

Sound and Silence in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*

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"In this decayed hole among the mountains

In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing..."(Eliot, 53)

Introduction

From the renowned long poem *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, Doris Lessing adopts the title and epigraph for her first and representative work *The Grass Is Singing*. It would be pertinent, therefore, to make a connection between the poem's theme with that of the novel, and also between the similar images used in the poem and in the novel.

Part V of the poem, "What the Thunder Said", has a number of allusions to the craving for rain which symbolizes the salvation of the modern society from the sterility and aridity. The narrator mournfully remarks the lack of water: "If there were the sound of water only/Not the cicada /And dry grass singing /But sound of water over a rock/...But there is no water" (352-58). While water is craved as salvation for the dried-out land, there is only the dry sound of cicada and grass singing. In the line which Lessing quotes in the epigraph of her novel, "The jungle crouched, humped in silence" (398) and waits for what is about to happen, but the rain does not come after all. In Part V of *The Waste Land*, a series of sounds are adopted for different symbols. Likewise, Lessing's novel also describes different sounds as well as silence in her work. In Eliot's poem, the loud pouring rain has not come yet, and instead, the thunder speaks words of commandment. The sound of rain is not heard while the grass is singing and the cicada chirping. But what is the grass singing for? If the rain pouring down brings salvation for the arid land, then the dry sound of cicada and grass singing is meant for contrast as opposed to the expected sound of rain, they are the nature's sound calling out to protest against the aridity and to crave for water.

Not only does Lessing borrow the title from Eliot's poem, she, like Eliot, also dexterously deploys the sound and silence in her novel for revelation of the colonial truth in South Rhodesia. There are various sources of sound such as the sound of the nature, district people's gossip and the voice of Mary's mother she echoes when accusing others, as well as the lack of sound such as the silence of district people and Tony being silenced. This paper, through the analysis of these sound and silence, demonstrates that language is power, so that colonial regime is sustained when some people are silenced and some others are empowered with voice. Characters in the novel speak because they have the discourse power or do not speak because their own sound is futile in front of the colonial truth in South Rhodesia land.

Being Silent and Being Silenced:

The Reserved News Report

The opening news report in the novel does not say much about the truth of the murder of a white female colonist by a native servant. The story adopts a flashback method and opens with the report about the murder of Mary the protagonist by a "special correspondent." (Lessing, 9) The whole story starts with this sentence: "The newspaper did not say much" (9). It merely reports about the death of Mary Turner and the presumption that the houseboy killed her, ending with the assumed crime motive, claiming that "It is thought he was in search of valuables" (9). In this district, the segregation between white and black is so strong that the black policemen cannot lay their hands on Dick, the victim's husband, a white man, even when Dick is apparently deranged by the shock of the murder. In a district like that, a case of a white mistress being killed by a black houseboy, which implies "reasons people might think about, but never never mentioned"(12), is disposed of with just a few words. The whole story opens and also ends because of the flashback framework, with some kind of silence.

Tony Being Silenced

Charlie Slatter has the discourse power that equals that of a policeman and silences Tony Marston the assistant. Tony, as a new comer to the district, is about to tell something—at least something if not the accurate understanding or interpretation of the murder case. But he is silenced several times by either Charlie Slatter or the sergeant:

"At last, cautiously, almost warningly, Charlie said 'what do you know of this'....[Tony] said, 'I don't know. Nothing really. It is all so difficult...' He hesitated, looking appealing at Charlie.(18)

[Charlie] said 'what do you mean, it is all so difficult?' (19)

