

The Cinderella Complex as Reflected in ‘The Grass is Singing’ by Doris Lessing

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This paper explores a hidden problem experienced by the majority of women all around the world, the Cinderella Complex. Through studying *The Grass Is Singing* by the British author Doris Lessing, it becomes obvious how patriarchal society is reinforcing the Complex through the independent protagonist “Mary Turner” by compelling her to get married. Otherwise, she is missing the best things in life; marriage and children. Therefore this paper is going to warn women about the importance of their independent personality. Most are unconscious about their dependency and how society, education, and even literature are nurturing them in a patriarchal discipline. However, the Cinderella Complex is not only harmful for women but for men as well, and this is what *The Grass Is Singing* examines.

Key words: *Cinderella complex, dependency, patriarchal society.*

Introduction

From the early beginning of human existence women were told of the need to support men emotionally and financially. Usually, patriarchal society persuades women that this system was founded for their comfort (Saha and Safri, 2016). However, women’s low sense of status puts them at risk of losing self-confidence. A helpless girl, who lives in a depressed society, has to wait for her dream knight on a white horse to realize all her fantasies, like *Cinderella*. This reinforces the concept of how to be a normal girl. For instance, young girls should play with dolls; this keeps up ideas of motherhood and domestic activities (Bressler, 2012, p. 135).

Sociologists in the fifties to the seventies of the last century concentrated on women’s rights and equality. Yet they believed in gender differences or that roles are different. They related motherhood to women’s natural wants without considering women’s distress and anxiety. Diane Richardson assumes that “in conventional sociology and popular culture, motherhood



was assumed to be a natural female desire and part of obtaining full adult status as a normal woman (qtd. in Woodward, 1994, p. 14)”. Therefore, girls grow up with a fear of being independent creatures with free wills and real dreams. In fact, the origin of this fear comes from the notion of femininity (Nerenberg, 2017). Girls are taught that a deep relationship exists between femininity and dependency. However, this dependency generates a hierarchical society where women cannot be superior to men or even equal. The African feminist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues that:

We teach girls to shrink themselves to make themselves smaller; we say to girls, “You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful; otherwise you will threaten the man”. (We should all be feminists, 2013)

The hierarchical society leads to the Cinderella Complex. The term was first used by American therapist Colette Dowling in her book “The Cinderella Complex: Women’s Hidden Fear of independence,” asserting that “woman’s unconscious desire to be taken care of by others, based primarily on a fear of independence, often coupled with a need to be rescued by an outside force- e.g., a prince (Segen's Medical Dictionary, 2011)”. This psychological analysis of the term “Cinderella Complex” by the mentioned therapist actually depends on the famous fairy tale *Cinderella*.

The Origin of *Cinderella* and Low Self-Esteem

The history of *Cinderella* goes back many centuries but with different titles and details. Yet it revolves around the same content as the newest version of the story. For example, in the sixth century BCE the famous *Rhodopis* appeared in Greek culture from the well-known philosopher Strabo, about a slave girl who married an Egyptian king; in Chinese civilization it dates back to the ninth-century with the title *Ye Xian* (McKinney, 2015). However, the modern, updated version of the *Cinderella* story is *Cendrillon* in 1697 by the French writer Charles Perrault, who worked on the Italian edition *Cenerentola*, published in 1634 by Giambattista Basile (Donahue, 2015).

Throughout all these versions of *Cinderella*, it becomes obvious that the protagonist suffers from a psychological problem called low self-esteem; however, in psychology this complex (low self-esteem) is a defence created inside the unconsciousness of a female, as a natural response to the core issue that she is unworthy or less important than other people (men), and thus deserves to be punished or neglected by life in some way (Tyson, 2006, p. 16-17). Unfortunately educational systems in eastern societies put young girls at great risk by focusing on the necessity of patriarchal doctrine. Pages 79-81 and p 106 of the standard reading text for second grade Iraq primary school show that wives should stay at home, performing household responsibilities, and that girls must help their mothers because this is



the behavior of nice girls while boys are outside helping their fathers or maybe studying science (IQ-RES). As a result of the ideology of how women should behave womanly, a great conflict is constructed in women's unconsciousness. Women who live in cultures with strict doctrines about their qualities grow up with the Cinderella Complex because they have low self-esteem. Therefore, the sense of dependency is strong in women's unconsciousness. That is transformed into her consciousness, as a kind of belief that she cannot be an independent person. On that account, she deserves to live as a servant in the marital home. This type of woman is the weakest as she does not believe in her personal abilities and freedom.

