



## A PLAY OF IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUSES IN IDENTITY FORMATION: ALTHUSSERIAN READING OF DORIS LESSING'S *THE GRASS IS SINGING*

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Article Info:

Article Received:17/12/2014

Revised on: 26/12/2014

Accepted on: 30/12/2014

### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the representation of Althusserian theory of Ideological State Apparatuses in Doris Lessing's first novel *The Grass is Singing* and its role in Identity Formation. The Althusserian theory is dedicated to Louis Pierre Althusser (16 October 1918 – 22 October 1990) who was a French Post Marxist philosopher, writer and theorist. He was born in Algeria and later worked as a professor of Philosophy in France. He was a famous theorist of Marxist philosophy. He explained the Marxist term "ideology" in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" published in 1968. Althusser defines ideology as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence". Althusser believes individuals are *always-already subjects* and subjects act in by the system.

According to Althusser, it is ideology which functions in material experiences and forms (through ISAs) which changes individuals to ideological subjects within capitalist society. He further adds there is no escape from ideology because we live in ideology, nothing happens outside ideology, and we cannot understand ourselves outside of ideology or we find our identities in front of the mirror of ideology. Such kind of ideology captures the individuality and restrains man as a subject into the ideological foundations of society. He feels that he has freedom of survival yet paradoxically he is trapped and cannot visualize beyond the norms and notions of Ideological State Apparatuses.

This research paper tries to analyze the identity formation of the characters in the novel mainly Mary Turner the protagonist who is affected by the ruling ideological practices prevalent in the society. It will also analyze the attempt of the characters in achieving the sense of their consciousness in this process of individuation that ultimately fails and doom them to destruction because of their blind acceptance of apparent ideological factors rooted in their family, culture and system.

Key words: Dorris Lessing, Ideology, Louis Althusser, ISA. Ideological Subjects

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### INTRODUCTION

Marxist criticism has long occurred as a consequential approach of literary criticism in the literary genres. It draws heavily upon the findings and pronouncements of the Marxist Karl Marx

whose theory of enforcement holds that human actions and institutions are economically determined and that class struggle is needed to create historical change and in order to bring class equality. It also discusses the exploitation of weak

class by capitalists. Exploitation of weak class by the ruling class is ever taking place by various ways. For example, earlier it was Slavery system when aristocrats had slaves and were exploited. Then it was Feudal System when zamindars would seize the land of farmers and make them toil for a single penny. Then Capitalism rose in which the minority or capitalists or bourgeoisies exploit the labours and transfer them in the situation of *Alienation or Reification or False Consciousness*.

However with the establishment of the welfare programs and development programs in the states, the education was widely spread to the majority or weaker classes through schools and educational institutions. People were no more remain devoid of their recognition of their consciousness. In this condition, the opportunity of exploitation took shape in the indirect and political form. The post Marxist Louis Althusser defines such ways of exploitation through the term *Ideology* in his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes toward an Investigation".

In fact Ideology was first described by Karl Marx as 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas... the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production. It makes the subordinate class accept a state of *alienation or false consciousness*'<sup>1</sup>. Then ideology was criticized by Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci who introduced the term *Hegemony* by which he means that ideology's power derives primarily from consent as opposed to the use of force. Later Althusser modified the implication of Ideology and by contrast, approximates ideology to Lacan's understanding of "reality," the world we construct around us after our entrance into the symbolic order. For Althusser, as for Lacan, it is impossible to access the "Real conditions of existence" due to our reliance on language; however, through a rigorous "scientific" approach to society, economics, and history, we can come close to perceiving if not those "Real conditions" at least the ways that we are inscribed in ideology by complex processes of recognition<sup>2</sup>.

According to Althusser, ideology does not "reflect" the real world but "represents" the

"imaginary relationship of individuals" to the real world; the thing ideology (mis)represents is itself already at one remove from the real<sup>3</sup>.

Roland Barthes (1970) follows similar principles to convey the idea that ideology promotes the values and interests of dominant groups of society. Although Barthes talks about 'myth', it is possible to argue that Barthes uses this term in *Mythologies* as a synonym of ideology. What links the concepts of Barthes and Althusser is the conviction that what people accept as being 'natural' is in fact an illusory reality constructed in order to mask the real structures of power obtaining in society<sup>4</sup>.