Charlie is instantly called on alert when Tony speaks out the word "difficult" and snaps at immediately with a warning: "We had better leave it to the Sergeant, when he comes then.' It was a snub; he had been shut up" (20). When Tony the newcomer who has not yet got a grasp of the situation in the district is about to say something, Charlie cuts off the conversation by referring to the sergeant because he thinks Tony's "sort of idea"(12) could be dangerous to talk about. In contrast with this "respect" Charlie shows in his words to the judicial system is the fact that up until then, Charlie has been acting as the surrogate policeman. He is the first one to whom the farm boys fetch the message, and he gets to the murder spot even before the sergeant and talks with Tony in such a way as if he was interrogating and collecting evidences of the murder. That is why Tony starts to question "where were the police? What right had Charlie, who was a neighbor, to be fetched before himself, who was practically a member of the household? Why was Charlie quietly taking command?" (19). When Tony decides that he shall not be bullied verbally and will tell the truth about things because he can "form a theory" (23), Charlie answers "We don't want theories. We want facts." (23). Tony is once again silenced. Charlie does not want him to say things which might be close to the truth of the case, which as we know from the later parts of the story is that Mary and Moses are involved in a tabooed relationship. This is not supposed to be talked about or even known among people. Charlie here acts as the judge exerting power to silence people or to allow them to talk.

The way Charlie is fetched before the policeman, the way he silences Tony, together with the way he reports the murder case suggest that the district is cognitively invalid. People choose to endow Charlie with discourse power and choose to accept things as he presents them. People like Charlie who are considered to be successful in the district try hard to preserve the system and mend any possible breakage. Language is power, and those possessing the discourse power in the district, usually rich and successful, use their discourse power to sustain the system in the district.

Silence of the District People

The district people in the opening chapter are silent towards the murder case –as opposed to what they would usually do. The story opens with people's reaction to this murder case. It is mentioned that people "all over the country" must have felt "anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction." (9) But then they would dismiss it as just another news report on the natives' stealing and doing bad things as expected. In contrast, the people in the 'district' would not turn the page quickly, or they may even keep the clipping of the news. But more interestingly, "The murder was simply not discussed" (9). "There was, it seemed, a tacit agreement that the Turner case should not be given undue publicity by gossip"(10). Considering that the white people live afar from each other, and normally they would even feel grateful for something to talk about, this

silence among the district people is against the normalcy. "The most interesting thing about the whole affair was this silent, unconscious agreement. Everyone behaved like a flock of birds who communicate – or so it seems – by means of a kind of telepathy" (10). There has been gossip for long time among the whites about the Turners' improper living condition. They regarded it as a degradation of the white people that might knock off the balance of superior whites and inferior blacks. Though this has been true, this time, people choose not to discuss the case instead. Considering the gossipy people and the case being a murder case, the silence of the district people proves that there is something different about this case. "Whom should it concern, if not the white farmers, that a silly woman got herself murdered by a native for reasons people might think about, but never, never mentioned"(11)? The narrator means that the district people get to understand what the murder case implies when they see the news, and that's why they keep silent about it.

The district people do not talk about the murder case because they feel that their lifestyle is being threatened: "It was their livelihood, their wives and families, their way of living, at stake"(12). As Fishburn cogently argues, "Because she has broken their biracial sexual taboos, the other whites see her as a threat to the myth of their own cultural superiority—a threat to the colonial status quo, one that must be contained, removed, or eliminated" (Fishburn, 20). As the narrator says, Moses' tabooed involvement with his white mistress in an emotional way should never be allowed from the district people's perspective. Keeping silent means that the district people do not want to face this part and they have to pretend that there is no black servant sexually involved with his white mistress as alluded in the case. In a word, any deviation from the normal path should not even be talked about but just be "fixed".

Silence of Moses

Moses the murderer gives himself up silently instead of defending himself. "Moses himself rose out of a tangled ant-heap in front of them. He walked up to them and said (or words to this effect): 'Here I am.'" (12) To people's surprise, Moses does not even try to escape away. According to the district native commissioner, it is the native people's conscience that when they do something wrong, they give themselves up.

