

The Outcasts in *The Grass Is Singing*

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The Grass Is Singing written by a British writer Doris Lessing, there are two main characters—Mary Turner and Dick Turner. They are white immigrants in South Africa and they fail to fit in both the white community and the local community. The difficulty in entering the community causes their identity crisis and leads to their tragedy. The reason why they are rejected by the community can be divided into two parts: the inner factor and outer factor.

Keywords: outcast, *Doris Lessing*, community

Introduction

The Grass Is Singing written by a British writer Doris Lessing, from the very beginning, *The Grass Is Singing* confronts the reader with two important characters—Mary Turner and Dick Turner. They are white immigrants in South Africa, but they are the outsiders of the white community. Dick runs a farm and the condition of his farm is terrible and Mary once works in the city, because of marriage, she moves to live with Dick in the countryside. They live in a vacuum, trapped in a situation where they belong neither to white community nor to black community. According to the definition of society, the society refers to a group of individuals involved in persistent social interaction or, a large social group sharing the same spatial or social territory, typically subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations. So, the society has a relative stable structure and the individuals in the community who maintain the same features will reject the individuals with different features. White community in South Africa and the reason why Mary and Dick are rejected by the white community comes from their differences.

Outer Factor

Economic Condition

Firstly, their economic condition is under the average of the other white immigrants. In southern Africa, there are not only ethnic differences, but also economic disparities. In addition to poverty of the local people, there is also an economic gap among the white people. At the beginning of the novel, a lot of ink has spread to describe the house of Dick and Mary. “That little box of a house—it was forgivable as a temporary dwelling, but not to live in permanently. Why some natives had houses as good; and it would give them a bad impression to see white people living in such a way” (Lessing, 1950, p. 10). The house that Dick live embarrasses the white people, his house is rather like a shelter, other white people’s house will not like this way. And house is an important image to express one’s social status and conveys the message of one’s cultural background. Obviously, due to the

poverty, Dick cannot maintain the living standard of white people. The common white people, they build neat houses, fence gardens beside their houses and fill them with English flowers. They even have a guidebook to instruct them to decorate their houses, actually, the colonists intend to distinguish themselves from the natives. Dick's house is not English style and looks like the shelter. The house even doesn't have a decent roof. In summer, it is hot under the iron-roof house and in the winter, the chill wind can escape in their houses. The living condition is very terrible just like the natives. His house is a shame to white community, inside his house, the curtains, the shape of clothes and chairs they use are in native styles. The house they live and the decoration they use are not like the white people's stuff.

And there is also a consensus in the white community that the poor whites were Afrikaners, never British. Additionally, the purpose that Dick come to Africa is not like the other white people. So, Dick and Mary, they are not considered as English people by the counterparts in the England. Dick, like Charlie, was also a white man. He was also driven to Africa by advanced navigation technology and map drawing and he wanted to achieve something in the South Africa. However, he did not fully practice the ideological strategy provided by the ruling class. First of all, Dick came to Africa out of his love for the land. He even thought that Africa was his own "country". He hated bankers, financiers, business tycoons and employees. But the purpose of their colonial expansion was to provide more goods for the domestic market and earn more profits. The tobacco industry is the most profitable, but Dick thinks that tobacco is "an evil crop. Growing tobacco is not running a farm at all. It's like running a factory" (Lessing, 1950, p. 67). Dick's thinking is far away from social norms. In his opinion, it's shameful to only take from the land. He creates a diverse environment in his farmland and grows many trees to protect his land. Mr. Slatter's farm had hardly any trees on it, and all the other white people do not plant trees in their farmlands either. Dick's farmland is different, he plants a lot of trees around his farmland. He cherishes the land and don't want only to take from the land. Dick's behavior, just like the local people, destroyed the legalization of colonialism, and the fate of waiting was to be abandoned by the mainstream society.

Race Discrimination

Mary and Dick as white people, they cannot blend in the black society either. Though they are inferior to the white community, they still look down upon the black people. Mary was born in South Africa, she was educated to stay away from the natives. In the novel, Mary use a lot of insulting words to call the natives. They used to open the store to sell natives' daily use, Mary cannot provide proper service to the natives. In order to supervise and control the black employees on the farm without showing any merciless, Mary incarnates as a clod supervisor, constantly scanning every move of black employees. In her eyes, black people are always lazy, ignorant and cheeky. Mary has a deep-rooted idea of racial discrimination. Mary, like other white people, treats black people cruelly. She thought they were rude. When her servant Moses wants to drink a mouthful of water, she lashes him with her whip. Even if Mary, a disadvantaged woman, is also cheered up by the white-supremacy value, and the white community has the support of police, courts and prisons, which strengthen the supremacy of this culture. The education she received and white community's doctrine made her must be rude to the natives. And Mary's identity reconstruction failed. Mary has been living and working in the city since she was 16 years old. She has realized her economic independence and has her own social mode. In a city full of strangers, she can keep a certain distance in her communication with others. However, Mary's living space after marriage changed from

the city to the countryside. She did not adapt to the rural lifestyle. At the beginning, Mary still wore town clothes and painted her nails red. Her dressing and life style are very different from the countryside. But when she married Dick, her living standard lowered, her poor life made her seldom attend parties, alienated from other white people, and did not integrate well into the white community. And then, she has some affairs with the black man called Moses. And their relationships are forbidden at that time, Mary knows that if the secrets are found out, it would be a shame. So, they are in a dilemma that they cannot be accepted by both communities.

