**(Dis)Identification with ‘Perils’ in Lessing’s *The* *Grass is Singing***

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**Abstract:** Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) can be read as an indictment of the rigidity of colonized discourse as it enforces colonial political comment within the milieu of monolithic social structure. Lessing’s novel embodies the idea that the coherence of the society is maintained to the extent of the identification or misidentification of the perils of great variety. The “perils” advanced in the novel are embodied into the colonial social body of Rhodesia. In the novel, the protagonists, Mary and Moses, are distasteful to patriarchal colonial body politic in that the (dis)identification of grounded perils is inherently at work in colonized society. The “perils” like “femininity and blackness”, gender and sexuality, marriage, female corporeality, landscape, disembodiment with colonial identity, social hierarchy, etc. remain solid in proportion to their recognition. Thus, this study attempts to comment on identification with these perils the extent of whether or not the protagonists justify that Lessing’s novel remains a powerful analysis of abjection to colonial society.

**Keywords**: Colonial, patriarchal society, perils, marginalization, blackness, femininity

Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* (1950) highlights a profound analysis of racism embedded with sociological impacts as experienced during the apartheid. Lessing handles the characters in a paradoxical perspective. They are reduced down to an isolation and misfitness; on the other hand, the society cannot totally uproot them as they are still at the epicenter of such a clashes-stricken society. The novel works out the view that the unity of the society depends on the rejection of the threats, potential risks and perils from the inside.

Group identity can be established through the expulsion of unwanted events, figures from the society. However, in divisible societies belongingness to the society and acceptability by the society in question are open to subjectivity’ in Kristeva’s terms “open to ambiguous threats from within and without” (Kristeva, cited in Grogan 32). Here, as Douglas remarks, the limits of social unity and order are to be strictly policed “in the paranoid structures of a racist system” (Douglas, cited in Grogan 32). The so-called defense mechanism in a racially-segregated society is fraught with elements of “pollution”, which is seen as a danger that is likely to occur “where the lines of sociological structure are not clearly defied” (Douglas, cited in Grogan 32). Douglas comments on the definition of pollution as a peril in which the limits of society is defied and condemned. According to this understanding; “A perilous person is seen wrongful. He has developed some wrong condition which should not have been crossed; if so, such a displacement constitutes a peril of such a sensitively balanced society.

**Society Structure**

As we see in the novel, woman and “the racially other’ stand at the peripheries of the whole society, political life exposing their “perilous’ existence into the nature of the society. As a source of paranoia, these two elements of dangers set up a source of threat to the social and political body (Grogan 34). It would be better to elaborate the structure of colonial South Africa, which is pictured with the superiority of white male, as in the character of Charlie Slatter. The psychology of the apartheid seems to be embodied in the characterization of Slatter who is expected to conduct violence. However necessary, upon women and the segregated Other in colonial society. Under the dominion of social limits, Slatter has to make sure that the first law of white South Africa “fellow whites not to be let sink lower than a certain point” (Lessing 178). As a supervisor of life quality of the white, Slatter is horrified by Mary’s social descent into poverty as the result of her association with the racial Other with the structure of white society. Thus, he persists that Moses be fired, and Mary be removed from the farm.

**Social results of the perils**

Slatter is required to upload the white male body; in doing so, he has to validate ‘the racist patriarchal extortion of control over black and female bodies’ (Grogan 34). This control extends towards the borders of exterminities of the elements of perils from the surface of society. Lessing’s “polluted’ characters are punished: Mary with death, and Moses with the fulfillment of the colonial stereotype of the black man as criminal. So, we can propose that the novel can be seen as the application of colonial rigidity together with its political comment. As Fishburn states, the novel also discloses the impossibility of establishing and increasing difference with monolithic social structures.

The novel displays the social body together with strict societal systems that maintain its existence through the scare, oppression and colonial abjection. Sentiments of racism weaken political stability and connectedly the power of oppressive ideology. Hami Bhabha in his book argues that the stereotypes created in the novel provide “major discursive strategy’ of colonial discourse. He adds:

Form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always in place already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated … as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof can never really in discourse be proved (Bhabha, cited in Grogan 35).