It is true that the omniscient narrator does not present Moses too much verbally, and this silence has been denounced by critics as the hidden colonial writing of Lessing. "Lessing leaves Moses's inner states shrouded in mystery", the implication of Mary's insanity "is that to feel outside the boundaries of apartheid is to struggle for an emotional survival that can come only at the expense of sanity, or life itself"(Wang, 40). But it is worth noticing that with his behavior and limited words, Moses actually presents himself as a powerful figure. Considering Moses' personality demonstrated throughout the whole novel, it is not typical behavior of him to be silent

and to give himself up to the policeman. Moses is different from the other natives in that he is the first one who dares to stand up for himself. He fetches water for himself when being thirsty and he talks back to Mary telling her that he needs water. That brings the whip to his face because "when a white man in Africa by accident looks into the eyes of a native and sees the human being (which it is his chief preoccupation to avoid), his sense of guilt, which he denies, fumes up in resentment and he brings down the whip" (152). He does not resume bathing until the mistress leaves when she runs into him sluicing himself.

A turning point in their relations arrives when he demands to leave the job of houseboy. Mary slumps into tears and begs him not to go, towards whom Moses behaves as a man in control: "He held the glass to her lips, so that she had to put up her hand to hold it, and with the tears running down her face she took a gulp. ... 'Drink,' he said simply, as if he were speaking to one of his own women; and she drank" (159). Since this incident, Moses turns into a caring man taking care of his woman. When Dick gets sick and Mary has been looking after him successively for a long time, Moses offers to take over the job. "'Madame must sleep,' he said. ...He insisted again: 'Madame think I not look after boss well?'" (168). He questions the way his mistress behaves, using English:

Without looking at her, he said: 'I do the work well, yes?' he spoke in English, which as a rule she would have flamed into temper over; she thought it impertinence. But she answered in English, 'Yes.' 'Then why Madame always cross?' (161)

He speaks English, the language of the colonizers, to reproachfully question Mary about the war the whites wage against each other: " 'Did Jesus think it right that people should kill each other?' (163)

All these present Moses as an eloquent person who understands, observes and questions. Pickering, who writes that "Moses's motives are complex, and seem the more so because his mental processes are never directly shown" (18) is not the only critic indicting the vagueness of Moses' motive in this work. It is true that there are not many descriptions of his inner activities in his relationship with Mary, but Moses is assertive in his behavior and words. He refuses to be treated like a machine, which is the normal way of blacks being treated; he speaks the language of the white people, questions and even defies the justice of the system going on in the land; he becomes the person pitying Mary and taking care of her in the story. He is by no means a silent and submissive person, and this was Lessing's strategy to emphasize in chiaroscuro the fact that white people silence blacks.

Then his silence after the murder could be read as the symbolic final ritual of salvation. The name Moses is the same with the figure in the Bible story who leads the Israel people out of Egypt to the promised land, though he himself was never to enter it. The salvation is earned through the sacrifice of Moses himself. Similarly, in the novel, Moses kills Mary at the end of the story to

complete her salvation out of misery. She is a suffering soul long before Moses comes into her life. Words like “unendurable” and “hopeless” are found in various places in the descriptions of Mary’s pain. She, after one futile attempt of returning to her old town’s life, slumps everyday into the old sofa and numbness. It appears to be that the only sensation she still has is her hatred for the unrelenting heat and her emotion to Moses. When Moses kills her, she is saved from the heat and the misery she has been enduring for a long time, and the rain pouring down at the moment of the murder illustrates the redemptive quality of this murdering action.

Moses also has a better understanding than the other natives that struggling or defense would be futile in this land because this system has been going on for years. Moses has a mission background and speaks the language of the whites, and his questioning in English about the righteousness of the system indicates that he has been thinking about the system. His behavior of walking away silently in the scene when Tony orders him to go away is one combined with anger and being betrayed. “‘Madame want me to go?’ said the boy quietly. ‘Yes, go away.’ ‘Madame want me to go because this boss’ (199)? Moses is interrogating Mary because he regards what they have as something more important than dodging the doubt of Tony. But “after a long, slow, evil look the native went” (199). Though Moses is hurt or irritated that Mary would not choose his side, he goes away because he knows that it would be futile to fight back. As it has already been demonstrated, Tony’s voice of trying to shed some light on the murder case is silenced. There is no need for Moses to say anything to defend since the case has already been “judged” by Slatters and the policeman as one involving theft and murder. He finishes his mission of saving Mary, and he submits himself to anything.

