

## THE SANCTUARY OF FEMALE VULNERABILITY: THE DEGRADING THOUGHT PROCESS -A RUMINATION ON THE GRASS IS SINGING

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Doris Lessing in her novel The Grass is Singing has delineated the ultimate ordeal for a woman to live in a conformist society where the non-conformist thoughts get choked almost all the time blemishing the milestones of self-discovery in each and every turn. A difficult childhood with incompatible parents galvanized Mary's indifference of marriage. When she was burgeoning in her truer self some outsider force influenced her course of life. Her victimized thought got manifested and incurred sufferings all the way through her life. Her imagined emancipation through marriage became the ultimate servitude of her soul. In a state of subjugation, it is always difficult to create right choice by right thoughts and Mary is the burning example of such failure. At the end of the novel, she finally perceived a precious realization that no one could offer her sanctuary but only herself. The status "married" or "a mate" cannot evaporate life's all uncertainties, rather in the uncertainties self is discovered or destroyed. For Mary, self was destroyed as she was not indulged with any more chances after discerning the utmost truth of life. Beneath a mere veneer of colonial situation, this novel has focused on the failed journey of self-discovery.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Self, Circumstances, Degrading Thoughts, Vulnerability, Catastrophe*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Mary's self-exploration began to occur when she was sent to the boarding school. For the first time she was extremely happy much to the point that she was afraid of going home at holiday-times to her "fuddled father", her "bitter mother" and "the fly away little house" (Lessing, 1973, p. 40). An idea of "lack" surrounded her being. As she grew up, her source of happiness shifted to her workplace where she enjoyed to the fullest: "She seemed born for typing and shorthand and book keeping and the comfortable routine of office" (Lessing, 1973, p.41). Life seemed to be a well rhythmic dance to her and she was following the moves perfectly since her quarreling parents made a gateway for her to be financially and emotionally independent in a comparatively early age.

Her mother's death made her "virtually alone" (Lessing, 1973, p. 41) and after that there was no communication between father and daughter. Being self-sufficient, she also did not prone to contact as if to avenge her mother's suffering but "it had never occurred to her that her father too might have suffered" (Lessing, 1973, p.41). She and her mother somehow subconsciously ingrained the idea that suffering is attached to feminine only. Her words, "he is a man isn't he" clarifies that she 'inherited' the outlook from her mother's attitude and yearlong behavior of "arid feminism" (Lessing, 1973, p. 41).

Years went by but Mary did not feel any difference between a sixteen year and a thirty-year-old self. At the age of thirty she had “a good state education, a thoroughly comfortable life enjoying herself in a civilized way and access to all knowledge of her time” (Lessing, 1973, p.52). She almost took a non-conformist approach towards her life and started to live on her own term. She did not consider strongly enough to be the bride though “she had been bridesmaid a dozen times” (Lessing, 1973, p.45). Her parents’ unsuccessful moreover bitter marriage kept her away from the fascination of marriage, love, sex and children - the whole package. “When she thought of marriage she remembered her father coming home red eyed and fuddled, when she thought about children she saw her mother’s face at her children’s funeral-anguished but as dry and as hard as rock” (Lessing,1973, p. 46). She never longed for her own children though she adored the others’. Her antipathy towards sex was profound. Having little privacy “there were things she did not care to remember; she had taken good care to forget them years ago” (Lessing, 1973, p. 46). The reality really made her more of a grounded person than flaming the seeker in her. “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, 1973, p.45). Furthermore, she was a very good listener and listened to other people’s grievance and sufferings without offering her own. Moreover, she used to advise them and proffer “a sort of universal shoulder for the world to weep on and give back nothing of her own. The truth was she had no troubles” (Lessing, 1973, p.45). Her ostensible strength of being “immune” was basically a weakness in disguise. She was “as adaptable, as aloof and as heart-whole as ever, working as hard enjoying herself as she ever did in office, and never for one moment alone, except when she was asleep” (Lessing,1973, p.45).