As we see from the quotation, the “peril of fear of sexual crimes against the white women by black men” (Grogan 35) constitutes the pollution of the racist society depicted through the stereotypes of the “bestial sexual license” (Bhabba cited in Grogan 36). This ‘peril’ instigated by the black men collapses the boundaries of the body politic and social order, no matter how negligent the society can be against the emancipation of women rights as a whole in colonial Rhodesia. When it comes to ‘black peril’, a common language and attitude are adapted by whites as an outlet for the social anxieties.

The novel encompasses perils in line with specific and insidious political motivation. Mary, grown and educated under continuous fear of a possible sexual assault by black men, has been restricted to walk alone as, “they [black men] were nasty and might do horrible things to her (Lessing 59). When studying through the hysterical background of Rhodesia, it appears that the ever-present threat from the ‘Other’ has been held uptight to establish white and male supremacy. This peril served two reasons; it announced the white woman as possessed by the white men, and it established the black ‘Other’ as primal animal incapable of controlling his impulses. Thus, with this peril created as a myth in the society, women and Africans were advertised as corporate; this necessitates the stereotyped female qualities as weak and passive. Thus, the peril requiring the roles of both victim and villain stabilized the places of woman and black man in line with the restrictions of the patriarchy. In such scrutinizing atmosphere, the desire of a white woman for a black man, as in the novel, reveals the impossible permission between the races going beyond the social order, the one which never lets intruders and perils collapse its structure. Hence, the murder of Mary can be seen as silent agreement that everyone signs silently in the atmosphere of collective sublimity. The social law is represented through the figures of Slatter and Sergeant Denham, both of whom bring also “pollution and peril” to the society. Mary poses a risk to the social law by association with blackness and letting her body be possessive by the ‘Other’ in a racial society.

As we have mentioned the “black peril”, it is also possible to mention “white peril” that is at her height of breakdown embodied in Mary. In the end of the novel, Mary clears the hierarchical and authorial difference between Moses and Slatter; thus, she collapses social law by her ‘openness’ to infiltration by the racial ‘Other’. For this reason, Mary is a perilous threat as she lives on the edges of her society on the site of danger and vulnerability. Actually, Mary, as a part of her culture, and although she defies its rules can be seen as an innate white peril. She is in a difficult position; she accepts the racist ideology of the community and also misidentifies with a group that marginalizes her, urging her to search for a relation outside its borders, with a man she has been taught to despise. Lessing’s criticism on this point associates with the presence of ‘white peril’ in the character of Mary as a misfit, hysterically mad and divided individual. Her psychological diagnosis surfaces the inherent problem in the body politic which itself is deeply divided.

Mary’s socially perilous nature becomes her survival within a compulsory system (Lessing 178). Mary does not perform her role of gender within socially acceptable limits. She overhears her friends: “She isn’t just like that, isn’t like that of all?” (Lessing 40). Her friends criticize her inappropriate clothes and character unsuitable for marriage. In this patriarchal society, as a “white peril”, she reveals her incapacity to be subservient to the dynamics of her community.

The society seems to be in the grips of the threats in a way of perils to its own sake. The audience in the cinema is represented to “hundreds of people flown out of their bodies and living in the lives of those stupid people” (Lessing 46), which symbolizes the society with forcing members into gender roles. It’s very commonplace to pose a danger to such society established on shaky foundations. A defiant member can question obsession with gender roles in which Mary sees the disturbed picture presented to her and her demand to express her sexuality. It was hard to reconcile “what she wanted for herself and what she was offered” (Lessing 44). Her desire to oppress her sexuality is ignored, and she is forced to express it in marriage resulting in her intensified desire to repress her corporeality (Bogard 37). Hence, she becomes another peril in her marriage as torn between marriage and her refusal of carnality. In the throbbing heart of the landscape and enforcement into the role demands of community, Mary shows symptoms of her divided self in racism, marriage tasks and social expectations. She notices that whiteness is dissociated from corporeality; white women are in the grasps of split ideality created by patriarchal culture. She feels the horror of female corporeality that is projected in the racial ‘Other’:

Since so many white women are like her, turning with relief to the bottle, she was in good company, and did 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 (Lessing 95).