Althusser connoted two terms related to Ideology: Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). According to Althusser, the basic function of the Repressive State Apparatuses like Heads of State, government, police, courts, army etc. is to intervene and act in favour of the ruling class that repress the ruled class by violent and coercive means. The Repressive state apparatus (RSA) is controlled by the ruling class, because more often than not, the ruling class possesses State power<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) cover mostly private domains like the religious systems, the political parties, trade Unions, families, some schools, the communications (newspapers, press, radio and television) cultural ventures, the legal, etc. It is dominated by private domains which have their own ideology constraints. ISA is diverse and plural and it functions in a concealed and a symbolic manner<sup>6</sup>.

*Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing*

The title *The Grass is Singing* borrowed from *What the Thunder Said* in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is Lessing's first novel. It is set in South Rhodesia, the province which was dominated by whites prior to its independence in 1980 'a time period when racism and power relations were prevalent in society'<sup>7</sup>. This novel is a psychological portrait of the characters of different races like whites and blacks. It shows the power relationships between whites and blacks as well as intra-relationship between one race and the psychological development of the characters of both

the races in South Rhodesia. 'It documents the complex white master - black servant relationship, and traces the racial subjugations and inhumanities suffered by black Africans and also explores the complacency and shallowness of white colonial society in Southern Africa'<sup>8</sup>.

The novel not merely shows the oppression of blacks by white colonial rulers, it also explores the concealed ways of dominance of ideology of the private domains that include the religious systems, the political parties, trade unions, families, some schools, the communications (newspapers, press, radio and television) cultural ventures, the legal, etc. over the ruled who could be a low middle or poor class man of any race, a black, a slave or a woman like the protagonist in the novel. 'Describing white colonial society in Anglo-Africa, the novel displays a society based on a hierarchical structure and oppression of non-whites and women. The novel suggests that because of her gender, the protagonist Mary Turner is presented with a limited set of options, forcing her into a life of subjection to given conditions'<sup>9</sup>. As a text it abounds in the plural forms of ideology that dominate the thinking of the characters who imagine that their subjectivity or identity is self-generated without any imposition but in reality they are 'always already subjects' of ISA that determines their identity.

#### *Althusserian ISA in The Grass is Singing*

The novel is centered on Mary Turner, the protagonist who 'thinks that her life goes as she wishes and hopes since she is young, beautiful and her friends like her'<sup>10</sup> leads her life as a feminist thinker but at last she has to succumb herself to the ideological oppression by the dominating institutions and society. She was a young white woman born in South Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to a debauched father. She was not a lucky child; she saw the death of her elder siblings with whom she had a cold relationship. Her parents had not a lovely relationship with each other. Luck somehow played good to her, she was sent to the boarding school where she grew up. She was alone but confident. Later she joined the company as a stereo typist and earned a good reputation amongst her colleagues and in almost a decade 'she became the personal secretary of her employer'<sup>11</sup>.

She had no complaints with her life in spite of the fact that she had had a troublesome childhood because of her parents' ill matched marriage and poverty. She enjoyed her job and the company of her colleagues contentedly. She would regularly attend functions and parties with her friends. 'She was friend to half the town. And in the evening she always went to sundowner parties that prolonged themselves till midnight, or danced, or went to the pictures. She was never in bed before twelve or later'<sup>12</sup>.

So much absorbed in her spinsterhood, she almost forgot herself as close to 30s and had not thought of marrying someone. In fact she would adorn herself as a girl as if she was in her teens 'she still wore her hair little girl fashion on her shoulders, and wore little girl frocks in pastel colours, and kept her shy, naïve manner'<sup>13</sup>. She assumed her age as if still in the adolescence and she was happy with that above all. 'She was very happy: that was perhaps her only positive quality, for there was nothing else distinctive about her, though at twenty-five she was at her prettiest'<sup>14</sup>.

But the dominant ideological cultural perception of society which according to Althusser is one of the private domains of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) despises a woman who retains her spinsterhood even in the age of her high maturity. It says that a woman should not lure such freedom at the mature age. Such kind of ISA subjugates the women in the indirect manner so as to keep her engaged in the feminine capacity. Therefore Mary was often blamed by her colleagues for living in fancy. 'She's not fifteen any longer: it is ridiculous! Someone should tell her about her clothes'<sup>15</sup>. The ideological cultural obligations of ruling society make it customary for a grown up woman to get married up to this age. Mary never pondered over her passing age and was living beyond the ideological coercion of ruling system that makes it customary for women to contract their spinsterhood into a nuptial lest they would suffer. Mary had proper education and was working sufficiently in the company. She disliked marrying because she was living an independent life but the ISA affected her freedom and turned her into a *subject* through the

ideological notion that a married woman has a better life than unmarried.

