

# A Comparison between Two Heroines in the Grass Is Singing and Surfacing

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**ABSTRACT:** This thesis selects the two representatives of two authors, *The Grass Is Singing* and *Surfacing* explore the ways to quest for self-identity of women in patriarchal society, basic methods and meanings of women's self-realization. The two female protagonists are both victims in patriarchal society, but they choose different ways to quest for identity and have different endings. It aims to attract the public attention on feminist issues.

**KEYWORD:** Female; Self-awareness; Quest

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood are prominent female writers in contemporary literary world. They both enjoy high reputation in the world as talented and versatile writers. Their works display specific female points of view and sharp insight. Readers will notice that the major concerns in their novels were women's survival. *The Grass Is Singing* and *Surfacing* are representatives of two authors. In these two novels, female protagonists are both victims in patriarchal society, but they choose different ways to quest for identity and have different endings. Conclusion is drawn in the last part, eliminating the binary oppositions and achieving some kind of harmony between male and female.

## 2 A COMPARISON BETWEEN TWO NOVELS

### 2.1 *The same feature of the female images: ontological insecurity*

The two heroines were in a catastrophic splitting of the self. Mary Turner and "I" underwent what R.D.Laing called 'engulfment' or 'implosion', a state of feeling empty and fearing the effects of other people and the external world. Their attempts to escape from facing their inner self are equivalent to a complex manoeuvre which has been describe by Laing as "elusion", a way of getting round conflict without direct confrontation.

Implosion—a form of ontological insecurity in which a person unable to reconcile his inner schisms is unable to achieve a healthy or vital self in dealing

with the world. Mary entered on a gradual nightmare in which they lose touch with the present tense certainties. Mary's inability to understand and comes to terms with her inner self leads to a deadlock rather than salvation. Mary's total submissions to the collective, as well as her later isolation, lead her to an abominable situation in relation to both black and white society, and eventually to her final destruction. Mary's problem is the frustration experienced in her early childhood, the memory of which is buried in that part of the unconscious that must be slowly admitted into awareness if the personality is to achieve integration. Mary attempts to bury her past, and the more she represses it the more control it gains over her, destroying her capacity for facing or understanding the present. We are introduced to Mary after "she had taken good care to forget these memories years ago,"(*The Grass Is Singing* p40) so that at the age of twenty she has already become emotionally blocked, unable to achieve intimate relationships, preferring the 'impersonality' of the collective life. When she is apprenticed as a typist in a nearby town, she therefore prefers to live in a girl's club to seek shelter from the problems of identity. Within that community, she creates for herself an 'impersonal'(*The Grass Is Singing* p38)world to protect her from facing the inner self with all its repressed aspects: "she went on as companionable, as adaptable, as aloof and as heart-whole as ever, working as hard enjoying herself as she ever did in the office, and never for one moment alone, expect when she was asleep."(*The Grass Is Singing* p39) In the communal life of the boarding house, she indulges in outer activity at expense of her inner self.

Lacking an operational sense of self, she leads a marginal existence colored by a sense of outer activity and inner passivity: Mary retreats inside herself to private world of dreams and fantasy. Mary is the person Lessing was afraid of becoming, so fragmented, so cut off from a firm sense of identity that she is not only incapable of connection to anyone else, she is detached from herself. We see that the void inside Mary was suddenly filled by an unexpected and enormous terror. Eventually her only social expression becomes her overweening hatred for the blacks whom she treats with exaggerated cruelty and impersonalness because they threaten her not only as men, but as usurpers of her only useful, though hated, function on the farm—housekeeping.

The narrator in *Surfacing* has in fact created a spurious, false self which relates to the outside world. She separates herself, not only from her private past, but from her parents, and more crucially, from all emotion. As a result, she is alienated from her historical present as well as her past. She travels with her friends and her lover Joe, but she only uses them for transportation since she does not have a car. She does not share her past with them and remains detached, projecting on them her own repression of memory. The alienation from her friends becomes more pronounced throughout the novel to refuse to face the fact. She has lost the ability to experience normal feelings; she recalls that her current man-friend, Joe was impressed by her coolness the first time they made love. She, on the other hand, found her behavior unremarkable because she did not feel anything. She is tortured by Joe's demand that she says she love him because she does not believe the word has any meaning. The protagonist's alienation from her feelings is reflected in her dispassionate voice. Everything is seen; nothing is felt. The small town, the cabin in the woods where she grew up, her three friends, even her memories are accurately recorded—or so it seems.

