

Unveiling Colonial Symbols: Mary Turner’s Murder in Doris Lessing’s “The Grass Is Singing”

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KEYWORDS: *This article examines and interprets Doris Lessing's first novel, The Grass is Singing (1950), as a personal and social portrait of its female protagonist, Mary Turner, from childhood to death and as a political expose of the futility and frailty of patriarchal and colonial culture. Doris Lessing calls into question the morals of all white people in Rhodesia through her novel. By depicting Mary Turner's life, the author expresses her displeasure with prejudice, unfairness, and racial inequality in Southern Africa. The tragic narrative of Dick and Mary Shows what happens to the white population and the black Africans. Despite their best efforts, the pair is miserable, frustrated, and disillusioned. A newspaper article titled "Murder Mystery" soon brings to life the story that Mary, the wife of a poor farmer, was found dead in her home by her housekeeper. In this case, the accused, Moses, admitted guilt. This study seeks to clarify how the novel The Grass is Singing reflects Lessing's understanding of the white colonial experience of Africa as a dark and horrifying examination of a failed marriage, the feverish psychosis of white sexuality, and the terror of black power and energy. This article details how Lessing depicts Mary's subjectivity as formed and intertwined within the ideological factors based on family and society, which ultimately leads to Mary's inability to achieve her sense of self and ultimately to her demise. This study also attempts to elucidate how Lessing's depiction of Mary Turner's murder sheds light on the complexities of power dynamics, sexuality, and racial tensions in colonial Africa. Since my goal is to uncover the circumstances behind Mary's death, I will concentrate on investigating the role of social, ethnic, and sexual barriers in shaping Mary Turner's subjectivity and contributing to her eventual demise.*

KEYWORDS: colonial power, racial identity, patriarchal society, failed marriage, psychological breakdown.

INTRODUCTION

The Grass is Singing is Doris Lessing's debut novel, which incorporates some of her experiences and recollections from her upbringing, childhood, and youth as a white settler in the Rhodesian (now Zimbabwean) veldt. Through the story of Mary Turner, a white landowner's wife, and her deadly relationship with their black servant, the novel demonstrates the author's criticism of sexual and political stereotypes and colonialism in Southern Africa. Outwardly, it appears to be a biographical and psychological portrait of a female protagonist from early life to death; upon closer inspection, it is a political expose of the inefficacy and fallibility of the patriarchal and colonial culture upon which the masculinity of imperialism has been built. As a victim of racism, sexism, and other forms of social prejudice, Mary Turner is unlike any of Lessing's other

characters since she was never given independence. Her entire life was characterized by loneliness, emotional emptiness, and intellectual and material sterility. She was drifting aimlessly after her marriage since she no longer felt fulfilled. Society compelled her to accept a loveless marriage, which she had previously observed in her parent's lives. She was utterly subjugated by alienation and apathy as she grew up in a dysfunctional family. The tidal wave of social fear, sexual unhappiness, and void tossed and turned her life. When race and patriarchy seize her, her struggle in the tumultuous sea becomes more difficult. She was killed by the enslaved Black person not because she was white but because she belonged to the weaker gender.

Doris Lessing, a British author and short-story writer, was born in Iran on October 22, 1919. From 1924 to 1949, she lived on a farm in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) before relocating to England and beginning her writing career. Her writings, which often reflect her socialist political engagement, focus on women's lives and the psychology, sexuality, politics, work, relationships with men and children, and the gradual blurring of vision that comes with ageing. Doris Lessing is a distinguished author who never hesitated to speak against the terrible treatment of Negroes at the hands of whites and the male dominance trend toward females in society. In addition to these issues, Lessing also explores colonialism, Marxism, progressivism, psychoanalysis, and mysticism. She was extraordinarily skilled at recalling and documenting the unpleasant experiences of living under Apartheid. By reading Lessing's works, we feel we are witnessing a real-life event unfold before our eyes. Doris Lessing's life experiences may have significantly impacted her writings. Apartheid and colonialism were brutal realities she had to face. Africa experienced a sombre period known as Apartheid. In addition to impeding the progress of African nations economically, the eclipse of Apartheid agitated the black population's conscience like a hurricane. As a vocal opponent of Apartheid, Doris Lessing was highly active. The oppression that blacks endured under Apartheid is vividly reflected in the works of Doris Lessing. The Apartheid system that dominated Africa from 1948 to 1994 and was endorsed by the National Party is unequivocally rejected by Lessing. This may explain why the majority of her works depict dreadful themes such as Apartheid, gender, ethnicity, identity loss, and psychological breakdown. Lessing did her utmost in her novel to describe the plight of blacks and the evil intentions of Europeans to destroy their joyful existences. With the end of Apartheid in 1994, Africa's history was transformed. In all honesty, it is because of the literary contributions of Doris Lessing that we can discern with clarity the historical realities of colonial suffering, particularly as it pertained to Africans. She had a lot of upheaval in her formative years due to constant relocation. Her early life was filled with events that would allow her to introduce variety into her works.