Voices:

The Gossip of District People

A source of loud voice which cannot be ignored is the gossip of the district people about Mary. The voice of people’s gossip is the direct cause for Mary to take the first step towards her later tragedy. Mary has been quite happy about her life in the town working as a secretary until one day she hears of people’s gossip about her:

“She’s not fifteen any longer: it is ridiculous! Someone should tell her about her clothes.”...

‘Why doesn’t she marry? She must have had plenty of chances’.

There was a dry chuckle. ‘I don’t think so. My husband was keen on her himself once, but he thinks she will never marry. She just isn’t like that, isn’t like that at all.

Something missing somewhere' (42).

These are voices which are not intended to be overheard by Mary herself, and they create effects way far more outreaching than they are supposed to. It is the direct reason why Mary rushes into her marriage with Dick before she gets to know what life on a distant farm would be like. This hasty marriage is her first and foremost way of proving that she is "like that". This marriage is more about readjusting her frustrated self-confidence and proving herself than about love or promise. By marrying the first man available then, she relieves herself of the burden of being gossiped by the others as being not "like that" — sexually futile.

However, this gossip has been haunting Mary for the rest of her short life. It haunts her when she poses to be a flirtatious woman with Charlie Slatter, though she does not care to be on good terms with the other members of the white people in the district. She has refused to go to the tea parties of those white housewives, but she one day invites the Slatters to dinner:

"He[Slatter] ate with distaste, making no effort to hide it, while Dick said nothing, and Mary made abrupt unrelated remarks about the weather with that appalling coyness, shaking her ear-rings, writhing her thin shoulders, ogling Charlie with a conventional flirtatiousness." (187)

She wants to prove that she is "like that" when another male member of the white community visits them and poses all these coquetties.

When Tony questions her about her relationship with Moses, she blurts out that "They said I was not like that, not like that, not like that." like "a gramophone that had got stuck at one point." (198) It is a difficult moment for her when she is being questioned. She has been cut off from the community consciousness for so long a time that she almost forgets it. "She behaves simply as if she lives in a world of her own, where other people's standards don't count. She has forgotten what her own people are like. But then, what is madness, but a refuge, a retreating from the world?" (198) But when being reminded of it, the thing that Mary remembers is still that she has been gossiped as being "not like that."

In a culture where deviation is discouraged, the "loud" gossip can have strong effect. Individuals do not have the discourse power when confronted with the community's choice of lifestyle. People are expected to understand and to conform to the community so that individuals like Mary are subject to the overwhelming power of the gossip of the others.

The first and foremost community consciousness would be the agreement on the segregation of white people and black people. However, this conformity also extends to other aspects like people's choice of marriage life. They gossip about Mary just because she is different. "She is not like that" say those gossip girls, but what is "that" like? Finding a man to get married before they turn to thirty and dress in a way which is considered proper by others. They defend their lifestyle

by badmouthing the others who do not conform to their lifestyle. By depicting a society like this where people gossip about a non-conformist but keep silent about trans-racial deviation, Lessing illustrates the powerlessness of individuals in face of the community.

The Voice of Suffering Women

Another interesting voice is the voice of Mary's mother that she takes when she accuses Dick of the bad condition of the house. When Mary gradually comes into realization of their poverty, and the heat starts to get on her nerve, she becomes especially cruel with the houseboy. In one of their quarrels, Mary accuses Dick of his incapability:

'...You expect me to live like a poor white in this pokey little place of yours. You expect me to cook myself every day because you won't put in ceilings...' She was speaking in a new voice for her, a voice she had never used before in her life. It was taken direct from her mother, when she had those scenes over money with her father. It was not the voice of Mary, the individual (who after all really did not care so much about the bath or whether the native stayed or went), but the voice of the suffering female, who wanted to show her husband she just would not be treated like that (83).