Such societal ideology persuaded Mary to obey and fall in the wedlock with a man whom she never loved. One evening she was enjoying herself in the party in a frock that made her fathom that she was very young; she eavesdropped her colleagues who were discussing that she ought to marry at this age otherwise no one would marry her. 'She should marry someone years older than herself. A man of fifty would suit her... you'll see, she will marry someone old enough to be her father one of these days'<sup>16</sup>. She felt as if it was her mistake of not marrying and then decided to find a suitable person. Eventually she found Dick Turner, the young Englishman who although owned a farm yet was a poor farmer. He had suffered from loneliness and wished to marry. He found Mary apt as a life partner as she was strong, mature, and versatile. He assumed that she would also help him in the farming.

They married and subsequently he took her to his home amidst his farm. It was loveless marriage as well ill matched too. 'After her marriage she suffered from laxity and meaninglessness of ill-matched marriage. She was forced by the society to accept loveless marriage that she also saw in her parent's life'<sup>17</sup>. They had no love for each other despite their committed behavior. Dick married to reduce his loneliness and Mary married because she was measured in terms of norms and notions of ISA; a kind of ideology that according to Althusser is "the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group"<sup>18</sup>. It functions through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) or an assortment of institutions that include the family, the media, religious organizations, cultural codes and most importantly in capitalist societies, the education system, as well as the received ideas that they propagate. The cultural ideological codes of the dominant schools of thought are depicted through Mary's friends and colleagues who persuaded her to marry despite her reluctance. She was happy with her spinsterhood but ideological codes and systems led her to throw herself in the marriage that she had always considered a prison. She transformed herself

inadvertently as an *always-already subject* that acts in by the system executed by ruling class for their own advantages.

Mary entered into the new and weird world where she had no taste for love and conjugal intimacy. Even on her wedding night, she underwent a monotonous relief of feeling nothing. The narrator informs about that 'It was not so bad, when it was all over: not as bad as that. It meant nothing to her, nothing at all. Expecting outrage and imposition, she was relieved to find she felt nothing'<sup>19</sup>. But she had to accept something unwillingly that was to accustom herself to a sobriquet 'Mrs. Turner'. Althusser illustrates this with the concept of "Hailing" or Interpellation". It is the process by which language identifies and constructs a social position for the addressee. It is the way a person is spoken to and addressed is often determinant upon his/her social standing in society. This term is derived from the notion that when an individual communicates with another individual, he/she is reproducing social relationships with people in society<sup>20</sup>. Similarly the hailing word 'Mrs. Mary Turner' confirms the identity of Mary as the wife (subject) who is required to be a committed wife. Whenever she was hailed with this initial, she would see her image as subject and would lose her potential to abandon her husband Dick Turner and off course his village life that she always disliked.

She could not take divorce from Dick because the symbolic ideology of our religious institutions insists married women that they must not separate from their husbands lest it is equivalent to a sin. Mary was willing to live her life independently but she was bound to abide by the entity of ideological constraints of marriage.

Being a farmer's wife, she had no choice to abandon farms and to rework as an employee in town. However she still yearned for a job in the reputed company and a rollicking life amongst her colleagues back in town. 'She day dreamed continually about herself working in an office, as the efficient and indispensable secretary, herself in the club, the popular elder confidante, herself welcomed in a score of friendly houses, or taken out by men who treated her with that comradely affection that was so simple and free from danger'<sup>21</sup>.

One day she came to know about Dick's miserable condition when he confessed that he was under heavy debt 'I borrowed two hundred pounds from him three years ago, just after we were married'<sup>22</sup>. After hearing this, she proposed an idea to Dick that he could quit farming and settle down in town as an office employee. He refused stubbornly as he did not wish to relinquish his ownership of farm. Even his neighbour Charlie Slatter from whom Dick had borrowed money several times, reiterated to him that he should leave village and perform well in the office works 'You are no good on land. Get yourself a steady job in town somewhere'<sup>23</sup> but Dick did not surrender until his condition became parlous.

