

The Female Dilemma in *The Grass Is Singing*

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Doris Lessing, a British female writer, published her first work, *The Grass is Singing* in 1950, which has attracted the attention of literary critics since its publication. From the perspectives of postcolonialism, ecology and ecofeminism, the critics interpret the racial oppression and conflicts in the African colonies and the tragic story of Mary, which is the heroine under the influence of racial discrimination. From the perspective of feminist criticism theory, this paper mainly discusses the survival and spiritual dilemma faced by Mary, the heroine who is oppressed and bound in the patriarchal society, the reasons behind Mary's dilemma, and Mary's behavior and measures when facing the dilemma. It reveals the survival status of women in patriarchal society, which is the author's criticism and irony of the patriarchal society. It is of positive significance for the development of feminist literature to cry out about women's miserable situation.

Keywords: *The Grass is Singing*, feminism, women's dilemma, patriarchal society, racial discrimination

Introduction

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) is known as the greatest female writer after Virginia Woolf. She has won many world-class literary awards and the Nobel Prize for literature in 2007. Her works cover a wide range of topics, including feminism, colonialism, apartheid and other social and political hot issues. Her works have been translated into many languages, which has had a far-reaching impact in the world. Since the publication of *The Grass is Singing* in 1950, it has aroused wide attention of scholars. Based on the racial conflicts and oppression in the African colonies, this novel describes a tragedy in the southern grassland of South Africa under the control of the British colonial rulers in the 1930s: Mary, a white woman living in South Africa since her childhood, had a poor family. Under the influence of her parents, she had a fear of men and marriage. As an adult, she led a comfortable white-collar single life and was forced by social pressure. Later, Mary married the white farmer Dick Turner in a hurry. However, the unfortunate marriage made Mary lose herself and fell into the dilemma of survival and spirit. When her relationship with Moses, a black manservant, was discovered by Tony, a young white man, Mary, who was poisoned by racial discrimination, abandoned Moses. In the end, Moses killed Mary in revenge.

Women's Dilemma in Patriarchal Society

In the novel *The Grass is Singing*, Lessing describes a typical patriarchal society. The background of the novel is being set in the 1930s. At that time, South Africa was under the colonial rule of the white colonists. It

was a colony where the colonists seized wealth and made huge profits, while the indigenous blacks were the objects of colonization and oppression. Men are dominant in both economic and social status, and women have to depend on men. Mary spent her childhood in poverty. Her father's income was meager, and he drank all day. Her mother complained all day, but there was nothing she could do. Under the influence of her family, Mary is afraid of men and marriage. Thus when Mary became an adult, she found a job as a writer in a company in the city, and started her own stable life. It can be said that Mary got rid of the shackles brought by her family and became an economically independent woman, living a free and carefree life. However, in the context of patriarchal society, she still can not get rid of the fate of women being oppressed and bound.

In the patriarchal society and cultural environment, it is natural that women should get married at a certain age. As she grew older, Mary occasionally felt uneasy, but her parents' bad marriage relationship made her subconsciously ignore and avoid marriage. Once at the home of a married friend, Mary overheard them talking about herself behind her back. Their words hurt Mary's heart. She was no longer content to enjoy her life as before. As a result, Mary's self-confidence was shattered under the social background and the pressure of public opinion. The growing age, the pressure of public opinion, and people's sarcastic words finally broke Mary's beautiful fantasy of life, forced her to face the cold reality that she had been escaping from, and made her fall into the dilemma of survival.

Lost her sense of superiority, Mary, in trouble, met white farmer Dick Turner. Eager for nature, Mary, forced by public opinion and pressure, finally accepted Dick's proposal and fantasized about starting a new life. But marriage does not bring her happiness as Mary imagined. Although in the beginning, Mary tried to decorate the square cottage where she and Dick lived, trying to add fun to life. But her husband, who is dedicated to farm work, goes out early and comes back late every day, and does not spend too much energy on household chores. Although due to her father's reasons, Mary unconsciously despises men, subconsciously, she habitually adheres to men's authority, hoping to overcome the difficulties in life with the help of men's power. Dick is the man Mary found to get rid of the social pressure. But the marriage with Dick did not help Mary out of her predicament and even put her in a mental predicament. After marriage, Mary stayed in the stuffy little house every day. She asked her husband Dick if he could install a ceiling on the house, but Dick refused her because it cost a lot of money, and they did not have such a sum of money at present. Thus Mary could only endure the hot and dry weather. Dick not only refused to let Mary install the ceiling, which was very important to her but even deprived her of the right to become a mother as a woman. Although Dick understood that their marriage needed children to maintain, which made the relationship between him and Mary become closer again, they could not afford children in terms of their financial situation.