As seen in this quotation, the entrapment of colonized white women can be seen as ‘colonial peril’ in which they struggle to dissociate themselves with colonized identity; however, they are not allowed due to their social positions.

Colonial hierarchy is emphasized which leads to identity split as a part of intensified racism. When Mary watches Moses washing himself and presses down her displeasure, the decision of society and the individual is underlined within the peril of colonized hierarchy. Mary imagines the black man as a soulless body “as a machine” (Lessing 68). In this point, Lessing underlines “the exploitation of the black man as a mere body used for labor” (Lessing 39) for capitalist purposes. Slatter sees his trade as “farming with the sjambok” (Lessing 14), a dehumanization of human workers in the Rhodesian society. In a similar fashion, Mary also behaves in lines with social rules when she dehumanizes and despises her servants. She is strict enough to throw a plate to the face of a black servant when he is presented as “only a black body ready to do her bidding” (Lessing 68). When the novel progresses, however, the recognition of Moses’ humanity begins to dissolve her misconceptions and leads her over the brink of madness. Thus, Mary’s identity portrayed by colonial hierarchy poses another peril to the welfare of the community as she is derailed out of normalcy. With the acceptance of “personal relation” (Lessing 144), she reveals that the “dislike” is not “other”, but an element of the self. In this case, Mary must face her corporeality through her sexual attraction to Moses, thus, recognizing his humanity. While watching him secretly, she feels “the pressure of the sun against the back of her bare neck” (Lessing 144). She becomes “shaking, the blood in her ears and her mouth dry” (Lessing 145). Thus, the shifting power relations in the novel become perilous for white patriarchy. Resultantly, relations of power that shift through Mary and Moses’ relationships overrides her feminine weakness and grants an undeserved power to “the black peril”, who becomes a signifier or power, which is impossible to tolerate within the hierarchical structure.

The second example of ‘perilously shifting relationships’ takes place after Mary has fired some house servants. When Moses threatens to resign in connection with the multiple lay-offs, Mary is overcome by her failures, and breaks down begging him to stay (Lessing 151). Moses brings her a glass of water, an act conflicting with ‘patriarchal hierarchy’ constituting the shift of power between the two characters: “Drink, he says simply as if he were speaking to one of his own women; and she drank” (Lessing 151). Moses exchanges the power; by doing so, he eliminates his status based on blackness. Mary is now defined by thirst for water, and it is now Moses who quenches her need as if she were “one of his women.” Her drinking symbolizes the recognition of power shift, weakening her racist and colonial identity. Thus, we can infer that colonial hierarchy becomes a peril for itself by letting its own member reverse the deep structure for the worse of the colonial community. Moses’ closeness to patriarchy in this way culminates Mary’s murder suggesting his threat against and penetration into the social body.

As the abject of dominant colonial power, Moses leads to Mary’s divided desire as to conform to her social order and liberate her fixed identity. Remaining in profound fear and unrest, Mary would have died rather than acknowledge of “her attraction” (Lessing 154). Mary can attain liberation from socialized identity if she allows attraction and if she overcomes the thin line between self and other. However, Mary who can’t resist contacting with Moses and forced to acknowledge him as a human being becomes aware that her growing fascination with Moses is perilous. (Lessing 156). As a matter of fact, “Moses threatens her with the liberator danger of the dissolution of her socialized identity” (Grogan 41).

Moses remains beyond the understanding of the social body. He is displayed as the basis onto which racist pathologies are drawn and as the colonial object that is ready to obliterate hegemonic whiteness. Lessing prefers to keep Moses as the pollutant that displays social paranoia on 1940s in Rhodesia. Moreover, the novel reveals neurotic cleavage in the closed social body. Lessing’s novel therefore remains a powerful analysis of social symbolism and “abjection to the colonial racism” (Grogan 41).

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