

## “Kristevan exploration of abjection in Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*”

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### Abstract

*This study attempts to identify to what extent the psychological portrayal of Mary Turner’s fragmented subjectivity and failure of individuation justifies Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* (1950) as powerful analysis of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. For Kristeva, abjection is the process of identity formation experiencing the separation from the mother and entry into language that blurs the boundaries between self and other, hence creates a disturbing, horrible and repulsive generative power of the ‘self’ within the phallogentric systems of thought. *The Grass is Singing* (1950) is replete with such tropes of abjection where the female protagonist, Mary Turner is exposed to decode the conventional features of femininity. She encounters Kristeva’s imaginary boundary into the realm of death and horror; experiences the transition between psychoanalysis and the subconscious mind; manipulates the boundaries, laws, and rules of her existence to a point where meaning is undermined. Even the concept of death is de-familiarized by portraying Mary as a ‘willing victim’. This article will demonstrate how the theory of abjection by Kristeva serves to parody the binary oppositions and effectively deconstructs the reader’s expectations of archetypal, naïve, passive female role endorsed with patriarchal ideology. This analysis will explore how in Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* (1950), Mary Turner is portrayed as neither a subject nor an object, but as perverse, narcissist, ambivalent and willing victim to subvert the conventional representation of femininity.*

**Keywords:** femininity, abject, individuation, patriarchy, psychoanalysis

Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection evocatively promises profound insight on the construction of identity, the operation of language, the meaning of negative emotions, the psychology of phobia, horror narratives as a literary genre, the denial and oppression of outsiders, violence against women. Accordingly, it focuses on unusual subject matters.

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...” (qtd. in *Sexual-Political Colonialism* 28). Doris Lessing questions the social system and order through her unusual female protagonist Mary Turner. Because “Woman is the silence or incoherence of the pre-discursive: she is the ‘Other’, which stands outside and threatens to disrupt the conscious (rational) order of speech” (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 142). To portray this unrepressed flow of liberating energy, Mary Turner is represented as someone who “misfits, outlaws and the self-exiled” (Lessing 10).

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Kristeva emphasises that “abjection is only activated when the subject feels unable to incorporate their experiences or symbolise them and distinguish them consciously from the self” (qtd. in Duschinsky 3). The subject is always in a state of transition or transformation of self. In Mary Turner, the tendency of a constant fight to cope with the transformation is mentionable. Though, Mary is comfortable with her free, independent, working life style, she wants to transform herself by leaving her free modern life behind with an intension to be a perfect wife of the society. According to Kristeva “an abject neither gives up nor accepts the prohibition, rule, or law; but puts them aside, misleads corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (*Powers of Horror* 10). Similarly, Mary neither gives up her intention to be a conventional married woman nor she accepts the rules, laws and usual conventions of being a married woman, a wife and a house wife. She keeps doing all her duties of household works but with a deep disgust and hatred for the conventions. Deep in her heart and mind she still wants to be a free, established, powerful woman who could lead her life as she likes.

“The abject describes those forces, practices and things which are opposed to and unsettle the conscious ego, the ‘I’. It is the zone between being and non-being” (qtd. in

*Against Abjection* 2). This unsettle state of Mary is intensified and personified through the portrayal of extremely bitter climate and uncomfortable roof of the house. Mary’s unusual toughness, unconventional attitude as a lady, her rudeness with the natives labeled her someone different, an ‘abject’ by the locals of the farm and the natives. The way “ordered and rationally accepted social law is continually being threatened by the ‘heterogeneous’ and the ‘irrational’ (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 168). The other ladies in her neighborhood feel threatened because of her strong personality.

Like an abject, Mary shows physical reaction as nausea and sickness. Her look was growing horrible, sick; she was behaving hysterical terror also. “She was fighting against something she did not understand”(Lessing 206). Mary’s dealing with the native house boy was a sign of her confronting abject. She could not keep these native workers out of her mind. They are a kind of object for her who is bringing out her abjection. She always took them as a challenge, behaved strangely to remain powerful even if the natives are good at their work. As Kristeva says “The abject has only one quality of the object -- that of being opposed to I”(Powers of Horror 1). We find Mary always opposing the concept of being the part of conventional social being. This is basically rooted from her unhappy childhood, where she experienced poverty, fighting between her parents, bitter and stiff behavior of her mother. Moreover, She lost her mother and was sent to a boarding. But she felt much relieved and never wanted to go home in her holidays. When she lost her mother, she was much contented not to be in touch with her father and family. “This primary abjection is the ultimate secret violence at the heart of all human existence. As Kristeva writes, ‘for man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to autonomy’” (qtd. in *Against Abjection* 4). And this autonomy was foregrounded by Mary’s living style “which had no meaning in her own life at all, for she was leading the comfortable carefree existence of a single woman” (Lessing 41).