Inner Factor

Personality

Secondly, the personality of Dick and Mary isolates them from the white society. "The esprit de corps which is the first rule of South African society, but which the Turners themselves ignored. They apparently did not recognize the need for esprit de corps; that, really, was why they were hated" (Lessing, 1950, p. 10). Dick and Mary don't cherish the values of the white community, Mary comes from the city and was an office lady before, she doesn't share many common things with other housewives in the farmlands. And what's more, Mary never attend the gatherings and parties of the farmland. People in the farmland know little about Turners. As for Dick's personality, he lacks the absoluteness of Charlie Slatter, who recklessly rapes the land, bullies his "niggers". Dick's inferiority, sensitivity, cowardice and indecision led to his poor farm management. Because of his bad luck, the farmers called him "Jonah" and borrowed a lot of money from the bank. His life became native-like. He can only afford the living standard of black people. In addition, in Dick's countryside, due to the shortage of labor, the racial advantage of white people was gradually replaced by that of black people. Dick had to give up his dignity as a white man and compromise with black people. Dick can not only speak vernacular, but also show a similar manner with black people. "he seemed to be growing into a native himself, she thought uneasily. He would blow his nose on his fingers into a bush, the way they did; he seemed, standing beside them, to be one of them; even his color was not so different" (Lessing, 1950, p. 113). And language is a tool to communicate but also a way to distinguish the different social groups, Dick not only behaves like the natives, he can also speak the native language. In the white community, white people only speak English and they hates black people speaking English. But Dick as a white man can speak native language and talk jokes with the natives, which cannot be accepted by the mainstream values. Dick is gradually drifting away from the white society.

Identity Construction

Furthermore, Identity is the social and cultural belonging of an individual. Generally speaking, when individuals are recognized by their society, their identity can be constructed. If they fail, identity anxiety will follow. Dick cannot accept his role as the colonies, so he is treated as the betrayer of the white society. He doesn't care the rules settled by the white colonies, so he runs his farm according to his own will. However, Charlie represents the colony spirit, he wants to "buy up that fool Dick Turner's farm when he went bankrupt" (Lessing, 1950, p. 81). So, the market in South Africa is competitive, the owner of big farms wants to enlarge their territory by purchasing other small farms. Dick doesn't know the real situation in South Africa, he operates his farm in such a way that he can't make a profit. He miscalculates the situation in Africa and plays the wrong role in colony. And his wife Mary also takes part in a wrong role as a housewife. Unlike the other housewives, Mary even goes to the farm to work when Dick is sick and Mary provides a lot of new ideas to Dick. She is a woman with many

ideas and with high self-esteem. Traditional housewives, just like Mrs. Slatter, they will just take responsibility to the house stuff, they will not consider the business things. The housewives in the farmland must be kind and ready to attend the gatherings and parties to maintain the relationships with the neighbors. However, Mary is strong self-esteem, she refuses the invitation of Mrs. Slatter to attend the evening party. “She, however, refuses to go. She wrote a formal note of thanks, saying she regretted, etc” (Lessing, 1950, p. 66). But Mary’s letter isn’t suitable in the countryside. “This kind of formality did not fit in with the easy manners of the district” (Lessing, 1950, p. 29). She still uses the manners of city and applies this kind of manner in the countryside, which is not appropriate. The other housewives think she is arrogant and they don’t know much about her. Thus, the Turners failed to construct their identities in the white community.

Conclusion

In short, outcasts are those who are included in social relations, but have exclusion to social moral standards, and even dissociate from various social value categories. Contradiction is the common feature of the outcasts, who are not accepted by different cultural societies. Outcast cannot be accepted by the mainstream culture. The identity crisis of “white supremacy” of the poor white people not only comes from the wake of black people in South Africa, but also from the different class gap between the rich and the poor in the white society. Mary and Dick are actually the epitome of poor white outcasts in the South Africa. White immigrants want to settle down and integrate in the white community, they have to obey the rules and principles shared by the whole group. Humans are social animals, they cannot isolate from the cultural groups. So, nowadays, the novel *The Grass Is Singing* has strong practical significance, some organizations and government need to pay attention to the mental health of people from different background.

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