



LABORATOIRE DE SOCIOLOGIE
D'ANTHROPOLOGIE
ET D'ETUDES AFRICAINES

LASANEA



**REVUE
DEZAN**

VOLUME 9, NUMERO 1, 2021

UAC, JUIN 2021

DEZAN

VOLUME 9, NUMERO 1, 2021

UAC, JUIN 2021

Toute correspondance est adressée au :
Comité de Rédaction de la revue DEZAN
01 BP 526 Cotonou, République du Bénin
revuedezean@yahoo.fr

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ISSN 1840-717-X DU 4^{ème} trimestre

Dépôt Légal N°6378 du 4^{ème} trimestre

Ce numéro a été réalisé grâce à l'engagement, aux conseils et observations d'enseignants et chercheurs du Département de Sociologie-Anthropologie et d'autres entités de la Faculté des Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines de l'Université d'Abomey Calavi.

Nous tenons à témoigner de notre reconnaissance aux **Professeurs Michel BOKO, Guy Ossito MIDIOHOUAN, Ambroise MEDEGAN, Bertin YEHOUENOU et Maxime da CRUZ.**

Dr. Narcisse YEDJI et Romuald T. SOSSOU ont assuré le recueil, l'agencement et la mise en forme des textes. Le tout, sous la supervision du Rédacteur en Chef par intérim **Dr. Codjo Timothée TOGBE**

REVUE DE ZAN

Volume 9, NUMERO 1, Juin 2021

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SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE GRASS IS SINGING* : A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

ABODOHOU ORERIEU OLIVIER

Enseignant-Chercheur à l'Université d'Abomey-Calavi (Bénin)

olivierabodohou@yahoo.fr

Abstract

Social Discrimination in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*: A Critical Analysis focuses on social discrimination in the postmodern period. It aims at bringing out the question of social discrimination in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*. To achieve my target, I have used psychoanalysis and socio-criticism as appropriate literary theories to critically appreciate how social discrimination is painted in *The Grass Is Singing*. My analysis has brought out that Doris Lessing uses his fictional work as ways and means to enlighten the issues of social discrimination. He also views social discrimination as an obstacle for social fulfilment, development and the well-being during his period.

Keywords: Postmodern period, social discrimination, psychoanalysis, people.

Résumé

La discrimination sociale dans *L'herbe Chante* de Doris Lessing : une analyse critique se base sur la discrimination sociale dans la période postmoderne. Cette étude vise à faire ressortir la question de la discrimination sociale dans *L'herbe Chante* de Doris Lessing. Pour atteindre mon objectif, j'ai utilisé la psychanalyse et la sociocritique comme théories littéraires appropriées pour apprécier de manière critique la manière dont la discrimination sociale est dépeinte dans *L'herbe Chante*. Mon analyse a fait ressortir que Doris Lessing utilise son travail de fiction comme des voies et moyens pour éclairer les questions

de discrimination sociale. Il considère également la discrimination sociale comme un obstacle à l'épanouissement social, au développement et au bien-être pendant sa période.

Mots-clés : Période postmoderne, discrimination sociale, psychanalyse, gens.

Introduction

Generally speaking, social discrimination refers to unjustifiable negative behaviour towards a group or its members, where behaviour is adjudged to include both actions towards, and judgements or decisions about, group members. Social discrimination appears as a silent cancer which has been hindering human progress for ages. No human society has been spared from its consequences. Every civilisation has experienced either a severe or a moderate form of social discrimination at a particular time of their existence. Doris Lessing is one of those authors who through an autobiography, has depicted her own experience of social discrimination.

To achieve my goal, I have organised my research work into four points. The first I deals with the theoretical framework of the study whereas the second point overviews the literature review. The third step focusses on the novel's characterisation and the last part indicates some perspectives.

1- Theoretical Framework

1-1 Problem Statement

Social discrimination has survived and resisted all changes occurred in human civilisation. It has therefore become the main issue of discussions for many authors and theorists whose writings denounce and expose its consequences.

1-2 Rationale

I have chosen Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* for this study since the issues raised about social discrimination are relevant to modern contemporary society. The sustained inequality between individuals on

the basis of illness, religion, or any other measures of diversity such as age, disability, sexual orientation, status as a parent, national origin, pregnancy, sexual harassment, race, colour, and sex, and reprisal/retaliation¹, exists in our society.