However, there is another type of woman who trusts herself and proves to the whole world that she is an independent woman, like Queen Victoria (1819– 1901); Marie Curie (1867– 1934); judge Sabiha Al-Shaykh Dawid (1912- 1975); the well-known journalist Maryam Nerma, (1890-1972); the Iraqi Kurdish poet Sabria Nuri Qader (1928); the Kurdish journalist Layla Qasim (1952-1974), etc (Khalil Al-Eilaf, 2018). All these women had their effect on the history of the world: scientifically, politically, and socially. In fact, most were wives and mothers, but they knew how to control their feelings, minds and even their bodies. They comprehended the necessity of partnership between couples which is the base of a successful marriage, even though they lived in a patriarchal society. Yet they were able to face the Cinderella Complex, and this is a glimmer of hope that the above-mentioned class might not be dependent women, and overcome their unconscious defense; “low self-esteem.”

Cinderella Complex and Literature

Traditionally, literature seems to focus only on the trivial topics in women's lives. It represents women as weak creatures, such as two women struggling for one man, a wife struggling with her mother-in-law again for the sake of a man, or woman's fear for her husband's abundance because she is unfertilized, so maybe he will re-marry as in Islamic societies. The Egyptian series *Eayilat El Hag Metwally* by Mustafa Muharram is a good example of dependent women who do not have any sense of creativity, but only fight each other for the sake of their husband who has four wives. Likewise, the Vikings series by Michael Hirst depicts women as merely bodies for men's desires. It is as if literature was founded to examine masculine issues, and when it deals with women affairs, it again serves men's essential needs. Namely, girls grow up reading stories or watching films about women's courtship and marriage.

These stories affect the unconscious mind of the average woman. They cause her Cinderella Complex, because her main quest in life is how to get married and meet her husband's satisfaction. She turns into a being without any ambitions and dreams to live out. She believes that this is the nature of the universe. Accordingly, women, from childhood to adulthood, only think about how to be similar to fictional protagonists with some specific

qualities “beautiful, polite, graceful, industrious, obedient, and passive” (qtd. in Tipping Su, 2010, p. 747). Thus, passivity turns out to be part of a “nice” woman’s personality who never says “no”, so that God will give her a prince.

It is obvious that literature in its beginnings never shows a real characterization of an independent woman. Mostly all strong independent women are portrayed as villains, for example Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth* (1606–07) who at the end kills herself due to her ambition and strength. However, strong women are not bad characters all the time, but still their happiness and destiny relates to men, for instance Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (1600–02) or *Romeo and Juliet* (1594–96).

Another famous traditional example is Penelope. She is the image of loyalty in *Ulysses*, which is about a woman who waits for her husband ten years, refusing all her suitors, while Odysseus dates women in one of his voyages. In Penelope’s condition, the author draws her as a strong woman who bears all the pain and the suitors pressure, just for the sake of her husband. It is an obvious example of how traditional authors instructed women to conform to the patriarchal system, and to be dependent human beings.

Thus, most literature before the twentieth century reinforced the Cinderella Complex in women’s unconsciousness, to keep masculinity and the patriarchal system safe. Literature made girls escape from their reality to the imaginary world of fairy tales. Ironically, women in both worlds are robbed of their wills; they have to obey in all conditions to be like the kind-beautiful Cinderella.

Nevertheless, after the novel’s emergence in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, topics became more critical and serious. Women’s roles were deepened but still all viewed in a masculine atmosphere. At that time, women still act in the private sphere, and their emotions remain limited, with specific features. It is as if society decides women’s quality and shape, and literature conforms to this imposition. For example, the good girls feel sympathy toward others but are incapable of helping them. As to other qualities, they never get angry, like Fanny Goodwill in Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*. Simply, good women were pictured as purely emotional, as opposed to self-sufficient women who were considered bad ones. Further, novels in this period dealt with sexual issues but never referred to sex problems inside the marital relationship; only in illegal relationships such as *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe. The only reason for marriage is to have children (Wolff, 1972, p. 211). Thus, the Cinderella Complex existed strongly, as women were stereotyped by *Cinderella*’s picture.