Though Mary was enjoying her life to the fullest through her work and socializing, at times she felt restless, “a vague dissatisfaction” (Lessing,1973, p.46) but could not sort out what that actually was for she did not know what she wanted: “Something bigger” and “a different kind of life” (Lessing, 1973, p.47). She was bearing a sense of incompleteness in her unconscious, subconscious and sometimes in her conscious mind. That sense emerged because she was relishing her life without embracing it as if she was supposed to live it superficially. She followed a non-conformist attitude without being a non-conformist at the core. For that reason, she turned out to be too vulnerable when she overheard the saucy discussion of her friends on her look, her growing age and most importantly her status of being single. They had as if “driven knives into her heart and thrown her quite off balance” (Lessing, 1973, p.49) by the comments like “something missing somewhere” and “She’ll never set the rivers on fire” (Lessing, 1973, p. 48). She never thought that people could discuss behind her back as she was so naïve, so unconscious of herself in relation to the other people. Moreover, she “knew so little about herself” (Lessing, 1973, p.52) and did not have any specific purpose. But a grounded man “having conceived of his purpose” should mentally follow a straight pathway to its achievement “looking neither to the right nor to the left” (Allen, 1903, p. 15). As a further matter, “doubts and fear should be rigorously excluded” (Allen, 1903: 15). But, conversely, Mary “was thrown completely off her balance” (Lessing,1973: 52) out of her doubt and insecurity of self as “some gossiping women had said she ought to get married”(Lessing,1973: 52).Finally, in order to prove them wrong, she married on the spur of the moment without contemplating the pros and cons. Her own belief system was shattered by a nudge of criticism and she placed herself in the gyre of eternal uncertainty.

“The soul attracts that which it secretly harbors”; both, whatever it loves and fears; “it reaches the height of its cherished aspirations” and also “it falls to the level of its unchartered desires” (Allen, 1903, p.7). Once an idea is instilled in the subconscious, be it good or bad, it is difficult for the concerned to come out of the circle and eventually thoughts become things- a soul receives all of these by means of circumstances. So justifiably for Mary, the amalgamation of two contrastive thought patterns in her subconscious –‘the fear of marriage’ and ‘a longing for closeness’ brought in front of

her a mess. She manifested her husband who was very much in sync with her ambiguous conviction.

Joseph Allen in his book *As a Man Thinketh*, in the chapter “Thought and Character” duly said:

“Man is made or unmade by himself; in the armory of thought he forges the weapons by which he destroys himself; he also fashions the tools with which he builds for himself heavenly mansions of joy and strength and peace (1903, p.5).”

As blessedness is measured by the “right thought” not by the “material possessions” in the same way wretchedness is also measured by “wrong thought” not by the “lack of material possessions” (Allen, 1903, p.9). Human mind is a powerful thing. But we pass almost all our life without understanding its excellence. For this reason, while encountering a bad situation all the concerning thoughts get submerged with negativity and in this way we just make the situation worse. After an impulsive marriage, gradually all the telltale incompatibilities between the husband and wife started to transpire. The very first conflict was about the habitation itself. “She loved the town, felt safe there” but “associated the country with her childhood” where “they were all surrounded by miles and miles of nothingness” (Lessing, 1973, p.53). But Dick Turner detested the town.

Besides, another aspect started to develop out of their marriage erratically- the transparent unintelligibility. Women’s perception of marriage is slightly different from most of the man of the society. For women it is a medium to find conjugal love- soul’s one of the basic needs, the scope of being more feminine and a way of finding freedom within the heavenly knot. But the dissonance Mary felt with her husband kept her perplexed and she consciously tried to find out something to keep the balance. Something that would save their marriage, save her own self, save her feminine desires. For the good reason she wanted to support her husband, to awaken him to the point of self-discovery, to help him fight back his bad luck, to show him the way of prosperity and enlightenment. She wanted so badly Dick Turner to find himself so that he can love himself and love Mary back which is the ultimate motto and goal of marriage where a woman just like a man is supposed to be celebrated in terms of emotion, desire and sexuality. This very institution is supposed to let women exercise the right of love and practice a fuller and freer expression of desire as the women’s struggle is for “both bread and roses” (Huq,1994, p. 20). However, Mary gradually found her husband parochial and mentally stubborn as well as fragile. But “she needed a man stronger than herself” and because of that “she was trying to create one out of Dick” (Lessing, 1973, p.156). She tried to strengthen her husband pouring her soul’s all strength in him through her thoughts. But, her types of thoughts lacked perseverance and kept changing negatively and therefore those negative thoughts moulded the victim out of herself. Human soul’s purpose is to save itself in the first hand, though in the rudimentary stage each and every soul is weak. But the certitude is:

“The weakest soul, knowing its own weakness and believing this truth –the strength can only be developed by effort and practice, will at once begin to exert itself, and adding effort to effort, patience to patience and strength to strength will never cease to develop and at last grow divinely strong (Allen, 1903, p.15).”