1-3 Significance

This paper helps uncover some of the different ways in which Doris Lessing deals with the concept of social discrimination in *The Grass Is Singing* to address the change and the need for it in the target society. In fact, Doris Lessing was referring to the colonial ruling of her new country, Southern Rhodesia during the 1930s and the 1940s². It also attempts to show that representation in the novel under study takes connotation based on love, punishment, gender and social condition.

1-4 Research Methodology

Research methods are specific procedures for collecting and analysing qualitative data to collect information and to organise the collected information according to the concept of social discrimination to interpret patterns and meanings in the data. The data I have collected come from literary theories or criticisms, articles, theses, essays, the novel under study and other materials related to this research work. They have helped me, after reading those literary works to understand them, to elaborate the framework of my topic, to classify the data, to explain them and to interpret its content.

As far as the theoretical issues are concerned, psychoanalysis and Socio-Criticism will be dominantly used in the process of this work according to the social aspect of social discrimination. This analysis is extended to some developing countries, for, what happened in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia during the postmodern period that had affected the British colonial society as well.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/eo/faqs/discrimination.htm#>, 28/12/20, 23:49

² During the 1930s and 1940s, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was a colonial country practised segregationism giving rise later to apartheid. Doris Lessing came into this country at age 6 where she wrote *The Grass Is Singing*.

2-Literature Review

2.1- Social Discrimination and its Different approaches

The term discrimination originates from the latin "discriminare"³. It etymologically means to divide, to separate or to discriminate. But this meaning of the term has encompassed other meanings in the course of time. Along the time, more evil appears in societies. The man-to-man relations have worsened, and more suspicious and hatred sentiments have developed within human race.

Correll and some authors provide a very definition of discrimination. According to them, the behaviour directed towards category members that is consequential for their outcomes and that is directed towards them not because of any particular deservingness or reciprocity, but simply because they happen to be members of that category⁴. So, social discrimination appears as a kind of sympathy or antipathy towards some group members.

The notion of 'deservingness' is central to the expression and experience of discrimination. It is not an objectively defined criterion but one that has its roots in historical and present - day inequalities and societal norms. The behaviours which some judge to be discriminatory, will not be seen as such by others. The expression of discrimination can broadly be classified into two types: overt or direct, and subtle, unconscious or automatic. Manifestations include verbal and non-verbal hostility⁵, avoidance of contact, aggressive approach behaviours⁶ and the denial of

3 https://www.Origin and meaning of discrimination by Online Etymology_22march 2020 15:17

⁴ Correll, J., Judd, C.M., Park, B. and Wittenbrink, B. (2010). *'Measuring prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination'*. In J.F. Dovidio, M. Hewstone, P. Glick and V.M. Esses (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p 46

⁵ Darley, J.M., and Fazio, R.H. (1980). *'Expectancy confirmation processes arising in the social interaction sequence'*. *American Psychologist*, pp 35, 867- 881

⁶Cuddy, A.J.C., Fiske, S.T, and Glick, P. (2007). *'The BIAS map: Behaviors from intergroup affect and stereotypes'*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, pp 92, 631-648.

opportunities and access or equal treatment⁷.

Several approaches have supported discrimination such as the social identity perspective. The social identity perspective is based on a sense of personal identity- as gay, black or as female, the 'behaviours from inter group affect and stereotypes' map, aversive racism theory and system justification theory. The social identity perspective⁸ holds that group members are motivated to protect their self - esteem and achieve a positive and distinct social identity. This drive for a positive social identity can result in discrimination. It is expressed as either direct harm to the outgroup, or more commonly and spontaneously, as giving preferential treatment to the ingroup, a phenomenon known as ingroup bias.

Going further, and illustrating the general tendency that humans have to discriminate, the minimal group paradigm studies⁹ reveal how mere categorisation as a group member can lead to ingroup bias, the favoring of group members over outgroup members in evaluations and allocation of resources¹⁰. In the minimal group paradigm studies, participants are classified as belonging to arbitrary groups and evaluate members of the ingroup and outgroup, and take part in a reward allocation task¹¹ between the two groups. It appears when some groups are created according to some common features.

The results among hundreds of studies show that participants rate ingroup members more positively, exhibit preference for ingroup members in allocation of resources, and want to maintain maximal

⁷ Bobo, L. (2001). *Racial attitudes and relations at the close of the twentieth century*. In N. Smelser, W.J. Wilson and F. Mitchell (eds.), *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences* Washington DC: National Academy Press. pp. 262-299.