Abjection generates the borders of the individual and the social body. Thus, Mary was not interested even to have her established and independent life. “She could have become a person on her own account. But this was against her instinct” (Lessing 43). Here, Mary is mastered by her ego and her superego was driving her, challenging her towards something/somewhere that she does not recognize as a thing. Without a sign, she was driven away from her present possibility of a satisfied settled life. As Kristeva says-“Not me, Not that, But not nothing, either” (*Powers of Horror* 2). Mary didn’t have any complain or miseries of her life like her other friends have. But at the same time, she didn’t have the satisfaction or joyous feeling about her life as other women have. “She was a most rare phenomenon: a woman of thirty without love, troubles, headaches, backaches, sleeplessness or neurosis. She did not know how rare she was” (Lessing 45). She found herself as she was waiting for something more. “She did not know what she wanted. Something bigger, she would think vaguely—a different kind of life”(Lessing 47).

Everybody was talking and criticizing her unusual character. She thought that there must be something in marriage as society demands it. Though, she did not feel any kind of devotion about married /family life but to answer against her friend’s criticism she went for it. She used ‘marriage’ as an instrument to give her unusual thought a mask. As Kristeva depicts that “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition” (Lessing 10). Thus, Mary made an unusual choice to marry Dick Turner, a farmer from the countryside of South Africa who was quite opposite to her. He doesn’t like the town life, holds a suburban mentality and was in a struggling stage to establish his farm.

For Mary, Dick was just a means to get hold or cross the social border of getting married. She found Dick quite obliged, submissive to her, which gives her a feeling of doing favor to Dick. On the other hand, she was also getting the status of a married woman of the society without being an obliged wife of the conventional society. She did not think of any future vision of this marriage. She did not know the reason of choosing Dick as her man; it was nothing. She was thinking about being the mistress of her own. Mary was much indifferent to all the new sequences added in her life. First of all, the house of Dick was in a poor condition. This living condition was disappointing but she was enjoying Dick’s shyness, embarrassment on his condition. And Mary felt this poor condition of Dick “enabled her to hold her own” (Lessing 64). As Kristeva depicts, “Abjection is precondition of narcissism” (*Powers of Horror* 8). Being married, the presence of an entirely another man, her husband, in her life, her sexual interaction- all these matters did not deem to identify or specify her ‘self’. “It meant nothing to her, nothing at all. Expecting outrage and imposition, she was relieved to find she felt nothing” (Lessing 66). In the symbolic realm, this attitude of Mary can be explained as the problem “she has with phallus that her father or her husband stands for - is not such to help the future subject leave the natural mansion” (*Powers of Horror* 8).

“The abject appears in order to uphold “I” within the ‘Other’. The abject is the violence of mourning for an “object” that has always already been lost”. To Mary, her family, emotional and impractical husband Dick and farm life becomes her object. She knew before that Dick will fail to accomplish his new project, but did say nothing to him. She only kept sitting all these days

hoping deep inside to happen something miraculous to them, being disgusted more and more on the life here, hated Dick for his inexperienced ventures, enduring the unbearable weather, the only thought that gave her joy was imagining herself working busily in the town-office, which was far more uncanny or irrelevant with her present life. She was not consciously thinking ‘Who she was’? Rather she was notifying more about the place – “Where she is?”

“The abject – constantly question about solidity and impel to start afresh” (*Powers of Horror* 5). Mary took care of the farm during the sickness and again handed over everything to him and got back her previous almost resigned life. But she wanted to start afresh. To get rid of this extremely boring life, she thought about children. Not for her family, even not from any emotional maternal craving which is common to a married woman. Rather, she hated the idea of a baby. When she thought about child, she remembered her own childhood, herself clinging to her mother all the time with love and pity, and hating her father. Even the idea of childbirth gave her a filthy feeling also. “The idea of child’s lips on her breasts made her feel quite sick; at the thought of it she would involuntarily clasp her hands over her breasts, as if protecting them from a violation” (Lessing 116). Thus keeping this kind of grotesque feeling, about motherhood, she became crazy about having child only to have something. She imagined her child not as a baby to give her a company, will comfort her. In her despair, as if she wanted a child to save her from herself. This is something beyond the unconscious, “it means that there are lives not sustained by desire, as desire is always for objects” (*Powers of Horror* 4).