Power of influence can be transmuted when the person, who is giving, is powerful. A socially, mentally, intellectually and moreover spiritually drained person can never buttress another weak person and failure is inevitable if one deceptively tries it. As time went on, Mary’s complementary idea of “husband” and “strength” was also started to shatter. When she continuously found her husband economically, personally and spiritually weak and goal-less in comparison to herself, the hatred for her husband turned in on herself as she tied to a failure. This hatred could have changed only “if he had genuinely, simply, because of the greater strength of his purpose, taken ascendancy over her” (Lessing, 1973, p.156).

But, the fact is:

“Not what he wishes and prays for does a man get, but what he justly earns. His wishes and prayers are only gratified and answered when they harmonize with his thoughts and actions (Allen, 1903, p.8).”

Mary's all insecurities, intolerance and dissatisfaction kept manifesting through her husband Dick's irresponsibility, lack of ambition and unmanliness. In that unbearable situation without rationalizing the consequence she continued to exude even more hatred for Dick Turner. The word “hatred” itself bears a very negative vibration. So, when all the negativity in the guise of hatred was being sent out in the universe as an unremitting form of energy, she was getting much more in return what was being sent out on her end. By that process her dream situation – being free, being loved, and being prosperous- –simply seemed unreachable.

One more crisis was emerging from the conjugal life of Dick and Mary Turner. The dissonance of desires regarding having children. The females are meant to bring new life. For this reason, ‘the female body’ holds a predominantly important place in the search for female identity. So, when Mary could not establish a standard and stronger identity as a wife, she focused on ratifying her identity as a mother and therefore she wanted a piece of herself in front of her as a validation of her life. But Dick never tried to understand Mary's urge. He did not even decipher ‘the female body function’ imposed a flow of anxiety on Mary as she knew for sure that after a certain period of time that she would not be able to be a mother. Moreover, there was a psychological incentive too! : “She imagined her own child, a small daughter, comforting her as she had comforted her mother” (Lessing, 1973, p.166). She wanted to be a mother to find an escape from the suffocating environment whereas Dick, being circumspect, continuously refused it due to his poverty. All these crises haunted her like a madman till the end of her life. After marriage she constantly struggled to find her older self - a confident, happy, satisfied one with the celebrated emancipation what she never found.

When she was criticised for not being married, unwittingly deep down inside she sensed that getting married, following the way of the world, would be liberating for her. But unfortunately, her impetuous marriage brought her to the ultimate catastrophe. Nevertheless, the problem lied somewhere deep within. The problem was she was trying hard to change the outer world without focusing much at her inner world. If, she only focused on her inner self she could have experienced a totally different life. Henry Thomas Hamblin in his book *The Power of Thought* said:

“First of all, we have to realize that thought is the cause of our actions and decisions. It is largely because of this that our circumstances depend upon our thoughts. If for instances, we do not overcome life's difficulties in our thoughts, then we can never overcome them in actual experience. By this I mean that our difficulties must be boldly met and conquered in thought, if ever we are hope to overcome them actually. (2008, p.18)”

At one point of her life when Mary wanted to start her life anew like before; her thought definitely arranged the opportunity for her to move in due course. Befittingly, one day in the gloomy and alienating farm, she noticed an advertisement in newspaper; her old firm advertised for a shorthand typist. A whisper from the universe! That was a ‘trigger’ for Mary to give life a re-thought. After reaching there she found the advertised position had been filled up already. That made her outraged because she came back with a sense of belongingness as she was returning to her “home”. But, when she was asked whether she is ill extrapolated from her appearance “skin became dried and brown”, “a faded cotton frock”, “hair was not very smart” (Lessing, 1973, p.123), she felt a burst anger with all her disgust, uncomfotability, in-betweenness and cried a river in her mind as the concerned person in the office did not understand her condition in farm, which was the least she expected. She was shocked and enraged at the same time for not being

empathized. Though she was yearning to have her life changed, deep down inside her subconscious she was pretty convinced that she would not be able to come out of that life sucking situation. She wanted to ascend from the inflicting situation but in her psyche the sybaritic fancy was engulfed by her predominant fear of confinement in the dampened area. Life certainly cannot be experienced through detachment rather it is the very depiction of human mind's inside out. James Allen in his book *As a Man Thinketh* in the chapter "Effect of Thought on Circumstances" said:

"A man does not come to the almshouse or the jail by the tyranny of fate or circumstances, but by the pathway of groveling thoughts and base desires. Nor does a pure minded man fall suddenly into crime by stress of any mere external force, the criminal thought had long been secretly fostered in the heart, and the hour of opportunity revealed its gathered power (1903, p.8)."