From the nineteenth century to the present time, life has changed in all its fields; politically, culturally, scientifically, technologically, and economically. Human beings have more freedom in expressing themselves. However, women’s situation in society has also changed.



Now, self-sufficient women are recognized no longer as bad women. Rather, they are the type who reach political positions such as the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Women are financially independent, a great step for the independence of women's personalities. Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letters*, by American author Nathaniel Hawthorne, is an example of the financially independent woman. Hence, the independent woman is not a majority; just one type out of three.

In the past, the majority of women suffered from the Cinderella Complex. They did not have any rights but only conform with the patriarchal rules. "Women couldn't retain a lawyer, sign a contract, inherit property, vote, or have rights over their children (Powell, 1996)". But in the present, in addition to independent women, there are two other classifications. One type of woman is dependent, similar to her mother, still suffering severely from the Cinderella Complex unconsciously. But the final type is aware of the Cinderella Complex and wants to be independent although she cannot under the force of patriarchy. The last mentioned type of woman is the majority after the twentieth century. Therefore, this paper comes to discuss the problem according to *The Grass Is Singing* by Doris Lessing. It shows how female characters, even when they are independent personalities, still cannot get rid of the Cinderella Complex, as happens with the protagonist Mary Turner. The paper is also a warning for women to be aware of the unconscious psychological disease, the Cinderella Complex. It is inspired by the fact that the consequences of this complex are more harmful for women, but at the same time, in most cases men suffer from it as well, because they live in a baleful family atmosphere as presented in the following section.

Cinderella Complex as Reflected in the Grass Is Singing

The realistic British novelist, Doris Lessing was born on October 22nd 1919 in Kermanshah, Iran. Lessing was awarded the Noble Prize for literature in 2007 (Batra, 2008, p. 1). She did not have any regular education but she cultured herself by reading books. She married Frank Wisdom and had a son and a daughter. However, the marriage ended in 1943 (ibid.). Lessing wrote several novels and short stories, all concerning social and political life. Yet, her biggest concern was women issues, and she was described as "the most fearless woman novelist in the world, unabashed ex-communist, uncompromising feminist too" (ibid.).

The *Grass Is Singing* is a story about a strong independent woman called Mary Turner and how society leads to the creation of the Cinderella Complex, and thus her final scene. Mary lives with her family; however, the narrator does not mention her surname. The Cinderella Complex soon comes to reveal itself, from the second chapter with Mary's mother who hates her drunk husband but is forced to live with him, being financially dependent. Otherwise, she would have divorced him especially after her children's death. In fact, she

divorces him spiritually. Two bodies live in the same house but without any emotion of love. They do not even eat together:

Mary's father who drank himself every evening into a state of cheerful fuddled good humour, coming home late to a cold-dinner, which he ate by himself. His wife treated him with a cold indifference. . . . Apart from that he was a cipher in the house, and knew it. . . . Mary's parents never quarrel over anything but money. (Lessing, 1950, p. 34-5)

Moreover, the drunk father sends his daughter Mary to work in a store in South Rhodesia. She is still young but it is good for her to get away from her boring family. She joins three different schools as her father transfers frequently. She becomes twenty years old and now has a job in an office. She is really a sociable woman. For her family, Mary rarely goes back to her home or as she calls it a "small wooden box on stilts" (qtd. in Batra, 2008, p. 40). However, with her mother's death, Mary never returns to see her father, as if she is avenging for her mother's sufferings: "He's a man, isn't he? He can do as he likes" (Lessing, 1950, p. 36). From Mary's point of view, her father is more powerful than her mother simply because he is a man and society gives him the right to do whatever he wants. So, he is responsible for her mother's sorrow.

However, the sociable Mary was like a child and never cared about love and marriage. She treats her male friends just like pals. In response they also accept her like a sister until patriarchal gossip comes to the surface. It is a turning point in her life, when she hears some of her friends hanging on how "she missed the best thing in life" (Batra, 2008, p. 42). They are referring to marriage and children. Therefore, this sufficient, happy girl turns into an arrested one. Her life is changed completely; she is no more the lovely active girl. Now, she is like the majority of girls in her society with only one obsession called "marriage", in order to be like Cinderella. Whether she dreams about the Charming Prince or not, she starts to dress differently from her own style, to attract men. In other words, she has to be an artificial woman not a natural one.