For this unfulfilled desire of having child, Mary lost herself even in a deeper despair. Dick tried to involve her in his farming but Mary hated it because it makes her face Dick with all his faults. So, she spent all her time sitting quiet in the house or sleeping all day, feeling tired. Even she didn’t feel hungry; it pained her to give the effort she needed to give for cooking and eating. She did everything mechanically. The house left upswept, dirty. She was unwilling to keep any servant now and only did the essentials she needs to do. She was too indifferent to fight.

In this grave despair when Mary started to be scared by her own self, she met Moses, a native house boy Dick brought not being able to bear bad food and messed up house. She felt extremely uneasy and a little afraid to deal with this boy because “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”(Lessing 174). Lessing also portrays this native black boy as a strong abject figure. He is shown as sensuous, obliged and clean. With great awkwardness and discomfort, Mary dealt him with a difference.

To Kristeva, the object of fear is, in other words, a substitute formation for the subject’s abject relation to drive. Moses deemed to be substitute formation of Mary’s abject relation to her drive. She was always aware about his presence in the house, “She used to sit quite still, watching him work. The powerful, broad-built body fascinated her” (Lessing 175). Her reaction to Moses is a mixture of pity and intrigue. She confronts the abject in Moses when she couldn’t forget his black smooth body showered by white foam. She was not being able to get out of the feeling though Mary was quiet and indifferent especially to Dick. “But as far as the native was concerned, she

was still responsive. This was the small part of her mind that was awake” (Lessing 184). Even in her fantasy, she was interacting, rebuking the boy for not doing his work properly. Soon she found herself talking by herself. She was afraid. She couldn’t understand what it is. She was “shrinking from the vision of herself talking like a mad woman in the corner of the sofa” (Lessing 184).

Gradually, Mary was being controlled by Moses little by little. And in case of abject formation Kristeva says, “through such possession causes me to be” (*Powers of Horror* 7). She was being unable to refuse Moses’ requests, his humble instructions during the everyday work dealing. She was confronting the abject in Moses while they were working together. She was afraid that Moses might leave their house. But at the same time, she was angered, loathed herself as she felt the growth of an implicit personal relationship developing between them which the laws of material world have no meaning.

She was not disturbed by Moses but the unusual humbleness, motherly care and fatherly attitude disturbed her “and through her torment she could hear his voice, firm and kind, like a father commanding her” (Lessing 187). She was confused, helpless at his behavior and about her own response. When they were communicating each other, the conventional social law regarding identity, the barrier between a white mistress and a native servant was contravened and meaning collapses, logic failed. “There was now a new relation between them; she felt helplessly in his power. Yet there was no reason why she should” (Lessing 190).

Now Mary stopped following and inspecting his work, gave him storeroom, left the care of the house to him. Bit by bit, Mary was giving herself to Moses, started to depend on him and to give her roles/part of work to him also. As when Dick fell ill again we found Moses took the part of taking care of Dick. But now Mary started to have horrible dreams at night about the native. “Twice she dreamed directly of the native, and on each occasion she woke in terror as he touched her. On each occasion in her dream he had stood over her, powerful and commanding, yet kind, but forcing her into a position where she had to touch him” (Lessing 102). She felt about Moses in between of motherly care and the repressive fatherly behavior and “therefore undergo a radical ‘dispersal’ of identity and loss of coherence” (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 141)

In this situation, the abject is foregrounded at a moment of dependence and understanding between Mary and Moses. Even in some sequences, we found Moses could read Mary and consoling her with smile and humble words. The transformation was taking a final shape when “she was fighting against something she did not understand...It was a nightmare, the powerful black man always in the house with her, so that there was no escape from his presence. She was possessed by it, and Dick was hardly there to her” (Lessing 206).

At the same time, Mary was also identified by their neighbors, Charlie Slatter, Tony Mortson-the new manager, as completely insane, someone whom they could not understand, her physical trauma, her unusual silence towards them, her horrible look and unclean dress up-everything seemed unfamiliar to them. Most importantly her relation/dealings with the native Moses

astonished them, where they found Moses more vocal than Mary. She went completely unresponsive to Dick, all the other family matters, household matters. As if she lost her language, her voice, she lost all her meaning regarding her life. Even she did not feel any excitement for the long desired holiday, Dick finally managed to have. She was only centered in Moses. It seemed she was waiting for something she has given herself to. She was living in a world which is unknown to others around her. She is strong and actively arranging events only by her own terms. Mary's transformation took the stage into the realm of fantasy. "She seemed to be sunk fathoms deep in some dream of her own. She only came to life, only noticed what she was doing, when the native came in to do some little thing in the room. Then she never took her eyes off him" (Lessing 222).

