

Female Emancipation and the crisis of authority in the postcolonial context in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* And *The Golden Notebook*

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This paper attempts to investigate how Doris Lessing Portrays gender in *The Grass is Singing* and *The Golden Notebook* which are amongst the major novels that she has published so far. We intend to examine how this writer has strived to lift the traditional and patriarchal norms that render the woman subordinate to her male counterpart rendering her almost mentally broken. Lessing has placed the woman at the forefront where she plays major roles to improve on her status and her society as a whole. She has gone further to represent the woman as an assertive being seeking recognition and visibility in her Society.

To give our paper a better comprehension, it would be good to review gender before deepening our analysis on the various texts under study. To begin with, gender is basically the biological difference in sex that is male and female. But it should be underscored that gender in literature, goes beyond this biological difference. It stretches to other societal activities that affect it. Hence, gender in literature dwells more on how Society perceives the sexes. It rather focuses on the domination of women by men to the advantage of men. Consequently, female domination does not come from biological difference as such but it comes from the patriarchal and hierarchical division of labour in which women are reduced to domestic duties. Mariam lowe and Ruth Heubbard quoting Jean Smith confirm that “Women subordination, while not biological in Origin, should be located in hierarchical division of labour that was anchored in the organisation of housework and child bearing and rearing” (89).

So the relegation of the women to the background can not be attributed to the biological difference. It should rather be blamed on societal discourses. Bill Aschroft et al quoting Spivak note that “ women in many societies have been relegated to the position of other , marginalized and, in a metaphorical sense , colonized, forced to pursue guerrilla warfare against imperial domination from positions deeply imbedded in, yet fundamentally alienated from that imperium” 174.

This suggests that women somehow share the experience of the politics of oppression, dehumanisation and repression. On the other hand, *The Holy Bible* on its part equally attributes a subordinate role to the woman. For instance, In first timothy chapter two, verses 11 to 13, we are told “let the woman learn in silence with all subjugation. But i

Suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be silent (King James version). This informs us that a woman is not supposed to take lead. She only has to be calm, Sit and listen without any objection to what the man says. All these, push the men to dominating women even in close relationships. So the women since time immemorial have always been running after the man. Helen chukuma in "Voices and choices" discloses that a woman's limitations are varied. In an argument with her husband, he is always right and any woman who tries to dominate her husband is considered a monster. (*Literature and Black aesthetics*. 131)- Moreover, Flora Nwapa in *One is Enough*, intimates that "you don't argue with your husband. A woman who tried to win an argument over her husband was regarded as a "He woman" (Nwapa 1982). So therefore a man feels his position threatened whenever a woman tries to put him on the right footing. Consequently, he does everything to grasp his position Gender here becomes a social construct. Margaret mead in a web based article confirms this by saying that: "Gender is a social construct specifying the socially and culturally prescribed roles that men and women are to follow" <http://www.trinity.edu/Mkearlm:gender.html>. The women have always had lower status than men for a very long time now.

We should also bear in mind that black women, more especially all over the world have suffered a sort of double segregation too. They have suffered first as blacks and secondly as women. This has made them to be stranded for they have been taught to fight against racism than to put up a worthless fight against sexism. This explains why in the 19th century America, when the white ladies stood up for their rights, the black women became caught in a dilemma. They were caught between joining the white women in the fight for their rights or joining the men to put a strong fight against sexism. bell hooks underlines this thus:

Contemporary black women could not join together to fight for women's right because we did not see " Women hood" as important aspect of our identity Racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and regard race as the only relevant label of Identification. We are just asked to deny a part of ourselves and we did... We cling to the hope that liberation from oppression would be all that was necessary for us to be free. (1)

But black sexism existed long before slavery and consequently before colonialism. Sexist politics of white-rule and colonisation only came to reinforce in the minds of enslaved black people existing believes that men were superior to women in the 18th and 19th centuries. Amanda Berry smith, a 19th century black missionary in Africa in *AIN't I A woman* underlines this point by saying:

The poor women of Africa, like those of India, have had a hard time. As a rule, they have all the hard work to do. They have to cut and carry all the wood, carry all the water on their heads, and plant all the rice. The men and the boys cut and burn and the black female slave experience. You will often see a great big man working a bread with nothing in his hand but a cut lass and a woman, his wife, coming on behind with a great big child on her back, and load on her head. (6-7)