⁸ Tajfel, H. and Turner, J.C. (1979). *'An integrative theory of intergroup conflict'*. In S. Worchel and W.G. Austin (eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* Monterey CA: Brooks Cole (pp. 33-47)..

⁹Tajfel, H., and Turner, J. C. (1986). *'The social identity theory of intergroup behavior'*. In S. Worchel and W.G. Austin (eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* Chicago: Nelson-Hall. (pp. 7-24).

¹⁰ Turner, J.C. (1978). *'Social comparison, similarity and ingroup favouritism'*. In T.H (ed.), *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* London: Academic Press. pp. 235-250

¹¹ Idem

difference in allocation between ingroup and outgroup members, thereby giving outgroup members less than an equality norm would require¹². Given the fact that group membership in this paradigm does not involve a deeply held attachment and operates within the wider context of equality norms, this tendency to discriminate is an important finding, and indicative of the spontaneous nature of prejudice and discrimination in intergroup contexts.

Social categorisation is sufficient to create discriminatory treatment, often motivated by ingroup favoritism. Direct competition between groups exacerbates this bias, typically generating responses directly to disadvantage the outgroup. Whereas social identity theory examines basic, general processes leading to intergroup discrimination, the Behaviors from Intergroup Affect and Stereotypes' (BIAS) map¹³ that helps to explain the behaviours from intergroup affect and stereotypes. It offers insights into the specific ways that we discriminate against members of particular types of groups. The BIAS map is an extension of the Stereotype Content Model¹⁴. It proposes that the relative status and competitiveness of groups determine the stereotype content of warmth and competence attributed to the outgroup.

The third approach deals with aversive racism¹⁵, that considers another race as an enemy, complements social identity theory and the bias map¹⁶ by further identifying when discrimination will be manifested or inhibited. The aversive racism framework essentially evolved to understand the psychological conflict that afflicts many White with regard to their racial attitudes. Changing social norms increasingly prohibit prejudice and discrimination towards minority and other

¹² Al Ramiah, A., Hewstone, M. and Al The Social Psychology of Discrimination: Theory, Measurement and Consequences, <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/index.cfm>, avril 2020; 17:15

¹³ Cuddy, A.J.C., Fiske, S.T, and Glick, P. (2007). 'The BIAS map: Behaviors from intergroup affect and stereotypes'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 631-648.

¹⁴ Fiske, S.T., Cuddy, A.J.C., Glick, P. and Xu, J. (2002). '*A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: Competence and warmth respectively follow from status and competition*'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, pp. 878-902.

¹⁵Dovidio, J.F. and Gaertner, S.L. (2004). '*Aversive racism*'. In M. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* San Diego, CA: Academic Press pp. 1-52

¹⁶ which helps identify the form in which discrimination will be manifested

stigmatized groups¹⁷, and work in a certain place has shown that appearing racist has become aversive to many White¹⁸ in terms not only of their public image but also of their private self-concept.

The final approach that we outline is system justification theory, which hinges on the finding that low status groups in 'unequal social system internalizes a sense of personal or collective inferiority'¹⁹. System justification theorists argue that the social identity perspective need for positive distinctiveness as a function of feeling good about oneself and one's group is related²⁰ to the belief that the system in which the groups are based is fair²¹. So, it is based on the welfare of human being.

2.2-Social Discrimination Appreciated by Scholars, researchers and other People

Social discrimination is defined as sustained inequality between individuals on the basis of illness, religion, or any other measures of diversity, many kinds of discrimination such as age discrimination, disability discrimination, sexual orientation, status as a parent, national origin, pregnancy, sexual harassment, race, colour, and sex, and reprisal/retaliation²². Whereas social justice occurs when each person can exercise his rights within a society.

A government that promotes social justice ensures that everyone has physical security, education, healthcare, and employment. It is also defined as "justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities,

¹⁷Crandall, C.S., Eshleman, A. and O'Brien, L.T. (2002). *'Social norms and the expression and suppression of prejudice: The struggle for internalization'*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, pp 82, 359-378.

¹⁸ Dovidio, J.F. and Gaertner, S.L. (2004). *'Aversive racism'*. In M. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* San Diego, CA: Academic Press. (pp. 1-52).