He also mentioned in the chapter "Thought and Character":

"Man is always the master, even in his weakest and most abandoned state; but in his weakness and degradation he is the foolish master who misgoverns his household. When he begins to reflect upon his condition, and to search diligently for the Law upon which his being is established, he then becomes the wise master, directing his energies with intelligence, and fashioning his thoughts to fruitful issues (1903, p.5)."

Mary too was searching her way which apparently seemed diligent but was basically slackened. Moreover, perseverance alone cannot achieve anything. It always has to be paired with consistency. The decision Mary took to leave the farm and start on her own again might have saved her from the fatal death. But the step she took after Dick reached to bring her back to the eternal hell was wrapped by "indecision" what Napoleon Hills labeled as "without definiteness of purpose" (1937, p. 188). Since anyone who wants success not only needs to specify the purpose but also:

"He should make this purpose his supreme duty, and should devote himself to its attainment, not allowing his thoughts to wander away into ephemeral fancies, longings and imaginings. This is the royal road to self-control and true concentration of thought. (Allen, 1903, p.15)"

But Mary went back to the farm with her husband as she did not have the courage to create what she expected out of life while the idea itself demands "sometimes very great courage" (Hill,1937, p.152) and for that a muscle of indifferent attitude towards criticism, socially established norm should be built. A great deal of personal work should be done in each and every level possible-physical, mental, economical and spiritual. Mary mastered only the third one before her marriage that she also choked with her own hands through the hasty marriage along with ignoring all other aspects of individual growth. James Allen admittedly said:

"Men are anxious to improve their circumstances but unwilling to improve themselves; they therefore remain bound. The man who does not shrink from self-crucifixion can never fail to accomplish the object upon which his heart is set (1903, p.8)."

He also suggested how this attitude should be exercised to make it a part of integral being:

"Those who are not prepared for the apprehension of a great purpose should fix their thoughts upon the faultless performance of their duty, no matter how insignificant the task may appear. Only in this way can the thoughts be gathered and focused and resolution and energy be developed, which being done, there is nothing which may not be accomplished (Allen, 1903, p.15)."

But Mary without meeting her life desire boldly let her feel trapped by her own fragility. She was so aloof, so unattached, so in dissonance that “she slept hours every day” nothing but to “hasten time” towards what she did not even know (Lessing, 1973, p. 158).

Unfortunately, Mary could not properly grasp the phenomenon of envisioning beyond reality. Therefore, her dichotomous thoughts- the urge for being loved and fear of living in never ending imprisonment- attracted a dichotomous situation through Moses; a slave who showed her what caring is all about and how does it feel to be cared for. Such kind of love each and every woman craves for. His muscles hit her subconscious psyche where the idea of strength was implanted. She was fascinated. For the first time in her life she was sexually aroused and hypnotized as “desire does not disappear because of denial” (Huq, 1994, p.19). Her suppressed desire started to burgeon. She started to “fly into dream land” where the “preposterous invisibilization of women” glared into her consciousness (Huq, 1994, p. 21). But societal dominance and regulation did not allow her to feel liberated through this relationship.

None understood Mary’s surreal nature of plight. Being qualified, she could not save her from the struggle of bread and roses, let alone winning it. So, it is quite clear that being qualified is not the only prerequisite to have a sound life. Rather, it is also the capability to shrug off everything that defies one’s philosophy of life; the ultimate challenge that almost all societies on this planet earth throw to the divine feminine irrespective of their cast, creed, age, status and stature. The independence and preference of feminine value is not celebrated. This pattern is so highly inculcated in the mind of people that the male and paradoxically, in some cases, the females cannot celebrate their own independence, buoyancy and iconoclasm. Through their parochial outlook and thought they turn their good qualities into the curse of their life. But to be subversive against this vice one should not be affected by the negative thought even if the surrounding is the fertile ground for its cultivation. One must “rise to the upper chambers of mental dwelling” and “key up to a strong pitch, away above the vibrations on the lower planes of thought” (Atkinson, 2015, p. 15). Consequently, one will be “immune to negative vibration” and “will be in touch with the great body of strong positive thought” emerging from one’s “own plane of development” (Atkinson,2015, p.15).

