

## PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

### Locating the 'subaltern other' in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

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**Tarulata Pegu: Locating the 'subaltern other' in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* -- PalArch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 17(9). ISSN 1567-214x**

**Keywords: Subaltern, marginalization, race, colonizer, colonized**

#### ABSTRACT

Subaltern, being a recurrent issue in postcolonial discourse, focuses on how the colonial hegemony and imperialism had otherized the natives and left them voiceless through their cruel policy. Postcolonial studies analyzes and react to the Eurocentric discourse in the colonies which regulates the representation and normality of the natives as an 'exotic' and 'inferior' being. Its proponents strive to recreate or reclaim the position, history, and culture of the natives by themselves thereby rejecting the master narratives. The objective of this research article is to locate how Doris Lessing, the British Nobel Prize winner, has problematize the issue of the subaltern in her debut novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950). Subaltern in its simple terms refers to the subjugated and oppressed people in a society who lie in the last ladder of the social strata. Colonized People from Asia, Africa, and South America are designated as 'subaltern' as they were in the periphery without a voice of their own. The research article also aims to trace the impact of subalternation on the individual's psyche and community as a whole. Although characters like Moses wanted to cross the boundary beyond the mistress-slave relationship and makes effort to get treated with respect remains unfulfilled. The study comes up with the conclusion that the subaltern can never rise above their inevitable position. Moses attempts to retain a warm and considerate bonding with Mary through sacrifices but was knocked down by the colonizers and their practices. He is compelled to surrender himself to the set patterns because of his color, language, and culture and thus left voiceless.

#### 1. Introduction

##### Objectives:

1. To analyse how Power operates in the colonies.
2. To examine how the natives were rendered an inferior position.
3. To point out the ways of resistance against oppression.
4. To explore the master-slave relationship in the novel.
5. To have a deeper look into the characters psychological instincts.

## 2. Review of Literature:

Examining the available literary texts and scholarly articles it is seen that a vast amount of work has been carried out on Doris Lessing and on her debut novel. It reveals that colonialism, postcolonialism, psychological studies, environmentalism, naturalism, gender issues has been its recurrent subject. One of the notable works is Gayle Green's *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change* (1994) that brings out the various thematic study using critical frameworks like Marxism, feminism, historical, biographical, psychoanalytical approaches of her books.

Mohammad k. Ahmed strives to show in his work, "Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*: Anatomy of a female psyche in the midst of gender, race, and class barrier", how ill-matched marriage added with poverty may cause deterioration of life in whole. An independent girl, Mary Turner succumbed to the rules of the society that looked marriage as the only means of existence (Ahmed 14). He concludes that the division of gender and race are the prime factor for Mary's tragic end.

Again, Lalbakhsh and Mohammad- Javed Haj'jari in their article "Double Effect and Black Revenge in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*" attempts to analyse how in one way the black man carried out revenge against the white master, and on the other, he submitted himself for his crime. This latter attitude shows his submission to the acquired Christian values.

Dr. P. Rajeswari's article "Search for Identity and reality in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*" interprets about the days of institutionalized racism and its consequences. The author focuses on how the actual socio-political reality sets up the question of identity in the novel.

In "An Interpretation of Mary in the Shadow of Colonialism in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is singing*", Yechun Zhang explores not only Mary's fear and constraints but also how she was led to the path of spiritual salvation through her various sacrifices. The author also attempts to understand how Mary was finally away from the shackles of life and that she resisted both the internal world and the world outside.

The theme of naturalism is explored by Rajendra P. Tiwari in his article "Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*: A Projection of Naturalism". He shows the role of instincts and environments in the progress of the events in the novel. Along with exploring the social and economic environment, it determines the "adaptability and ability [of characters] to compete in the struggle for survival (Tiwari 39).

Thus, the present study attempts to give a deeper insight into the study of the novel from the perspective of subaltern theory which will add value to the existing body of literature.