¹⁹ Jost, J.T., Burgess, D. and Mosso, C. (2001). *'Conflicts of legitimation among self, group, and system: The integrative potential of system justification theory'*. In J.T. Jost and B. Major (eds.), *The psychology of legitimacy: Emerging perspectives on ideology, justice, and intergroup relations* New York Cambridge University Press. pp. 363-388

²⁰ positively or negatively, depending on your status

²¹ Jost, J.T. and Banaji, M.R. (1994). *'The role of stereotyping in system- justification and the production of false consciousness'*. British Journal of Social Psychology pp 33, 1-27.

²² <https://www.cdc.gov/eeo/faqs/discrimination.htm#>, 28/12/20, 23:49

and privileges within a society.”²³ Often this is achieved through institutions or services at work to make sure people can equally access the benefits of social cooperation and guard against socio-economic inequality. As far as the effects of discrimination are considered, discrimination affects people's opportunities, their well-being, and their sense of agency.

Persistent exposure to discrimination can lead individuals to internalize the prejudice or stigma that is directed against them, manifesting in shame, low self-esteem, fear and stress, as well as poor health. Dinesh Bhugra (2016)²⁴ perceives social discrimination versus social justice as important as educational.

3-Characterisation of Social Discrimination in *The Grass Is Singing*

Discrimination idealised by Doris Lessing appears throughout her novel *The Grass Is Singing*. In the background of the novel, there is the brutal discrimination practiced against the black by the white British settlers and it is possible to read the novel as a social critique. It is obvious to detect the clash between the white and the black, yet this forms a background in the novel for an individual who deteriorates day by day owing to her failure of balancing her own desires with the intentions of the society.

The conflict between the society and the individual can be noticed from the beginning of the novel. First of all, it is essential to comprehend the features of the society in South Africa. It is a white colonizer society in which there is such a great discrimination against the African people that the English do not accept these black people as human beings and all their laws are set up according to this dogma. The rules are so rigid that

²³

[https://www.google.com/search?q=Social+discrimination+Versus+Social+Justice&og=28/12/20 à 22 :58](https://www.google.com/search?q=Social+discrimination+Versus+Social+Justice&og=28/12/20+à+22+58)

²⁴ Dinesh Bhugra (2016) *Social discrimination and social justice*, in *International Review of Psychiatry*, 28:4, 336-341, DOI: 10.1080/09540261.2016.1210359

any kind of relation between a black and a white person is seen as impossible except for the role of a master and that of a servant.

For instance; Moses is not allowed to ride in the same car even with the dead body of Mary Turner since she is a white woman²⁵. The narrator reflects the negative attitude to the blacks by the words, “niggers, animals and swine” among other humiliating terms. Moreover, the blacks do not have any individuality in the book and they are drawn as types called only by their Christian names such as “Moses and Samson”. They interpret the murder as if it were done for robbery, which is the reason they always give when they want to blame any black person²⁶

The white want to interpret the murder according to their prejudices. They are conditioned to think that the blacks are guilty by birth. Individual judgment is out of the question. The silent agreement at the beginning of the chapter marks this fact in this society where there is no right for any individual to live. The reader can easily comprehend that in such a society, the individual cannot survive if he/she wishes to live according to his/her interests. This is the chief flaw in the tragedy of the Turners, especially for Mary Turner, who refuses the demands of the collective, which causes her to suffer from alienation, isolation and an inevitable madness that comes out as a result. The narrator tells:

The Turners were disliked, though few of their neighbours had ever met them, or even seen them in distance. Yet what was there to dislike? They simply ‘kept themselves to themselves’; that was all. They were never seen at district dances, or fetes or gymkhanas. They must have had something to be ashamed of; that was the feeling. It was not right to seclude themselves like that; it was a slap in the face of everyone else; what had they got to be so stuck-up about? What, indeed!²⁷

Nevertheless, the society does not prefer to explore the reasons for their alienation. They prefer to look at their life-style superficially unlike a

²⁵ Lessing, Doris. *The Grass is Singing*. London: Harper Perennial, 2007, pp.28-29

²⁶ Gul Buyu , *A Freudian Study of The Grass is Singing, Aylak Adam and The White Hotel*, Thesis in English Literature, June 2007.P.24

²⁷ Lessing, Doris. *The Grass is Singing*. London: Harper Perennial, 2007, p.11

young man called Tony Marston, who has just arrived from England and who has not yet developed a deep prejudiced attitude towards the natives.