As nothing is in our control but our thoughts, so we sincerely and assuredly should put focus on that. Taking charge of life is a sheer necessity that we need to understand and act upon but again somewhere deep down inside we have a tendency to handle it in a frivolous manner as the most of the people believe that we cannot control our thoughts. However, the fact is we give birth to thoughts and nurture them. Every concerned individual should nurture thoughts with nourishments otherwise the thoughts will suffer from malnutrition and it will have a direct impact on the quality of life. This incentive care of thought is not only for the bigger decision for life but also for day to day practice. It is for how to react when something is not in sync with one’s desired reality. Thought is power and sheer thought has the capability to change the world outside. A refined feeling through thought is always essential to hold the control of a situation and this was what exactly Mary required. She could not control the situation since she never accepted herself in her thought. So, all the other people whom Mary came to pass in the lifetime also reflected her idea of self. Even Moses being a servant started to crush Mary mentally and emotionally. This sheer catastrophe merely happened for her self-fulfilling prophecy. James Allen factually said:

“Man is buffeted by circumstances so long as he believes himself to be the creature of outside conditions, but when he realizes that he is a creative power and that he may command the hidden soil and seeds of his being out of which circumstances grow, he then becomes the rightful master of himself (1903, p.7).”

He also stated:

“Circumstance does not make the man; it reveals him to himself. No such conditions can exist as descending into vice and its attendant sufferings apart from vicious inclinations or ascending into virtue and its pure happiness without the continued cultivation of various aspirations (1903, p.8).”

Mary desired freedom but it was not her aspiration as she was never free in her thought. By the law of universe “men do not attract that which they want but which they are. Their whims, fancies and ambitions are thwarted at every step but their inmost thoughts and desires are fed with their own food, be it foul or clean” (Allen,1903, p. 8).The foul thought immersed in Mary’s spirit to such an extent that her vulnerable self could not stand erect. Finally, she started to be dependent on Tony Marston, a handsome young man, who came in the farm to be trained in the farm work. In different phases of her life she always thought of someone (Dick Turner, Moses and later on Tony Marston) to rescue her without ‘being’ her true and most needed rescuer. At last, when she was planning to escape from the farm with Tony, a stream of introspection thumped at her psyche and “the young man would save her” (Lessing, 1973, p. 246) turned to “he could not save her” (Lessing, 1973, p. 248). She could relate the futility of this thought while taking a walk down memory lane:

“Yes: long, long ago, she had turned towards another young man, a young man from a farm, when she was in trouble and had not known what to do. It had seemed to her that she would be saved from herself by marrying him. And then, she had felt this emptiness when at last she had known there was to be no release and that she would live on the farm till she died. There was nothing new even in her death; all this was familiar, even her feeling of helplessness (Lessing, 1973, p. 248).”

Mary’s “faint aloofness” was all the way through her life, not only before her marriage. She always looked at her life from a distance and life also rejected to embrace her passionately. But “man can find every truth connected with his being if he will dig deep into the mine of his soul; and that he is the maker of his character, the molder of his life and the builder of his destiny” (Allen,1903, pp. 5-6). As she did not find enough courage to dive deep into her soul and confront her soul’s utmost desire, suffering was her companion: “Suffering is always the effect of wrong thought in some direction. It is an indication that the individual is out of harmony with himself, with the law of his being” (Allen, 1903, p.9). At the end of the novel finally she reflected on her own action: “I should have left long ago. I don’t know why I didn’t. I don’t know why I came” (Lessing, 1973, p. 232) - the ultimate confession of a tumultuous mind lost in translation.

Mary’s chaotic thoughts cut down all the thread to such a degree that it was worthless to look for a fine texture of life. Totally vanquished by life Mary waited for death to be her rescuer. At the end of the novel it is mentioned that “a woman without will, sitting on an old ruined sofa that smelled of dirt, waiting for the night to come that would finish her” (Lessing,1973, p. 241). She nurtured her negative thoughts so well that she justly knew of her death. If only she had developed sense about her success with the same intensity and believed of leading a happy married life with the same certainty and confidence, her reality could have been far better because: “Strong expectancy is a powerful magnet. He of the strong, confident desire attracts to him the things best calculated to aid him-persons, things, circumstances, surroundings; if he desires them hopefully, trustfully, confidently, calmly” (Atkinson,2015, p. 32). But time and again she intercepted her desired life by her blurring and degrading thoughts and therefore created a sanctuary of vulnerability throughout her life.

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