In her final transformation, we found Mary totally beyond the knowledge of the material world; it does not mean anything to her. Mary was what Kristeva describes as a "willing victim"; she shut out everything that conflicted with her actions, as she lost every ways to get out of this horrible situation of hers. She disobeyed and ignored everything that would revive the code she may have followed like other white people living a farm life. She was heading towards her pathetic nervous breakdown and crossing the borders one after one, without knowing her goal, not desiring but enjoying in it violently and painfully. Mary seems to be the horrors she confronts in this ambiguous state by her conscious mind. But still the horrors were there beyond the imaginary border between the self and "something" which is terrible to acknowledge consciously.

Moses was asked to leave by Mary as an extension to Tony's instruction but she was confused between the two states of dismissing Moses from the job and justifying her closeness to Moses. Finally when she instructs Moses to leave, she for a moment felt relieved but the next moment she collapsed by the thought that Moses will not come back again. Deep inside her, she felt she wronged Moses. "She groaned because of the strain, lifted in puzzled judgment on herself, who was at the same time the judged, knowing only that she was suffering torment beyond description." (Lessing 241) And she started to wait for Moses to come with the final horror/violence/death. She becomes a "willing victim" to get rid of this abject situation. Death would be the chief curator of her border of imaginary museum. "Mary Turner has ultimately renounced abjection instead returning to and accepting her infantile origins, just as the narrative has returned to its starting place, with the mysterious unaccountable corpse"(Ridout and Watkins 28).

Mary rejects the symbolic order in favor of the abject and emerges in relation to the mother's body. Before death, she lost her language that anticipates Mary's return to infancy, her absorption into the semiotic which started with the progressive acceptance of Moses's maternal care. Now "it" is welcoming Mary, horrifically to death. "She stood, waiting for the changing noise. It came, and with it the terror" (Lessing 239). She is what Kristeva describes as a 'willing victim', "She said aloud, 'it will be there'. And the sound of her own voice, calm, prophetic, fatal, fell on her hands to her ears like a warning" (Lessing 239). Thus, the abject no longer threatens her because she has willingly crossed the imaginary margins. Lessing's use of abjection in *The Grass is Singing* usurps the traditional patriarchal convention of the female as victim. Mary is strong, in

control, and actively orchestrating events on her own terms. “She knew it. But not yet, she said to herself, it would not be quite yet; she had the day in front of her” (*ibid*). This is underpinned by a feminist message that advocates taking control of one's life. Using abjection as a deliberate strategy counterpoints to the conventions and manipulates the structure, rules and stipulations of the genre. Thus, the abject serves to parody the binary oppositions which are a feature of the traditional female stereotyping. This adds a dimension to Lessing’s work that introduces a whole new realm of possibilities. Abjection also effectively deconstructs the reader's expectations of female representation.

Mary’s future was undecided. Moses gave the answer of that undecided question of Mary’s pathetic condition changing it as a sign of hatred, by killing her. “Hence there was not yet an ‘other’, an ob-ject: merely an ab-ject. What is to be done with this ab-ject? Allow it to drift towards the libido so as to constitute an object of desire? The question might well remain undecided, undecidable” (*Powers of Horror* 48). Here, in this novel, Lessing also keeps this question open to decide the meaning of this murder. In the novel, no clue was being found why Moses killed Mary. It might be Moses’ sympathy/love not hatred towards Mary or understanding between two abject characters. Because Moses who himself is an abject understood that abject does not have any future apart from sufferings. For this reason, probably, Mary was ‘willingly’ waiting for it to come. According to Deborah Caslav Covino “the abject woman becomes a subversive trope of female liberation: she speaks an alternative, disruptive language, immersing herself in the significances of the flesh, becoming willfully monstrous as she defies the symbolic order” (qtd. in *Against Abjection* 7).

Lessing’s attempt to portray the character of Mary as an abject shows that the possibility of radical social change is bound up with the disruption of authoritarian discourses. This subversive openness of the abject character is a powerful resistance against society’s closed symbolic order, law of father, patriarchy.

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