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An Existential Study of the Select Novel of Doris Lessing's 'The Grass is Singing'

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores philosophy of existentialism in the selected novel of Doris Lessing. All her novels have a positive impact on the mind of its readers to uplift mankind and its living conditions. In her novels all characters but specially the protagonists face self-alienation and quest for their self-identity. Existentialism is a philosophy that has always insisted that philosophy should directly deal with the real world situations and topics that can be for example death, birth, sex and crime. This kind of philosophy came into existence very broadly during 20th century. It lays focus on the existence and the ways humans find existing themselves. The goal of existentialistic philosophy is finding inner self, its free will. Doris Lessing - the Nobel Laureate of 2007 through her novels has always portrayed the harsh reality of her times. Existentialist philosophy has a great hold on the world of literature throughout the world. Doris Lessing had explored this philosophy in a very exhaustive manner to bring out the alienation and isolation of her characters. Her characters are ordinary men and women, who face the stresses and anxieties by the trials and tribulations, identity crisis, meaninglessness, confusion and chaos of traditions etc. are some of the basic tenets that existentialistic philosophy propagates and are quite visible in the lives of the characters of the Doris Lessing's novels and form the main focus of this research article. Her fiction is remarkable for portraying the stark reality. The themes of subjugation, alienation, search for identity and realisation of self, economic inequality and first and foremost the unhealthy relation between men and women have been the chief causes for the oppression of women. All these aspects are immensely in abundance in Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing*, where its protagonist Mary Turner fall the victim of such injustice. This research work explores the psychological agony faced by the characters and how the anxieties actually bring about self-development. It also highlights that human emotions, relationships and situations are the essence of human existence. Lessing's fiction has a positive impact on her readers and grows

psychologically strong; the characters have the capacity to wrestle with the existential concerns and uplift humanity and improve their conditions.

Keywords: Existentialism, alienation, isolation, meaninglessness, anxiety.

1. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this research are;

- (i) To highlight that all human relations, emotions and situations are because of human existence.
- (ii) To explore the agony and then leading to the self-development of characters in the novel.
- (iii) To establish existentialistic philosophy as a literary theory.

2. INTRODUCTION

This research article makes a critical analysis of *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing. The novel is widely acknowledged one of the best novels of Doris Lessing. Since from the dawn of civilization human mind remained engaged in finding the reality behind the chaos in life, meaninglessness and the reality behind man's existence. All this has filled life with confusion and frustration and finally came the birth of Existentialism or existentialistic philosophy particularly in Europe. This philosophy is concerned particularly to the condition of men, their state of living, his freedom, his decision in life, and finally the challenges that he faces throughout his life. The main tenet of existentialistic philosophy is the search for meaning in the life and can only achieved by exhalation of their inner self. Jacob in his book *In Search of Authenticity: Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus* (1995) states that:

When people are confused as to their self-identity, a serious quest for genuine self can begin. When one is painfully conscious of the danger of abandoning one's self, a cry for authenticity is heard. Indeed, given the negative sense of the notion of authenticity, discussed above, and commonsense psychology, one might dare to put forward the following rule . . . Only such a person will recognize the vital significance of authentic identity and strive to make it an operative value in his life. We set about looking for ourselves when we feel we are actually experiencing the disintegration of ourselves and our own identity. The role of these existential predicaments explains the tendency of the philosophers of authenticity to engage in self-questioning and self-analysis; to probe the innermost layers of their selves and their turbulent lives. Continuous self-examination helps one to see that, to use Sartre's words, one is not what one is, and one is what one is not (Jacob 21).

This quest for understanding the meaning of life begins with any unpleasant incident that develops a sense of meaninglessness, alienation and frustration in the life. This approach of existentialistic philosophy is very clearly seen in the select novel of Doris Lessing *The Grass is Singing*, where her characters face these desires for the betterment of their lives. They struggle for their freedom and pursuit for a meaningful existence. These characters for this quest go against their society and become the victims of isolation, alienation and death. The protagonist of the novel *The Grass is Singing*, Mary Turner is one such an example, "Mary Turner, wife of Richard Turner, a farmer at Ngesi, was found murdered on the front verandah of their homestead yesterday morning." (Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 9). The main motto of existential philosophy is that

'existence proceeds essence'. Every human being in this world is in pain, contempt, frustration, alienation and sickness. He lives in the world of absurdity where there is no purpose only meaninglessness in life. Sartre and Kierkegaard pointed out the individuals and their subjectivity. Sartre defines it as, "Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is latter which the deeper meaning of existentialism" (Sartre 16-17).