These are all indication of the fact that women and more especially black women were generally dominated by men to their advantage. This existed at the socio-Economic and political levels. The woman is usually a passive participant in issues that even concern her well-being. It is under this type of pressure that Lessing tends to advocate a new self definition of the woman. This is inline with the feminist stand points. Raman Selden holds that feminism as a field is very vast and dominant in America and Britain. He notes however that despite the vastness, the central idea with feminism is to “challenge male chauvinism and to end women’s exploitation by patriarchy at all levels” (135). This matches Bill Ashcroft’s view that feminism generally attempts to unmask, reject patriarchy and fight for female equality (249). Elizabeth Goodman concurs by saying that “Feminism is a politics: a recognition of the historical and cultural subordination of women(the only world-wide majority to be treated as a minority),and the resolve to do something about it(x).” We understand that the feminist theory which has to be employed in this paper, has to do with the deconstruction of gender hierarchy. From this background therefore it becomes very clear that the identity of the woman had been totally fragmented and shattered by the forces of colonisation, tradition and patriarchy. It is this shattered identity that Lessing has not only made an attempt to rebuild and rekindle hope in but render gender hierarchy equitable. We realise here that Lessing’s texts deconstruct gender hierarchy. We are far from suggesting that it destroys gender hierarchy completely. However, deconstruction, according to Jonathan Culler can be simply defined as

a critique of the hierarchical oppositions that have structured Western thought: /Inside/Outside, Mind/Body/ Literal/metaphorical, Speech/writing, presence/absence, nature/culture, form/meaning. To deconstruct an opposition is to show that it is not natural and inevitable but a construction, produced by discourses that rely on it, and to show that it is a construction in a work of deconstruction that seeks to dismantle it- that is not destroy it but give it a different structure and functioning (127).

THE PROCESS OF METAMORPHOSIS

This section of this paper is focused on female self definition in spite of the position they have been pushed to by patriarchy. This is done to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant. Lessing has succeeded in doing this through her major female characters. She has placed them in positions where they will not only be seen but heard, where they will not be passive but be an active participant in decision taking. Metamorphosis should be understood within this context as a shift or a kind of redefinition of the female self as opposed to the stigmatised identity that she was given by the male, *The Holy Bible* and the colonial world. I want to say here that women all through history have been held down by patriarchy, tradition, the Bible and the colonial ideologies. This is the myth that Lessing has set out to break. That “Man is the more important figure; Woman is born to serve him, love him be protected by him, and assist in reproducing him. In the English language the word “Man” is used synonymously with ‘Human being’ (Karl menninger, DD : 41)”. This prominent writer is out therefore to break this myth and boost the image of the woman. She attempts to deconstruct those patriarchal norms that discriminated against the woman relegating her to the background. By so doing, she attempts to move the woman from the margin to the centre. This falls in line with the tenets of feminism as Elizabeth Goodman further contends that “feminism is a politics a recognition of the historical and cultural subordination of woman (the only world-wide majority to be treat as a minority), and the resolve to do something about it (X)”. This emphasizes why Lessing launches a scathing attack against patriarchy.

In *The Grass is Singing*, What Mary fears, is the repetition of her mother’s life but she falls in the same situation by getting married to Dick Turner. We all understand that Mary’s mother lived a very unhappy life due to their poor economic situation. Claire Sprague (1987) confirms this by saying: “The authorial voice tells the reader that Mary’s nameless mother had a life ‘so unhappy because of economic pressure that she had literally pined to death’ (45). When her mother dies, Mary abandons her pathetic and alcoholic father” (24).

Mary therefore by abandoning her father seems in a way to be avenging her mother’s suffering (44). She shows her dominance here, later, she will take her own stance against her husband, against the field workers and also against the servants who come under her household rule and who are finally merged into the personality of Moses. When Moses controls Mary, it becomes very unsettling to Charlie Slatter, the upholder of white racism. If, as he say’s blacks keep women in their right place’ then black males are as patriarchal as white males. For slatter, the overturn of the proper power relationship between white and black, male and female that takes place when white women boss black men, as Mary

does when Dick is sick is a major factor in Mary's murder. "Nigger's don't understand women giving them orders. They keep their own women in their right place. (Claire, 1987). Mary's dominance has really been revealed here. She is not just at the receiving end. She objects and even gives instructions although this only leads her to death. This is where the crisis of authority comes in. When a woman tries to take a step ahead, she is stifled by societal forces.

However, the men in her life are neither free nor powerful. They are marginal and defeated. The father who attracted and repelled her and whom she blames for all the problems of her childhood is described as a cipher in his own home. So too is Dick, who annoys Mary by calling her "boss". Moses on the other hand exhibits a different kind of powerlessness. He may have emotional power over Mary, but he has virtually no socio-economic and political power. Mary enjoys authority. She even enjoys order, predictability and impersonality more than she enjoys power (44). She totally controls her projects. Her cleaning, sewing, painting and chicken rising are acts which help in a way to give her, her economic independence. These activities make Mary an emancipated woman but it only conjoins her sexual immaturity to paint a negative picture of her. Lessing has succeeded in bringing to life a female character who attempts to break the myth that has always relegated the woman to the background. She continues with this fight in *The Golden Notebook*. Here, Lessing has tried to rekindle the women's movement. Elizabeth Maslin notes. *The Golden Notebook* became, almost as soon as it was published, a flagship for the reawakening of women's movement and it has continued to be claimed as a classic feminist text" (20). Here, Lessing has succeeded in giving a voice to the women socially, economically and politically.