Here Dick suffers from the dominant ideology of capitalists that cleverly captures one's individuality and restrains man as a subject into the ideological foundations of society. He is victim of the ruling class ideology that has bound him into the obstinacy to remain an owner irrespective of the fact that it was bringing only deterioration to his family. It can also be related to *Interpellation* in which 'the socially constructed reality is passed as 'natural', even though it's a subjective distortion of the reality and the world'<sup>24</sup>. 'The individuals freely accept to live within a particular ideology, even though "their relation to the conditions of existence is an imaginary relation to real relations"<sup>25</sup>. Dick Turner always wanted to imagine himself as owner and a member of the capitalist society in spite of the fact that his condition was no more in the state of livelihood even. He was strictly trying to maintain his ideological image of ownership which he assumed was giving him a kind of freedom rather than working as an employee. Were he able to understand the distinction between his imaginary and real state of existence, he would have met the ability to confront the ideological stress.

Mary failing in her attempt once tried to leave her farm life and went back to rejoin her office. Ironically, she was not given the job and the employer gave an excuse that they had already hired somebody. It happened because she lost her charm and grace that she had possessed before her marriage. The hostile response she got, clearly implicates the superficial ideology of the capitalists who treat the low class people or miserable people

with malicious intent even if they are of the same race and entertain only those people who look young and handsome. It is one of the features of ISAs of the ruling class that promote the idea of engaging only smart looking and attractive people for the work. It implicates if one seeks a job, it is important to have a charming personality irrespective of knowledge and if the person lacks such charm then he must accept his failure as the unworthy candidate. Here the superficial ideological notions of capitalists restrain man to recognize his own identity and rather he finds his identity in front of the mirror of ideology. Like wisely Mary Turner lost her charm and was not in the condition to afford improvement in it anymore and therefore lost her job too. She felt as if it was her mistake that she had lost her charm now which she had possessed prior to her marriage. She blamed herself as a loser. Finally she dropped off her rebellion to outcast the married life and moved back to Dick Turner's house. 'The woman who was once admired and loved by the society is disqualified because of her sloppy appearance and unpolished manners. She comes back and ultimately resigns herself to the traditional role of a woman, that is, of looking after her home and husband'<sup>26</sup>.

Mary had no hopes now but her life offered her a new opportunity again. Dick brought a black servant Mosses for her help. He was the same servant who was once lashed by Mary in the field. When he came in, Mary was stunned for a while. Dick was unaware of this incidence and strictly ordered her to not to snub him otherwise they would not find any other servant. She obeyed Dick and tried to adjust with Mosses. Gradually it is noticed that she developed an attraction with Mosses although she resisted because she did not want to break the mirror image of herself of being Mrs. Turner and also had a prejudice of being racist since her childhood when she was regularly taught to remain distant from black natives. 'She was afraid of them, of course. Every woman in South Africa is brought up to be. In her childhood she had been forbidden to walk out alone, and when she had asked why, she has been told in the furtive, lowered, but matter-of-fact voice she associated with her mother, that they were nasty and might do horrible things to her'<sup>27</sup>.

She had always hated black people including women. The narrator informs us 'If she disliked native men, she loathed the women. She hated the exposed fleshiness of them, their soft brown bodies and soft bashful faces that were also insolent and inquisitive, and their chattering voices that held a brazen fleshy undertone. She could not bear to see them sitting there on the grass; their legs tucked under them in that traditional timeless pose'<sup>28</sup>.

However as her life passed carrying the prejudiced ideological notions of disliking black natives, she once got attracted with Mosses. She used to sit quite still, watching him work. The powerful, broad built body fascinated her'<sup>29</sup>. She was quite unsupportive to her adherence of being a racist and began enjoying the pleasure of a bizarre relationship. But it was not Mary's deliberate attempt to deceive Dick rather she was feeling abducted in the unconscious dominance of Mosses. Bahlaq states that she becomes closer to Moses due to the incidents they pass through, such as the whipping, Dick's sickness and Mary's physical and psychological deterioration, Moses becomes the powerful person and she becomes submissive to him'<sup>30</sup>. After her marriage, she had been constantly suffering from acute loneliness and wished to get rid of Dick and his village life yet she was not able to due to ideological constraints. In this case, she felt a complete relief in the presence of Mosses who had already started dominating her unconsciously. 'When she breaks down emotionally, she is self-conscious at Moses' presence, and before long realizes that 'there was now a new relation between them'<sup>31</sup>.