The protagonist's inability to feel is paralleled by an inability to act. Her selective vision holds fast to the illusion that she is helpless and "they" do things to her. Hurt and angry that her parents died before endowing her with their power, she accuses them of having hurt her. "They have no rights to get old," she complains, remaining blind to the pain her abrupt departure from home doubtless caused them. She remembers that once she thought a certain purple bean on a high pole was a source of power I would have been evil. Her association of power with evil and her dissociation of herself from both reflect a typical female delusion of innocence. Hiding from her complicity in evil feeds a false belief that she can do nothing but witness her victimization. In order to regain her power the protagonist must realize that she does not live in a world where only others have power or do evil. At last she understands that she

is losing touch with reality and acknowledges, "That is the real danger now, the hospital or the zoo. Where we are put...when we can no longer cope." (*Surfacing* p196) Yet she determines that she will never be a victim again.

## 2.2 *The similar roles as victims and different ways of seeking identity*

The two heroines both were influenced by dominative patriarchal ideology. In their minds, the traditional roles of men and women are clear-cut. Women are confined to the home, subordinated to and dominated. Mary in *The Grass Is Singing* and the nameless protagonist in *Surfacing* are both victims, in a sense, of this overwhelming social convention and get hurt in the masculine society. Women have been haunted by their ignorant self split by their own definition as a wife-to-be.

In *Surfacing*, from the protagonist's reminiscence, the narrator comes to realize that she was only a child-bearer and a child-rearer. She is considered only as an incubator, a useful machine for bearing babies, but not a free individual. In the marriage, woman is expected to cater to her husband's needs. She remembers, "He began to expect things. He wanted to be pleased" (*Surfacing* p36), "I still listen to what he said" (*Surfacing* p49). As a wife, the narrator finds she should learn to submit and to obey. In her recalling of her relationship with her ex-lover, the narrator finds she has completely lost her selfhood and identity. The loss of selfhood is like a suicidal jump from the cliff, waiting for the smash at the bottom. As a woman, the narrator realizes that she falls a victim of the institution which sets men above women. In the subordinated position, she does not have the right to do anything she likes to do. While recalling her relationship with her early lover, the narrator also contemplates the relationship with Joe, her present lover. She finds that although she is free of marriage, she is still bound to men. Women, for Joe, should learn to submit to men. Joe hopes that as a woman his girlfriend should be submissive and obedient. Therefore, when he proposes marriage to the narrator, he gets furious at her unexpected refusal. As far as Joe is concerned, women must learn to be obedient to men's desire, accepting men's proposals and rules. In fact, Joe seldom cares about his girlfriend. When they come to the narrators' home, "'Is this where you lived?' Joe asks. It's unusual for him to ask me anything about myself." (*Surfacing* p31) what Joe cares about is his own feelings and his superordinate position in their relationship. As a man, Joe thinks that he should never be allowed to reconcile or withdraw in his conquest of women when his marriage proposal is rejected by the narrator, Joe feels angry and refuses to compromise with his girlfriend, "at night Joe kept

turned away from me. He wasn't going to compromise. I ran my fingers over his furry back to show I wanted a truce." (*Surfacing* p92) Women, in Joe's eyes, should submit to their men under any circumstance while men should always be the winner and conqueror. Joe even thinks of his relationship with the narrator as a contest. In her contemplation, the narrator realizes her true relationship with Joe. She finds Joe does not love her. All he wants is to please himself and to beat his girlfriend into submission.

After being battered in body and mind, the narrator finally passes into a state of raised consciousness. She becomes keenly aware of women's victimized position in the patriarchal society.

The relationship between David and Anna fully make "I" aware of women's victimized position. Anna's "invisibility" is achieved behind her excessively applied cosmetics and the smoke from her mysteries, though she never realizes the ironic fact that she herself is a victim of another sort of murder. In Anna's relationship with David, her body is "her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he was her life, her life was the fight: she was fighting him because if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere. To continue the war." (*Surfacing* p155) Anna says of David's tyranny over her: "He's got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I'm never sure." (*Surfacing* p123) David, thus, is incontestably the winner as Anna masochistically endures, perhaps even enjoys, his crude and insulting sexual allusions, his insistence on her stupidity, her own reduction as a human being.