During this period, the black male servant Moses broke into Mary's life. His strong body and calm character all attracted Mary. Getting along with Moses not only made Mary feel wonderful and happy, but also made her uneasy. Mary always had subconscious discrimination against Moses, but she could not control her feelings towards Moses. Finally, after Tony, a young white man, broke the relationship between them, Mary immediately abandoned Moses and chose to take Tony's side. After getting rid of the social pressure and other factors, Mary fell into the spiritual dilemma. Although she was eager to get rid of her relationship with Moses, she did not expect that all these things would be in his eyes. As a male, Moses thought that his dignity had been

violated, and finally raised the sickle of revenge to Mary. In a sense, Mary got rid of the predicament completely, but ended her life in such a tragic way.

The Causes of Women's Dilemma

Simone de Beauvoir, the pioneer of feminism, believes that "Women are not born, but rather gradually formed. No fate can determine the social image of human female in physiology, psychology or economy" (Beauvoir, 1998, p. 309). Indeed, in the process of the development of human history, the patriarchal society and culture of men as the main body constantly oppressed women, making them in a situation of oppression, bondage and domination for a long time. This male-dominated patriarchal cultural standard is not only mandatory, forcing women to be subordinate to men, subject to patriarchal power and can not have their own independent lives, but it also has a subtle impact on women's thinking. It makes women who have been under the influence of patriarchy culture internalize this kind of compulsory standard into their own value orientation and hinders them from pursuing freedom and liberation.

In the novel, under the background of patriarchal society, the discrimination against women is obvious. Within the rulers, there is gender discrimination against white men and women, and racial discrimination also exists between white women and black men. Firstly, within the white colonists, women were dependent on men in both social and economic status. After marriage, Mary had no source of income, she could only rely on her husband and become a housewife. This made Mary become Dick's vassal in social status and economic ability, and lost her independence. Except for the identity of Dick's wife and the tin roofed hut, she has no other identity and shelter in this society.

Secondly, among black men and white women, women are still in a restricted position. The novel described that Dick Turner could only lie in bed all day after his illness. Mary has to take the place of her husband and urged the workers to work on the farm. The unreasonable attitude not only reflects natives' dissatisfaction with the white rulers, but also reflects their contempt and disdain for women. Later, Moses, a black slave, went to Mary's house to work as a servant. Facing Mary, he was aggressive and threatening. He even dared to stare at Mary with his eyes. He did not have the fear of the white rulers. Mary was not only afraid of Moses, but also attracted by his masculinity. She gradually fell into the entanglement of reason and emotion, and finally fell into the spiritual dilemma. After the white youth named Tony found out her relationship with Moses, Mary chose to stand on Tony's side because of her white race identity and abandoned Moses. As a male, Moses was insulted by Mary. His strong desire to maintain self-esteem and anger in his heart drove him to revenge on Mary. Eventually Mary died by the sword of Moses. In the patriarchal society, the tragedy of Mary's life is inevitable, and eventually she becomes the victim of racial struggle and contradiction.

Conclusion

In *The Grass is Singing*, Lessing presents the tragic life of Mary, the heroine in the patriarchal society. From here, readers can deeply understand the oppression and bondage of patriarchal culture on women. In the shadow of her childhood, Mary, who struggled to break free, successfully became an independent woman. However, because of the comments from her friends, people's criticism, and social pressure, she got into trouble. To get rid of the dilemma, she had to give in and marry Dick Turner. But the unfortunate marriage

once again pulled her into the abyss. The description of a woman's dilemma in the novel reflects the situation where women have had to survive in the cracks and are constantly suppressed and persecuted in the patriarchal society and the racial struggle and irreconcilable class contradictions. At the same time, it is also the author's cry about women's injustice. In real life, Lessing dares to challenge the difficulties she faces, break the unfortunate marriage, pursue the freedom of love, actively participate in social activities, and show the dazzling brilliance of women. Her works have positive significance for the development of feminist literature, and are worthy of more exploration.

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