At last Mary submitted herself to the black servant and in this way broke down her white colonial ideology. But this situation led her to embrace madness, a further depression and even a fear that she would be killed by Mosses. 'This situation in-between ruptures Mary's white colonial identity, which leads to a *split subject*, and subsequently, madness'<sup>32</sup>. She was not able to surmount the fact that she had been touched by a black person for whom she had always begotten hatred. The British young man Tony Marston who had come to work in Dick's farm in his absence once

saw Mary getting undressed by Mosses. Astonishingly he questioned her 'Does that native always dress and undress you?'<sup>33</sup>. Mary in excruciating embarrassment made excuses and ordered Mosses 'Go away'<sup>34</sup>. And when the latter asked her malevolently whether Dick and Mary are leaving for town 'Madam is leaving the farm. She responded faintly, 'Yes'<sup>35</sup>.

Mary had guilt that she had allowed Mosses to touch her which ruined her identity of being racist. She also realized that Mosses had understood the pride of her white ideology and would kill her very soon. So it happened; she was killed by Mosses the night before they were leaving for town.

The white ideology: an excuse of capitalists to repress Blackshad made Mary Turner an ideological subject who thought that she had dominance over blacks and they ought to be treated like slaves only otherwise they would be dangerous. T Kirton asserts that Mary, like other members of society, is taught to view the differences between black and white characters as fundamental to Rhodesian society. Mary increases the intensity of her hatred for the black characters by continually reaffirming in her mind their inferiority and danger to the white characters'<sup>36</sup>.

She always treated them like slaves. Whenever the black servants would work in her house either she misbehaved with them or blamed them of theft. T Kirton says that it was also presumed by Mary Turner that the black characters were thieves waiting for an opportunity to steal the white's belongings. Even Mary's murderer was initially accused of theft and his crime was thought to be motivated by alcohol'<sup>37</sup>. She enjoyed the domination of being white who could have superiority over blacks but this identity broke down when she allowed Mosses to touch her.

Here we see that Mary Turner had always conformed to extreme racism but contrarily she surrendered herself to a black servant. Resultantly it became difficult to her to confront her identity failure and expiated. Such apparent ideological apparatuses that work in concealed manner guide man to follow the conventions unabated made by ruling class, are actually harmful for him because

heimagineshimself as a free agentwhich in reality exploits him. He freely identifies himself as an independent individual but he does not know that his consciousness is bound in the chains of ideology.'This ideology of the subject that ISAs impose on individuals affirms, is in an ironic twist that their subjectivity consists of a quite radical independence and autonomy. That is, individuals are interpellated as free subjects who cause or originate their belief systems, their actions, and their social institutions'<sup>38</sup>.This aspect indicates that the capitalists have best used the idea of Interpellation of controlling the subjectivity of the individual with the help of ISAs.

### CONCLUSION

The ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) work in concealed and symbolic manner in reducing man to a subject who accepts everything as being natural that in fact is an illusionary reality. These apparatuses pursue man to obey codes, systems and conventions made by ruling society and to imagine as if he is living freely unbridled.

Mary Turner married under the persuasion of ISA'convention but she was not able to enjoy her married life with Dick Turner. She wanted to work in the town but she was connived by Dick's capitalist ideologywho did not want to sell his farm despite his deplorable condition.

Somehow she struggled to survive in his wild house but for how long she could. She met Mosses the black servant and found the empathy in him which she had been missing in her life. She forgot her ideology of racism and would conciliate his presence with affection but when she realized it she became remorseful and held Mosses responsible for this. Mosses was unabashed and could not tolerate misrepresentation of her white ideology of being racist, he killed her.

We find that Mary was the sensitive victim of ISAs and she realized it at the end also. Before she died she tried to mention Tony Marston about her long standing quest of her recognition of her identity. She realized that in this process she got influenced by ISA' symbolic coercions and felt that by following these she would live better and more happily but these factors actually reduced her to *subject* who was left with no identity at all in

reality.'It's a long time since I came here, So long I can't quite remember.... I should have left long ago. I don't know why I didn't. I don't know why I came. But things are different. Very different'<sup>39</sup>.

Over all the novel has many facets that show that ideological state apparatuses are the key cause of man's imaginary identity formation that is far away from reality and gives him only illusionary happiness.

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