Mary grows up witnessing the poor life and miseries her mother suffers. The resemblance between her own married life and her mother's brings back the memories of her mother accusing her father. Mary's case exemplifies that of the sacrificed white women in the colonized land. The white men come to the African land with their dreams of making a fortune or avoiding the office clerk routine in their home country. They go out to the field to work, leaving their women in houses to become the real sufferers of the heat and loneliness. Many female characters in Lessing's *African Stories* (1981) that spans her entire writing career have the similar living condition and similar suffering mind as Mary's and her mother's here. In "The Second Hut", Major Carruthers's bedridden wife is a suffering soul who won't even get out of the bed; in the "Traitors", the narrator's mother says "it's no life for a woman, this' ...her voice breaking, gathering us close" (46). The white women usually just stay in their own houses when their husbands go out to the field to work. They suffer from poverty resulting from their husbands' in-expertise in their businesses as well as the loneliness and confinement in the African land. Mary's mother suffers from poverty and dissatisfaction with life, and her daughter witnesses the situation but tragically repeats it.

Mary suffers from loneliness, only that she herself is unaware of that. After the visit of the Slatters, Dick, who resumes his self-assurance from the masculine talk with Charlie, suggests Mary talking more with the other white women: "I am glad they came. It must be lonely for you"(81). Mary denies this. Her understanding about loneliness is "craving for other people's

company”(81), and she “did not want anyone’s company”(81). This is due to the fact that her pride is seriously hurt by the patronizing attitude of Mrs. Slatter, though Mrs. Slatter is trying to show only kindness and sympathy. The narrator points out that “she did not know that loneliness can be an unnoticed cramping of the spirit for lack of companionship”(81). The almost hysterical behavior of Mary in her interactions with the houseboys is a good illustration of her cramped spirit. Generations of colonial white women suffer from poverty and humiliation. Mrs. Slatter also suffers a period of poverty so that she “[knows] herself what hardship and loneliness [is]” (79) and shows genuine intention to help.

Voices of Nature

In contrast with the silence of the district people and Moses, and Tony being silenced, are the loud voices of nature. Tony stands on the veranda where the murder takes place and sees the veld and kopjes, or grassland and hills:

“which were sharp and blue after the rain; it had poured half the night. He realized, as the sound grew loud in his ears, that cicadas were shrilling all about him. He had been too absorbed to hear them. It was a steady, insistent screaming from every bush and tree. It wore on his nerves” (30).

Though Tony has been silenced, the voice of nature, however, shall not be silenced. They defy the human control if Tony finds it difficult to defy the power of Slatter and the policeman.

At the climax of the story and just before the climax of the story, we also hear all kinds of sounds of nature. On the night before Moses kills Mary, she is waiting and when she goes out, she hears the noise. “She entered [the trees], feeling the shade fall on her flesh, hearing the cicadas all about, shrilling endlessly, insistently. ... But the noise was unbearable! She was caught up in a shriek of sound....Three of the those ugly little beetles squatted there, singing away, oblivious of her, of everything, blind to everything but the life-giving sun. She came close to them, staring. Such little beetles to make such an intolerable noise” (208)! Here is the essence of the sound of nature– being oblivious of human control and human emotion, and they sing their protestation.

At the climax of the story, the murder scene, its symbolic meaning is well translated by the natural sounds of the thunder and the rain. “Then, as she heard the thunder growl and shake in the trees, the sky lit up, and she saw a man’s shape move out from the dark and come towards her...”(216) The murder scene is accompanied by the growling thunder, and thunder could be read as the uncontrollable sound of nature. This is nature’s foreboding sound that nature is taking its revenge. “And then the bush avenged itself: that was her last thought. The trees advanced in a rush, like beasts, and the thunder was the noise of their coming” (217). White people come to the land; people like Charlie Slatter exploit the land; It may seem that they have taken full advantage

of the native people, squeeze their labor to the extreme and abuse them, but the African land is not to be tamed. They can vent out their revolt in various ways like the thunder growling and cicada shrilling constantly.