## 3. Analysis

Subaltern is a recurrent issue of discussions in postcolonial discourses. Postcolonial studies and theories evolved as a reaction to and an analysis of colonial hegemony and imperialism that otherized the natives and left them

voiceless through their policies. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) brought new dynamics to the study of postcolonial literature. He concisely demonstrates how the colonizers marginalize the culture and people of the colonized nation as "inferior" and the "other". Another important postcolonial critic, Frantz Fanon in his important works *Black Skin and White Mask* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) questions the racial policies and the inhuman colonial practices that oppressed the Blacks based on their skin color, language, and culture. The proponents of the postcolonial studies strive to recreate or reclaim the position, history, and culture of the natives by themselves thereby rejecting the master narratives and positions rendered to them during the colonial period. So, it is the history of the marginalized communities, gender, and races written from their perspectives. Their objective is to make certain that the elitist bias in writing history is avoided.

The term 'subaltern' itself was first used by the Italian Marxist and Communist critic Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*. According to him, subaltern was the subjugated underclass in a society on whom the dominant power exerts its hegemonic influence. He used it to designate the workers who had been suppressed by the National Fascist Party of Benito Mussolini. *The Glossary of Literary Terms* explains subaltern in the following lines:

"The subaltern has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who employ this discourse; "subaltern" is a British word for someone of inferior military rank, and combines the Latin terms for "under" (sub) and "other" (alter). (Abrams 307)

The 'subaltern other' is deprived socially and economically through the political practices and class conflicts existing in the colonized nation. Colonized People from Asia, Africa, and South America are designated as 'subaltern' as they were in the periphery without a voice of their own. As it was impossible to recover the history of the colonized natives so the subaltern studies suggest that the 'Third World' must understand the process through which they were persuaded to accept the Eurocentric version of reality. In this regard, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" provides herself the answer that the subaltern does not have his/her voice and that they should be spoken for because colonialism has set its very pattern in such way that prevents it.

Doris Lessing's (1919-2013), *The Grass is Singing* (1950) is set in the backdrop of colonization by the British Crown Colony in Southern Rhodesia. Lessing, the Nobel Prize winner, has brilliantly brought out the subject of racial politics during the 1940s in her first above-mentioned novel. Historically, the colony was established in 1923. Before that, it was administered by the British South African Company. The study discusses how the minority white government has a strict hold on the natives of the country and favored the white colonizers. The natives are placed in the lowest level of the economic and social rank, thus they are portrayed as the 'subaltern other' or the 'colonized other' in Lessing's novel.

As the Englishmen were the governing race in the country, they normalize the domination of the natives and consider them as the uncivilized 'savages'. It can be seen that the powerful white master like Charlie Slatter believed in keeping his black servants in the right place only by using 'sjambok' or the whip. The inhuman treatment of the natives gets highlighted by the way they are caught and sold to white farmers as if they were a commodity. The concepts of basic human rights sound a distant dream to them as they were treated like animals without any human feelings. They were forced to work throughout the day whether it is in the field or houses throughout their life. Moreover, situations were worse for the contract labors. The white farmers bought them for three to four pounds for certain years. They cannot escape during the given period under any circumstances and if they attempt to flee then the white farmer may approach the police to bring them back. As a shelter, they spend their nights in a small dark and temporary grass build huts in allotted compounds. They are treated as machines and heartless souls on whom they show their outbursts at will. The white farmers do not realize the fact that his/her comfortable life had been possible because of the gold of these natives whom they employ to dig it out and submit them.

The role of the white man in marginalizing the natives in the period of colonization is the history common to every colonized nation. However, the ways and its presentations by different historian, intellectuals, and authors differ. The British-Zimbabwean author, Doris Lessing in her novel tries to draw a breathtaking picture of a disturbing relationship between the binaries of 'self' and the 'other' or the colonizers and the colonized. The female protagonist of the novel, Mary and her black servant Moses had established a paradoxical relationship among themselves at a different level. Moses and the other black servants are meted out an inhuman treatment by Mary. Having nothing much to do in her new country life; Mary was obsessed to retain her authority over her servants. She would complain them of theft, laziness, and misbehavior. She inspects and follows their work every minute and makes them rework things already done. This creates a deep-rooted impact on the psyche of the black servants who are robbed of their right even to breathe and thus leave the house finding one or the other excuses. Mary too spoils her temper involving in such cruelties and was always in the mood of fighting with her husband Dick. Gradually, Dick was fed up with Mary's constantly dismissing the boys for almost no faults. Because of this, time to time they were left without servants. This becomes one of the reasons for the growing sour relationship between the husband and the wife.