Socially, women have taken a metamorphic growth. They have moved away from the era where it was only the man who dictated to them. They take decisions and stick to them. This is realised here through Anna Wulf, Molly and Ella.

When Molly sees that marriage is not giving her the happiness she thought of, she divorces her husband in spite of the fact that they have a son. She discloses to Anna Wulf that marriage is not just a question of giving birth to children. She confirms this point thus "the point is, neither of us was prepared to get married simply to give our children father. So now, we must take the consequences."(32)

These ladies are different from the traditional women who kept dancing to the tunes of the men. They are even ready to bear the consequences of whatever happens to them. However, Anna thinks that these men cannot succeed without the assistance of the women. She discloses that:

Practically all the men one knows are married to nice ordinary dreary women. So sad for them. As it happens, Marion is a good person, not stupid at all, but she's been married for fifteen years to a man who makes her feel stupid[...] What would they do, these men, without their stupid wives?. (44)

They constantly need the woman. This shows that the woman's role is well felt.

Anna Wulf and Ella have equally tried to show to the males that they too have their own respect and they endeavour to stick to it. This is contrary to the period when the women were just at the receiving end. They have proven to be very resistant to the temptation of the males. Even though Anna and her comrades live a bohemian life-style, they do not just fall prey to the sexual desires of the men. While at the Mashoppy hotel where they drink and tell stories, every male especially Paul and George want to take Anna to bed. She realises this temptation and proves to be very resistant. This brings a sort of self-respect to her and the women folk in general. This indicates that the women have become more conscious. They are no longer household chattels. Anna out-rightly shows herself respect to Richard when he invites her out and proposes to take her to bed. Anna responds: "Richard you're an awful bore" (60). This shows that Anna is resistant to temptation. This gives her some credibility and self respect in front of the men.

Economically, Lessing has tried to break the myth that women can only depend on the men for their survival. When Richard divorces Molly and gets married to Marion, it does not imply anything to Molly. She decides almost immediately to do other things to sustain life. She did song and dance act in a revue, she took to drawing lessons, and equally worked as a journalist which she later gave up to work in one of the cultural networks of the Communist Party. According to Richard, Molly was immoral, sloppy and bohemian (36). But this lady has proven that without the man, a woman can still give meaning to her life. Anna Wulf too is economically independent. She makes much money after the sale of her novel *Frontiers of War*. Anna has the power of the pen. She is a very good writer. She is even invited by Mr. Reginald Tarbrucke for a talk because they need suitable themes for their television plays since she is a serious writer. This indicates that women have changed drastically. They do not necessarily need the assistance of the men to make their life meaningful. This indicates that Lessing is concerned with social change. Maslen informs us that Lessing tries to dismantle the great block between men and women. She does this through Anna Wulf. This is what we find in the culminating golden notebook of *The Golden Notebook*,

where Anna writes the first sentence of Saul's new novel and he offers the first sentence of hers, each of them, as it were, inscribing the other's body. Anna thinks: "I felt towards him as if he were my brother, as if, like a brother, it wouldn't matter how we strayed from each other, how far apart we were, we would always be flesh of one flesh and think each other's thoughts" (556).

Lessing opts for a society wherein there should be no conflict between men and women. If such a society were to exist, then the world will be a better place to live in.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show that that in spite of the values that tradition, *The Holy Bible* and colonial ideologies have put in place to subvert the position of the woman especially the African woman, things have changed and it is a continuous process.. The world is like a dancing mask evolving and mentalities are also changing. Empowering the woman within this context, goes to subvert the western notion of the third world woman. what I think however is that if the women were to live in close collaboration with men rather than the other wanting to be a superior to the other, productivity will be high and so the world will be a better place to live in. what should rather be celebrated and encouraged , should be collaborative feminism.

Like many artistic works, Lessing's works under study betrays a few flaws. But on the whole however both novels are redeemed by the author's powerful artistic strength which is realized in her deployment of effective techniques as well as having at her disposal a feminist ideological perspective that allows adequate perception of her issues and the deep penetration of the realities of her characters. Above all, this paper delegitimizes patriarchy thus falls inline with the postcolonial criticism which seek to invert the structures of oppression and domination.

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