Self designed rules and beliefs of the society act as hindrance to the women's freedom and blow away the women's chance to be great which disturb the feminist writers and bring the voices of women's liberation at the moment of creating a literary work. As in Doris Lessing's *"The Grass Is Singing"*. This novel narrates about Mary Turner's struggles between her own desires versus her unwanted marriage. She breeds as an "amigo" of her mother, "hating her father" (TGS 2008:P 30). The impact of growing up with bitterness against her father reflects in Mary Turner's adulthood later in the novel. Growing up in a troubled family with major financial problems, deprived Mary from developing a healthy personal identity and a sense of belongingness to a family. She only feels important while comforting her mother: "Mary comforted her miserably, longing to get away, but feeling important too" (TGS 2008:P 30). This shows that Mary Turner's existence, in her childhood, finds its meaning only with

the need of her mother's feeling for her. Only these moments slightly secured her sense of belonging to a family. The relationship between Mary Turner and her mother has a key impact on Mary Turner's sense of identity. Mary Turner's role model: her mother, who is dreadfully poor without any emotional support, later inescapably brings Mary Turner to the point where the mother was earlier. Hence, Mary repeats the same blunders of her mother and dies. Paradoxically, Mary Turner, however trying to evade becoming like her mother, ends up playing a role that is very similar to her mother. Mary Turner's relationship with her father is the other major factor that hampers her female identity and her sense of belonging to female society during her adulthood. The fact that "Mary was pleased to be rid of him" clearly shows the nature of the father-daughter relationship in the novel (TGS 2008: P 32). The father as heavy drunker and a pumpman working for the railway, impacts Mary Turner's relationship with men. "There had been little privacy" in the small farm house in which she grows up; therefore she acquires "a profound distaste for sex" (TGS 2008: P 37). The narration of Mary Turner's dream clearly reflects her continuous impact by the traumatic experiences: flaking her from adult sexuality. Due to which, in her socially active life in the town as a working woman she develops just friendships with men; she is "a good pal, with none of this silly sex business." (TGS 2008:P 37).

As an impact of her unhappy childhood, Mary Turner turns to be a strong and independent woman. The novel asserts:

"There was nothing to prevent her living by herself, even running her own car, entertaining on a small scale. She could have become a person on her own account...She seemed impersonal, above the little worries. The stiffness of her manner, her shyness protected her from many spites and jealousies. She seemed immune." (TGS 2008: P 34)

Mary Turner can take care of her business on her own whereas women at that era had to dependent mostly on men. Mary is socially very active in the town and has lots of both males and female friends. She is a friend to half the town. She also can adapt very well in every occasion when it is needed, as stated below: "If a visiting cricket team came to town and partners were needed, the organizers would ring up Mary... She would sell tickets for a charity dance or act as a dancing partner for a visiting fullback with equal amiability." (TGS 2008:P 36)

Until Mary accidentally overheard her friends gossiping about why she stays single, she has not thought of marriage. She thinks that she need not get married as she already has a pretty good life. She is contented with her life, satisfied with her job, feels sufficient and capable. The reflection of her parents' marriage prohibits her from the thoughts of marriage. Most of her childhood memories are filled with the quarrelling of her parents about the bills they have to pay. When Mary thinks of "home" she remembers a wooden box shaken by passing trains; When she thinks of marriage, her father coming home red-eyed and fuddled flashed up; when she thinks of children, her mother's face at her children's funeral flashes up—anguished, but dry and hard as a rock. Mary adores other people's children but shudders at the thought of having her own. She feels gushy at weddings, but she has a profound distaste for sex; there had been little privacy in her home and there were things she did not want to remember. Mary Turner's unwillingness to cope up with the sexual side of marriage causes the later barrenness in her own marriage. However, after she overhears the talk about her being single. She starts thinking about getting married. She does not expect that her friends gossip on such things about her behind her back. That incident has a profound impact on Mary Turner and she wonders, if there is something wrong with her. Her life becomes the object of other people's concern since - "she was not playing her part, for she did not get married" (TGS 2008:P 35).

When she overhears her friends discussing how "she just isn't like that," she spontaneously looks for a marriage partner in order to fulfill the patriarchal expectation (TGS 2008:P 38).

When the society, including her friends do not accept her decision of not getting married, Mary Turner starts looking for a husband. And she allows a much older man than herself to approach her.

Mary Turner prefers "a widower of fifty-five with half grown children" because she "felt safer with him [. . .] because she did not associate ardours and embraces with a middle aged gentleman whose attitude who almost fatherly" (TGS 2008:P 40).