Nevertheless, she soon find a husband. He is a fifty-five year old widow. However, it is hard for a girl who never thinks about sex to have a relationship with a man her father's age, so that she runs away from his house upon his first try at kissing. This scene shows the psychological struggle of women in searching for a husband. Here, the author pictures a strong protagonist who escapes from such a marriage. But in real life, with ordinary women, mostly they conform to the rules and keep their emotions inside their hearts sometimes unless it comes out in the form of tears and so they (men) call women with whimper.

Mary's attempts to find a husband succeed after meeting Dick Turner. Dick is an honest white man who has a farm in South Africa. He loves Mary and hopes to have children. The

author portrays him as a natural man with natural habits and dreams. Mary agrees to go with him to his farm as this is usual after marriage; the wife should leave her job and go after her husband's dreams. Further, Mary loves nature and she thinks that leaving her job which she likes the most is not bad, as the biggest happiness is waiting for her after marriage with Dick. All the way there, she is half-sleepy, and wakes up in a dark place; it is Dick's farm which will finish all her remaining life. The house is very small with a very low ceiling, as if it is foreshadowing for her that this will be her future grave.

It is a dark night when Mary gets out of the car and walks towards the house, which looks to her "shut and dark and stuffy". The living room is tiny, "tiny and very low", the roof is corrugated and there is a strong musty, almost animal-like smell about the place. (qtd. in Batra, 2008, p. 44)

Mary is very disappointed with the condition of the house. Dick can feel that but she tries to force herself to smile, to not hurt Dick's feelings because her unconsciousness reminds her of the patriarchal system. She settles the situation by offering to arrange the place and in this way she will be a nice woman just like Cinderella. Here, the patriarchal discipline works again when Dick feels happy with his new wife offering. He scolds himself for not thinking about marriage before, as if marriage is just a wife doing all the household activities for free.

Ironically, Mary does not take a long time to realize that she is not Cinderella and that Dick is not Prince Charming. They cannot even have children because they do not have enough money. Generally speaking, she has saved money from her past work, so that she starts to buy some necessary things for her household. She paints the walls by herself. She has much ability and energy to manage everything and to be a good wife. She is happy to surprise Dick with their house after the changes which take two and a half months. He cannot accept all that "energy and efficiency". In other words, Mary's ability reminds him of the qualities he lacks (ibid. p. 47). Here, Dick plays the role of the step-mother and the step-sisters in *Cinderella*. Exactly like Cinderella, Mary too is busy with the household and sewing till night, when she falls into a deep sleep. So far, she becomes a new woman, having different priorities from her previous life.

However, living in South Africa is not an easy thing for a white woman. Mary cannot bear the hot weather so she asks Dick to put new ceilings in their house. Unfortunately, the answer is always no, for he does not have enough money. Mary believes that they will not cost too much. But it seems that Dick does not care about her suffering; of course he is not the Charming Prince. Gradually, the boredom and the loneliness change Mary's personality. She is no longer the lovely, friendly girl; now she hardly speaks even with her visitors. She could not exchange any speech with Mrs. Slatter while Dick has a deep conversation with Mr. Slatter [a white farmer in South Africa].

Dick never listens to Mary's advice and he goes through several mischievous trades which hardens life for the couple. All the while Mary is thinking that "with all the money lost on the turkey-runs, the pig sties, the beehives and now the kaffir store, they could have easily put ceilings into the house and made their life more comfortable" (Batra, 2008, p. 58). One day as she is reading a newspaper, she discovers that her old employer needs an employee. Mary takes a long breath and decides to be herself again, as if she wakes up from her Cinderella Complex. She leaves a note to her husband that she will never come back again. She walks to Mr. Slatter's farm and asks him to drive her to the railway. Mary is very excited to start over in her world in which everything is "glossy, clean and ordered", as opposed to Dick's farm (Lessing, 1950, p. 105). Dick never makes any decision to improve their lives; he never thinks about Mary's needs and psychology. In contrast Mary does her best but this is what the patriarchal society teaches; that a good wife should bear all the difficulties for the sake of her husband, so that a man deals with his wife as a machine not a human being. However, Mary is shocked when her old friends do not know her. Furthermore, her old employer is very disappointed with her status:

Her hands were crinkled and brown; and she hid them under her bag. . . . The man opposite to her was staring at her face. Then he glanced at her shoes still red with dust because she had forgotten to wipe them. Looking grieved, but at the same time shocked and scandalized, he said that the job has been filled already. . . . She [Mary] knew that he was putting her off. (ibid. p. 105).