Mary was mentally worn out handling her houseboys. She was biased against her black servants. Before her marriage, she heard her friends complaining about their servants. Right from her childhood, her mother in the town did not allow her to talk to her mother's black servants. She was forbidden to go out alone for the fear of natives as they were seen as dirty and lustrous being. The hatred for the natives was inculcated in her blood from an early age. Now that she was facing the native herself for the first time after her marriage made her

nauseating. She was quite unaware that her future would be surrounded by the natives whether it is on the farm, the store or the house.

The old Samson who has been working for Dick for many years had a very welcoming attitude towards Mary after her marriage. But unlike Dick, who would keep out the groceries as there was nothing much in the house to hide, Mary counted every little thing in the house and took away all the keys from Samson. Soon Samson became unhappy and being unable to bear the irritation of the new mistress, resigned the job. This was the beginning of endless coming and going of servants who were tortured and suppressed by her. She earned for herself the fame of being the most cruel and terrible mistress in the district where the natives fear to work.

This became the very reason people were angry and least shocked when they learn that Mary was murdered by the houseboy Moses. So at the very beginning of the novel, the murder was reported in the paper as such: "No motive has been discovered. It is thought he was in search of valuables" (Lessing 9). The way it was reported gave the impression that a native could kill someone just with the motive of stealing. This misrepresentation of the natives by the whites for the natives was enough to arouse the anger of any of them. The blacks were also compelled to think themselves as the culprits and their every action as inferior and despicable. In this way, they manipulate things and represent the 'subaltern' as the thief, rapist, and dirty uncivilized being.

A close study of the novel reveals that there was much more to the incident of murder. Mary's first encounter with Moses on the farm was fatal to her. However, it was her action that invites her end. Once when Dick was ill she had to look after the farm and its labors. As she despised the natives to her very veins she could not tolerate herself standing in the scorching heat among the smelly natives. She kept a strict eye on every movement of the natives working in the field. If someone exceeds more than a minute to stretch themselves from the long hours of bending she would shout at them to get back to work. Mary found Moses standing idly for seconds and heading towards the bushes. She shouted to him twice to get back to work. At this Moses spoke out in his language that he wants to drink water. Mary could not understand him and barked back not to speak in their native language. Moses feeling helpless looked for the boss boy but he was not in sight so he replied to her in English making gestures with his hand that he wants to drink water. At this, the rest of the workers laugh in good humor listening to his English. Mary was infuriated at this as she felt herself being laughed at and suddenly out of control she hit Moses in the face with the whip that she was carrying all the while. Drops of blood rush out from the wound and Mary could see the bloodshot eyes of Moses. He was standing there covering his face with all the indignation and anger in him. Mary was much frightened when she looked into his eyes and for the first time, she was nervous with fear. She dreaded that he might hit her back. Soon she holds herself back and commands everybody including Moses to get back to work.

Commanding them she felt victorious once again over the natives. This way the labors are not only denied a voice but their movements or stretching were under control. Again, water which is a basic necessity of life may come to them at the cost of their blood.

Mary was aware that Moses had the right to complain to the police against this physical violence. She was unafraid of this fact rather she was angry that the 'niggers' have the right to approach police for this. She also knew that the natives seldom approach the police. Somehow the natives were conscious of the fact that the law and authorities were in the favor of the white people. So the protection and rights of the natives were for namesake.

Moses' second encounter with Mary was more enigmatic but considerate. For Mary, it took out her nerve to see that Moses was to stay in the house as the houseboy/servant. Her mind flips into the incident of her first encounter with Moses and was afraid of revenge by him. She talked to her husband about changing the servant. But this time Dick was determined and warned her not to change the houseboy in any case. Mary would look for a fault of some kind or the other to get a reason to dismiss him but to her heart's dismay, Moses performs things exactly as instructed by her. This left her no room to take out the fear of her life altogether. Soon Mary realizes that Moses is unlike her other servants. His missionary upbringing led him to speak English, have good behavior and Dick too assured her that he was one of the best mission boys he had. So, he seemed harmless to Mary.