The influence of Mary Turner's oedipal trauma caused by her father becomes obvious once again in the novel at this time. Mary Turner's distaste for sex and her decision to marry an old man carry repercussions of Freudian ideas, that explains female adult sexuality by means of the relationship with the father in childhood. We can say that Mary Turner probably chooses an old man to flirt, so as to balance for the fatherly affection she lacked during her childhood.

But as the old man tries to kiss her, she runs away and the whole town learns about this embarrassing situation. People react meaningfully as -

“When people heard it they nodded and laughed as if it confirmed something they had known for a long time” (TGS 2008:P 42).

As soon as Mary Turner lets her social milieu direct her life by persuading the decisions she make, Mary Turner’s life starts to revolve around the expectations of the society. The society expects her to quit the role of an independent town girl and shoulder a new one that suits her age. She is expected to become a wife and a mother to which she cannot because Mary is afraid of being a mother and her sexuality is impaired because of her childhood trauma that is her untimely exposure to sex. The interplay between her familial background and the starkly demanding social environment forces her into marrying anybody literary to save herself from gossips about her being single. The following quotation supports the above assertion.

“Then she met Dick Turner. It might have been anybody. Or rather, it would have been the first man she met who treated her as if she were wonderful and unique. She needed that badly. She needed it to restore her feeling of superiority to men, which was really, at bottom, what she had been living from all these years.” (TGS 2008:P 43)

Lessing makes it clear that Mary needs an ego booster which only a man can provide. She craves to remain as “wonderful and unique” but she loses her dignity and self-image when her friends comment on her unmarried life thus urging her to change. Since she marries only to satisfy the society, she starts feeling uncomfortable in her marriage. She starts losing her own self.

“She felt as she had never done before; she was hollow inside, empty, and into this emptiness would sweep from nowhere a vast panic, as if there were nothing in the world she could grasp hold of.” (TGS 2008:P 42)

The above quotation clearly shows how Mary starts to lose her strong personality. She cannot just overlook or rectify the society about their thoughts and has to deal with an unwanted marriage. Soon after marrying Dick Turner just to fulfil the social pressure, she starts feeling unhappy.

“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. Mary, with the memory of her own mother recurring more and more frequently, like an older, sardonic double of herself walking beside her, followed the course her upbringing made inevitable.” (TGS 2008:P 98)

The above quote from the novel clearly shows the parallelism between Mary and her mother. They both end up marrying men who are no good for their wives. The only difference between Mary’s father and Dick is that Dick is not a drunkard or lazy. Moreover, Dick is hardworking and respects Mary. He even wonders at her efficiency, her energy and her intelligence but this could not save her from her mother’s fate.

Mary Turner’s relationship with her husband Dick is based on Mary’s gratitude to Dick for recognizing the fact that Mary married below her by accepting him. Mary accepts Dick because his worship reinstates “her feeling of superiority to men” (TGS 2008:P 43). Dick knows that he pulled Mary into a miserable poor farmers life by proposing her. Despite being very determined and hardworking, he ends up being poor farmer; he feels that “he had no right to marry” (TGS 2008: P 57). He has certain latent inferiority which Mary appreciates and enjoys sometime.

CONCLUSION

Mary Turner’s marriage life is not a happily ever after. Mary and Dick’s marriage is not based on love and understanding. Mary Turner’s miserable marriage life starts when her husband takes her to his home. As he is a jinxed Farmer back in Southern Rhodesia, South Africa Mary has to quit the town life. Mary Turner basically hates farming and black people and thus feels immediately unhappy towards her marriage. The society forces her to do the things she does not like. After marrying Dick she not only has to live in a farm, but also has to do the work as a farmer when her husband is ill. Moreover marriage also compel her to lose her identity as a strong and independent woman. She has to live away from the town, lose her job as well as her friends. After getting married at that time, women have to stay at home with their husbands and are not allowed to have a job. A wife’s primary job is doing the house works, take care of their children and be a good housewife. Mary Turner leaves everything she has built, her decent job, her friends, and the town she loves the most. This condition drives her into madness. She fails to deal with herself. She loses everything things that makes her happy. Mary Turner’s marriage forces her to enter into an adult life for which she is not ready. When things get hard to handle, she runs away from the farm and Dick. She gets back to the town and finds the

advertising about her old job. She decides to apply once again but then realizes the difference between her present existence and the past, and becomes aware that she is too old for the position. She fears seeing her friends who knew her. She do not want to be seen in the present miserable state, with her failure record by the friends whose words pushed her to marry. Therefore when Dick comes to the town to pick her up, she returns to him without argument. She is no more the woman she was once or believed herself to be.

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