While Mary in *The Grass Is Singing* is a victim of patriarchal system and racial prejudice. She is dragged into a loveless marriage by the social forces and prohibited from another physical union by the same forces. Mary is put in a special situation: as a white, she is superior to the blacks, but as a woman, she is inferior not only to her husband and the other white man, she is also inferior to the black men. So her relationship with her husband and her murderer, the black boy, Moses, is a strange one. When she was still single at thirty, she was expected to get married by the society, otherwise she would appear to be "abnormal", a state she cannot bear. Under this pressure, she meets Dick Turner and marries him out of a desperate need to get a husband to release her from that kind of life. On the farm, as a wife, she is totally dependent on Dick. No matter how feeble and incompetent he is, he is a man. Yet she cannot help feeling distresses, especially when he fails again and again in his farming work. The idea of patriarchal dominance is rooted in her, so she pours her anger on the black servants, both at home and in the field.

White women not only suffered discrimination from the white community but also from black men. From the perspective of white settlers, women were innately weak and inferior to men in social position; also in their eyes white women were superior to blacks in race. However, in the opinion of both white and black males, women, no matter white or black, were inborn weak and attached to men. This made women live in a frustrated and isolated situation.

The protagonists of *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) and *Surfacing* (1972) are actually quite similar in that both are initially represented as passive victims who suffer from a kind of nerve breakdown and divided self. After they come to realize their condition of victimization and their victim complex, they begin to search for their identities and struggle to survive in the patriarchal society. In *Surfacing* the nameless protagonist suffers from her past painful memory. However, she refuses to be a victim any longer. Hence, she experiences the spiritual pilgrimages to search for identity with the help of her parents. In the end, she struggled to survive through self-examination in quest for identities and finally succeed in transforming from victims to survivors. The protagonist in *Surfacing* manages to participate fully in her own life and strive to survive by searching her whole and independent self and real identity. But, Mary in *The Grass Is Singing* had not succeeded in the journey of achieving her self. "She had inherited from her mother an arid feminism." (*The Grass Is Singing* p33) After she realized her victimized position, she had made her efforts to change her situation. Such as she helped Dick to escape from economic dilemma and went back to the company she once worked, although they are proved to be unsuccessful. Her role as uncomprehending victim seals her fate, for she has no chance for survival in the world where survival depends on awareness of her inner self and developing the inner realm of experience—a realm which Mary persistently blocks. Otherwise the two protagonists' quest for identities is performed in different ways. Throughout her life, Mary had turned for outside help to save her from herself. Mary's alienation from her inner self finds its clearest expression in her relationships with men. Instead of taking responsibility for her own life, she expects them to save her from herself. This is doom to her final destruction. Only at the moment she would die she had realized the tragic ending is her own responsibility in some degrees. While I in *Surfacing* had obtained her knowledge of her victim complex and realize that she is at least responsible for the condition of difficulty and sufferings. It is her weakness and passivity, escape from reality and deception that make them fall into adversity. She realizes that women should adjust their attitude and

behavior to the society and stand up for future, for the society couldn't change to conform to their quest.

### 2.3 *The similarities in the process of seeking identity and the differences of the ending*

Both of the protagonists face conflicts and suffer from alienation from the patriarchal society. Then they begin to recognize their victimized situation and try to break through the entrapment. Both of the female protagonists experienced the same process of seeking identity: separation, initiation and return. At first, both of them leave the place where they are familiar with; and then the consequent action of escape in search of their identity; and at last they return to the world with some elixir or boon.

With the knowledge that she has gained from the spiritual and psychological journey, the protagonist in *Surfacing* no longer sees herself as inevitably powerless and victimized. Her quest to integrate the spiritual and the social will be more successful than Mary Turner since she can now live in a world defined by her own feeling and judgment—she has found a female language in the male context. *The*

*Grass Is Singing* was published in 1950 while *Surfacing* was published in 1972. We can see the progress of protagonists' female awareness. The protagonist in *Surfacing* achieves quest for female oneself successfully while in *The Grass Is Singing*, Mary's quest for female oneself is unsuccessful. And also the early seventies was the time when the women's liberation was at its height, the protagonists in the literary works have shown us this progress of women. They have known how to construct identity of female and known how to break the bondage of marriage and social conventions. Mary in *The Grass Is Singing* lacks self-knowledge and her blind identification with the collective causes her the loss of self-identity.

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