The rain falls immediately after the murder, indicating that the murder brings salvation for Mary just like rain does so for the Waste Land. Joy Wang argues that “the warped interracial relationship between the novel's white female protagonist, Mary Turner, and her black servant Moses, becomes the vehicle for a cathartic and redemptive alleviation of white post-colonial guilt” (Wang, 37). From the ending of the story, their relationship is more of the atonement of Mary than it is of redeeming the white guilt of Mary. “It was beginning to rain; big drops blew in across Moses’ back, chilling him” (217). The thunder and the rain are the two major images in Eliot’s poem. In the Part “What the thunder said”, there is consistent craving for rain, because rain is indication of the salvation for the land. The rain is just remotely expected at the end of the poem, but in the novel rain does come. By borrowing this part of the poem as the epigraph and as the title of the story, Lessing also employs that indicative meaning of the major image in the poem—the rain as some kind of salvation in the novel. For all these years she lives in the farm, Mary takes antagonistic attitudes towards nature and she would not go out into nature even if the heat in the house is unbearable. Nature is represented for her in the unbearable sun. She is tortured by poverty, heat and her own prejudice. Moses kills her and also saves her from misery she has been living with for many years. At the end of the story, the narrator reveals the reason why Moses chooses not to escape though he might have chance to do so. “And this was his final moment of triumph, a moment so perfect that it took the urgency from thoughts of escape, leaving him indifferent”(219). Moses’ feelings is firstly that of being betrayed by Mary so that he interrogates “Madame want me to go because of this boss [Tony]”(199), and he questions if Mary is not coming back to the farm. Moses murders Mary though what kind of intention he is holding in the murder is unknown to the readers. “Regret? Not a sign of it. Fear? It did not seem so”(26). The narrator leaves the interpretation of Moses’ inner activities to the readers: it might be revenge against the betrayal or revenge of the African land against the colonizers. The symbolic meaning of his murdering action, however, is revealed—Moses, the black power, takes its revenge.

Conclusion

Lessing gives us an insight into the situation of the African land by directing our attention to the unusual silence of the district people at the opening of the story. Within the context that there is an unanimous effort of the district people to keep quiet, we go on to encounter Tony being silenced dexterously by Charlie and the sergeant.

The silence of Moses remains a mystery, just as his act of murder leaves an open space for us to interpret his motive. This mystery is, however, shed with some light from the sound of nature as opposed to the silence of various kinds. With the chirping cicadas and heavy rain drops, nature is singing the protestation. The other sound like the gossip of the district people unfolds before us the reality of the district where people try to extinguish deviation from their own approved lifestyle. This is some kind of verbal violence of people with discourse power. The sound of voice Mary takes after her mother also reveals the hardships and poverty some white women go through in the colonized land. Through these sounds and silence, Lessing unfolds before us the colonial situation in the district, the helpless plight which women like Mary face, the other white people's concern and their discreetness. Which people with discourse power make the colonial system work by silencing others and thus sustain the district. Nonetheless, nature's voice cannot be ignored or silenced. Rain symbolizing salvation comes at the end of story since the secret to salvation lies in the words of the thunder speaking in Eliot's *The Waste Land* – to give, to sympathize and to control.

The title of the novel, which usually reveals the focal point the author intends to make, is adopted directly from lines in the part "What the Thunder Said" – the grass is singing. In the title, the plant is endowed with voice of singing, so there is urge to take notice of the various sounds in the novel. The epigraph of the novel – parts also taken from the part, a few lines only as they are, contains various forms of sounds such as the grass singing, door swinging, cock crowing, and finally the thunder speaking. Though rain and the sound of water are hoped for, the sterile waste land suffers from the lack of water and the craving for rain. This is seen through the scorching sounds of cock crowing and door swinging, etc.. Similarly, the sounds of nature's protestation are also employed in the novel to express the author's intention. The last two lines quoted in the epigraph set a contrast between the silence of the crouching jungle and the speaking thunder. While the salvation for the waste land lies in the motto of the thunder, the silence in contrast to the striking thunder is also an important message. In the same way, Lessing adopts various forms of sounds, voices and silence in this novel to demonstrate the rich meanings of the life and death, speech and silence, murder and salvation in the colonial African land.

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