The conflict between Mary and the society is shown through Charlie Slatter and Mary. Charlie is a typical colonial white man living comfortably in South Africa since he has always behaved in an expected way obeying the social rules of the white patriarchal society. Charlie symbolizes the survival of the fittest in the novel whereas Mary and Dick stand on the opposite side. Therefore, it is inevitable for them to fail in such a community. Charlie is highly disturbed by the behaviour of Mary towards the native and he warns Dick about this²⁸.

Mary's childless and sexless life correspond with the sterility depicted in *Waste Land*. Thus, Lessing pictures the social discrimination of a woman who falls owing to her indifference to and ignorance of herself, and her inability to listen to her needs rather than conforming to social values. Moreover, Doris Lessing wrote a novel whose surface layer indicates a simple conflict between the black and the white. The death of Mary at the end of the novel is not only a sort of warning for the cruelties of colonialism during the late twentieth century in Africa but also the consequences of social discrimination. This social discrimination is based on the race.

4-Perspectives

To actively fight against discrimination in companies many actions need to be taken into account.

4-1- Information and acts as fundamental tools

In everyday life, we can be confronted with many discriminations, depending on our perceived gender identity, skin color, sexual orientation... Whether it is stereotypes (positive or negative), remarks, "jokes", insults, these behaviors are not acceptable. Discrimination is not individual and isolated behavior: most often, it constitutes a whole

²⁸Lessing, Doris. *The Grass is Singing*. London: Harper Collins, 2013, p.221

(repeated behavior, representation in the media...) that can profoundly affect the victim (loss of self-confidence, anxiety, depression, etc.).

To know how to recognize discrimination when confronted with it, but also not to have discriminatory behaviors, it is essential to be informed: this makes it possible to deconstruct stereotypes and to be better informed about what people discriminated against experience.

4-2- Attitudes towards social discriminations

That's the most important thing, even if it's not easy. This will allow you not to remain alone in the face of what you are going through, to have support, to find solutions, to defend yourself... If you can, try to broach the subject with a caring person you trust (friend, family, doctor, teacher...). If this is not possible, know that there are listening numbers or online chats that can listen to you and advise you.

Whether you are a victim of social discrimination, violence, or hate speech. The main thing is to get closer to the competent services in this area. Depending on your situation, you can also file a complaint by going to a police station. Be aware that police and gendarmerie officers are legally obliged to register your complaint. However, if you are confronted with this situation, you can contact the Defender of Rights and/or write to the public prosecutor.

Concrete actions to combat social discrimination effectively, particularly within companies, must be taken on a much wider scale. Pedagogy is essential in order to eliminate sexist, racist or homophobic reflexes from an early age. No study demonstrates the real effectiveness of such a policy in the long term. Gender discrimination is present everywhere and pedagogy will not change anything. It is objectively much more difficult for a woman to maintain her degree of involvement in her work throughout her career than for a man. To remedy this specific problem, the fight must therefore be carried out at the level of society as a whole, rebalancing the role of men and women, both at the professional and family level.

Conclusion

All in all, it appears that social discrimination is a social flaw and manifests itself in every area of human life. In *The Grass is Singing*, Lessing explores some facets through which social discrimination operates, especially through race, gender and class issues. She, then, proved how ineffective and wicked were the Whites politics. That is certainly why she claimed that only some civilisations produce misfits as a result to their failures to cope with social discrimination. In her novel under study, these misfits refer to characters such as Mary, Dick and Moses; and the failures are related to the protagonist's death, Mary, the madness of her husband, Dick, and the imprisonment of her Black servant, Moses. Through psychoanalysis, New Historicism and semiotics approaches, this study unravels some tragic outcomes of any kind of social discrimination. Nevertheless, though *The Grass is Singing* played a crucial role in eradicating racial discrimination, and thus allowing decolonisation in former Southern Rhodesia, a galloping display of social discrimination is being observed on every side of our societies and it is some the factors of an obstacle for social fulfilment, development and well-being in his era.

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ISSN 1840-717-X DU 4ème trimestre
Dépôt Légal N°6378 du 4ème trimestre

Impression : Centre des Publications Universitaires
(Université d'Abomey-Calavi) Tél. : (00229) 95 91 57 61
République du Bénin