Mary, however, was inconvincible about Moses. She had an inscrutable feeling for him and was trying to detach her mixed feelings for Moses. She found herself entrapped in the thought of Moses. For instance, she would not take off her eyes from Moses while he is bathing or working. Moses followed her in her dreams too. She would wake up in shock dreaming about her physical contact with Moses. Once when Dick was ill Moses offered himself to stay in the house and take care of the master. It was a nightmare for Mary to be near Moses. Separated only by a wall in the night Mary experiences a complete nervous breakdown when she woke from the dreams about Moses. Seeing her confused and frightened, Moses, to assure her comfort, asked if she was afraid of him and Mary replied 'half-Hysterically' that she was not. She was already in a degrading position because of losing her "independent" and carefree town life and her failed marriage to Dick.

This also shows the caring nature of Moses. He knew that Mary had not slept for two days so he wanted to stay back with the sick master. Moses took care of Mary's meals that she skipped at an alarming rate. He gifted her little things like flowers and eggs brought from the compound to make her happy. Ignoring the past, Moses attempted to develop a warm relationship with Mary. But even after this, she despised him. Dissatisfied with her marriage, home, and life surrounded by natives made her more and more intolerable. Once Moses intended to leave the house but it was on her tears and appeal he stayed back in the house. Almost immediately, Mary repeated her habit of chiding him and his works. As expected Moses work for her like a "machine without a soul" (152).

The reason for these sacrifices is his willingness to share the bonding of love and understanding.

Moses' effortless endeavor to get treated like a man was very clear to her. She was shocked to learn that he knows certain things of her world which Mary herself was unaware of. She was appreciative of his well-built structure. He even gathers the courage to express his dismay for her ill-treatment to him. He was reclaiming his value when he made her realize that it was at her request he did not leave the house. This placed him in a position that Antonio Gramsci, in his seminal works, recommended the subaltern to gather the autonomy by placing a 'voice of protest'. So, she was forced to treat him with respect as a human being and not as something dirty and arrogant.

Mary was both fascinated and angry at him. The thing that worried her deadly is her growing obsession for Moses and the fear of disapproval of having a personal relationship with a native servant. The lines- "...when a white man in Africa by accident looks into the eyes of a native and sees the human being (which it is his chief preoccupation to avoid), his sense of guilt, which he denies, fumes up in resentment and he brings down the whip" (144), although true was unaccepted by Mary. She was well aware of the binaries of the 'self' and the 'other' that segregated them.

Gradually, she succumbed to him and she hated herself for this. She felt she loses her battle with the natives on the one hand and with the male hegemony on the other. Because more than once she look forward to be protected by her husband and other white men like Tony Marston or partly by Charlie Slatter from the despised natives. But they did not meet her expectation. She connects them to her father whom she disliked because of his patriarchal nature. These made her lost her senses altogether. She provoked Moses' anger and insults him and chased him away when Tony was with her. Feeling humiliated and heartbroken at the thought that Mary was chasing him away for another man and after assurance that she will never return to the place again after her trip, he was shattered. With the presence of the white man near Mary, he felt the trauma of being racially segregated and oppressed. Thus, in the heat of the moment, he murdered Mary. It can be called a revenge for his humiliated feelings and also an act of resistance by a native against injustices meted out by a white master. At the same, his surrender was an act of holding on to his morals and display of honor of the blacks as a whole who were ready to accept their guilt if and when required.

Thus, it can be wind up by saying that although Moses was attempting to retain the bond of love and care with Mary through sacrifices his fantasies were knocked down by the colonizers and their policies. He realized that he can never rise above his position because of his color, language, and culture. He is always seen as the 'inferior' or the 'subaltern other' who lack the basic rights of human beings. Although he had in him what Edward Said calls as the 'spirit of resistance' yet it proves insufficient under the stronghold of colonizers set patterns. This led him to surrender himself after the murder of Mary with the least reaction. Through this, he also establishes the audacity of the natives and not the coward being to run away after committing the so-called wrong things.

Even after all this, he failed miserably to get a voice of his own. Natives like him in those days in South Africa were marginalized and subjugated in every step of their life. There were strict checks to the conducts of people like him by the whites. People like Charlie were always there to control and chide the native seeing their growing power. He saw Mary speaking to Moses like a white man in a flirtatious manner. Thus, he scolded him and instructed Dick to throw him out while Moses was still listening. Again, Tony Marston was dumb stricken to discover the close relationship that a white woman was having with a black servant. Yet he found her less faulty and chased away Moses shouting, “get out before I kick you out” (188). So, situations and stuffs like this leave a deep impact on the individual's psyche in particular and the community in general.

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