Angrily, Mary looks at herself in her bedroom in the hotel. She is out of fashion. She cannot know herself, as if her eyes are blaming them all, saying this I missed the best in life! Mary cannot stand herself, she does not have any money or any place to go. During this time, Dick enters and without any conversation the couple goes back to the farm. Now she realizes that she is a completely dependent woman, and that she will soon die just like her mother, as if life is repeating the same scenario. In fact, it is not life which should be blamed. Rather it is patriarchal society which should be blamed for creating the Cinderella Complex inside women, which leads them to give up their jobs and dreams and go into a mirage.

Days pass. Dick falls ill with malaria. Mary holds all the responsibility. The first day is difficult, but it is important for Mary because she has to prove herself among the natives who look at women as weak. The black men do not listen to her commands while the black women are laughing at her, but finally she manages everything. She dismisses some of them and deducts half the wage of those who did not come back work on the first day and she even hits one of them in his face. She works hard to find out the weak points in Dick's work, to fix it. She also organises to plant tobacco which will bring them a higher income. For the first time since her marriage she feels content and confident. But soon Dick recovers from his illness and comes back to his work.

Now Mary begins to think about the second best thing that she should not miss, which is having a child after marriage, according to rituals. She is almost forty. She talks to Dick about having a child for company in her loneliness, but it is useless. Meanwhile she is losing hope in life. A new black servant is serving in her house. Unfortunately he is the same heavy, strong native that she hit on his face. His name is Moses. He is very active and submissive to Mary. He proves himself an honest servant when Dick falls ill for the second time.

However, as each day passes Mary loses her balance more. She has nightmares and hallucinations and when Dick is at home, he is sitting in his chair smoking. There is no communication between them. Their neighbours gossip about them as they are not social, but this time neither of them listen to the gossips. Mr. Slatter watches everything, in particular how Dick's health and finances are getting worse. He advises Dick to leave and go to the town, and start a new project. He offers to buy his farm and sends Tony Marston. "He [Marston] was twenty. He had had a good conventional education. . . . he had chosen South Africa as his home" (Lessing, 1950, p. 192-3). Tony lives with the Turners and goes to work with Dick.

Despite it remains no long for Turners leaving the farm, Mary is with cold emotion. One day, Tony watches how Moses deals with Mary; the situation is not suitable for a white, married woman. Tony dismisses Moses with a very straight voice while his hand is around Mary's waist. Mary feels protective so that she emphasizes on Mr. Marston speech. Moses leaves, angry with Mary's behaviour. In other words, Moses feels offended that Mary, a woman, could deal with a man in this way. Ironically, even though Moses is a servant, he cannot bear such a treatment from a woman. The patriarchal system is everywhere and women should conform to it.

Mary feels restless, as if Moses is around, somewhere in the house. Her instinct is correct. The last day when the Turners are about to leave, Moses avenges his dignity and kills Mary. Dick has lost everything; his health, farm, and Mary, and almost he loses his mind as well. Thus, in conclusion, it is not Mary alone who loses all her dreams and eventually her life due to the Cinderella Complex which the patriarchal society plants, but also Dick, and even Moses who will finish his life in prison. The story closes with a sad scene warning women not to be deceived with Prince Charming, because marriage is not like Aladdin's Lamp in which all the dreams come true. Marriage is a serious step in life and it should depend on both sides, man and woman equally, without giving up women's personality and independence. Awareness of patriarchal rules which are actually against both women and men, is also needed.

Conclusion

This paper offers the following two conclusions:

1. The Cinderella Complex is an unconscious, psychological problem. It infects women all around the world, due to patriarchal doctrines in which keeping women in a close circle, desiring only the Prince Charming who will come and take her to eternal happiness like princess Cinderella. In fact low self-esteem will be the inevitable result, as happens with the protagonist Mary Turner, in *The Grass Is Singing*, who changes from an independent woman to a dependent passive wife who finishes her life in vain.
2. Through discussing male characters; Mary's father and Dick Turner in *The Grass Is Singing*, the paper shows the negative impacts of patriarchal ideology on men. Mary's father finishes his life drinking and living alone, while Dick Turner loses his mind after his wife's murder. Thus, it is important to warn women and the whole community about patriarchal ideology, and to emphasise that women's independent personality never threatens men's power rather it creates a healthy marriage life.



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