Doris Lessing has written about the personal lives of her characters. She had dwelt deep into the inner psyche of individuals and cannot escape from the realities and had to face their consequences. The protagonist of the novel *The Grass is Singing* falls the victim of all these consequences. She falls the victim first of the society and then of her unpleasant marriage to a farmer namely Dick Turner, who doesn't have love and intimacy for her. She had been a victim of isolation since from her childhood.

When Mary thought of 'home' she remembered a wooden box shaken by passing trains; when thought of marriage she remembered her father coming home red-eyed and fuddled; when she thought of children she saw her mother's face at her children's funeral- anguished, but as dry and as hard as rock. Mary liked other people's children but shuddered at the thought of having any of her own (Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 39).

Then she marries to a farmer namely Dick Turner. He never understands the desires of his wife Mary Turner. She wants to enjoy the life to its whole. She loves to dance, good food, poetry, town life. She loves town life. She is fascinated by the life in town and finds herself comfortable and associated with it. While as her husband loves only farms and felt sophisticated in the town.

She loved the town, felt safe there, and associated the country with her childhood; because of those little drops she had lived in . . . Dick Turner disliked the town. – and then on into the business part of the town with the shops full of fashion for smart women and extravagant imported food, he felt ill at ease and uncomfortable and murderous. He suffered from claustrophobia. He wanted to run away- either to run away or to smash the place up (Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 45).

Mary wants pleasures of life to live a happy and healthy life. But unfortunately Dick thinks otherwise. He treats her desires more childish and this lack on the side of her husband drove her towards the state of alienation and isolation. The novels perfectly portray the existentialistic quest of Mary Turner. Doris Lessing made novel as a weapon to fight against the ill omens in her society. She made her characters to struggle against the absurdity of the society. Lessing's novels exposed human psychology, woman's search for self-identity. Her characters need to have the basic amenities in their life. All her characters strive for becoming human. Mary Turner wants peace in her life. She wants to live a life of herself without the interference of any one. Her relationship with her husband Dick is only a compromise. They didn't share any bond of love affection and emotion. She never felt for him. Anca et. al., states this state of Mary Turner as:

Dick and Mary Turner only have their needs in common, while emotionally they are world apart. For Lessing, emotional frigidity is the symptom of a problem with multiple causes, originating in the rigid general image of the cultural roles of men and women, sexuality, and intimacy as well as in the individual's thwarted emotional life (Anca 27).

Lessing has chosen fiction writing as a weapon to fight against the society of her time. Doris Lessing through her protagonist wants to emphasize the harsh treatment that a female meets in a society. Her

protagonist Mary Turner is an existentialist and craves for freedom and independent identity but meets with her doom by the male dominated society who wants her to be repressive and submissive for her entire life. It shows that whatever a female wants to be or do but can't escape from this male dominated society. Lessing's novels *The Grass is Singing* portray the existentialistic issues and also the pathetic condition of Mary who faces alienation, isolation, agony, and distress throughout her life.

3. CONCLUSION

After analysing the novel through its protagonist Mary Turner, her marital and personal life, it is clear that lack of love, trust and understanding leads towards her breakdown. The theme of breakdown forms the back bone in the select novel of Doris Lessing. Throughout her life Mary remains dissatisfied with the love within family, and craves for the true love outside her family but fails. She faces only failures in her life. Mary marries Dick but fail on the grounds of true love and genuine feelings for each other. And all this leads towards the breakdown of Mary as a wife and as an individual in her life. Existentialism remained a prominent philosophy throughout centuries for the realistic writers. Doris Lessing is one of the best examples of existential writers. She perfectly projected the individual's plight, agony, alienation, isolation and trauma and its impact on the individuals own life.

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