The Grass is Singing is a "small novel on the emotions," as interpreted by Marxists. The novel's title is derived from section 5 of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). The book depicts the terrible consequences of economic inequality and racial prejudice for both white colonial elites and black communities in southern Africa. The novel is an account of Lessing's life and the racial tensions in South Africa, where whites refuse to see blacks as equals and instead humiliate them in various ways. Lessing provided the audience with a vivid depiction of colonialism. Colonialism represents a form of aggressive policy that poses a significant risk to global peace. The disaster that befell the colonized was the advent of colonial power. Colonialism was not merely a system of individual exploitation; instead, it aimed to reinvest the advantages in the country referred to as the "motherland." The primary factor contributing to the tragic destiny of the protagonist in *The Grass is Singing* is the influence that culminates in colonialism. In this literary work, Lessing imbues numerous characters with an organic quality, as if they were sentient. She begins by revealing to Western readers the current state of affairs in South African colonies during the

apartheid regime with unabashed emotion. She then proceeds to detail the arduous struggle of impoverished white immigrants to survive amid colonialism's shadow.

Furthermore, Mary Turner is the initial marginalized individual to appear in her works; she personifies every quality and spiritual undertone associated with the term "marginal man." As a white woman residing in colonial society, she experiences profound limitations imposed by colonialism. However, she pauses and escapes from her confined situation due to her enlightenment. She appears to be a pitiful woman who endures physical or mental suffering on the colonial farm until a native reprimands her. Still, in reality, it is she who has been subjugated and influenced by racism. As a result, she is a victim of violence that colonialism has concealed.

The novel begins with an article from a newspaper headlined "Murder Mystery." A white farmer's wife is brutally murdered by their black houseboy, as detailed in this account. Even though the murderer confessed to the crime, the title of the newspaper piece remains "Murder Mystery." The narrative traces the events of Mary's life preceding the assassination as it progresses. It begins with her upbringing as a favoured spinster "town girl." It progresses through her adversity-ridden marriage to the meek, needy, and unsuccessful farmer, Dick, her subsequent exile to the desolate Veldt, her agony in the oppressive heat and boredom, and her growing disputes with Dick—most notably concerning her intolerable treatment of the farm labourers. As a result of the misery and poverty of her rural existence, Mary's mental health gradually deteriorates, as evidenced by her sexual anxiety and dread of her housekeeper, Moses. Although not overtly mentioned, the novel implies that Mary sexually submits to him at the exact moment that her mental faculties start to deteriorate. An Englishman arrives at the farm and observes something is amiss; their relationship proceeds. Mary expels Moses at his behest; immediately preceding her departure from the farm, Moses reappears to brutally murder her on the front terrace of her residence. Lessing intensifies Moses' murder of Mary by portraying her two protagonists in a personal relationship of estrangement, fragmentation, and destruction of awareness. In truth, fragmentation is a process that incorporates both aspects of this experience. Lessing sees the oppression of blacks and women as a result of externally visible social and political structures that are either insufficient or coercive. To these life-denying or intolerable social structures, she finds an expression inside herself.

The research problem revolves around understanding the circumstances leading to the death of Mary Turner in Doris Lessing's "The Grass is Singing" within the broader context of colonialism, patriarchy, and racial inequality in Southern Africa. It aims to unravel the intricate web of social, ethnic, and sexual barriers that ultimately culminated in Mary's tragic demise.

What socio-political and cultural factors contribute to Mary Turner's murder in "The Grass is Singing," and how do they reflect Doris Lessing's critique of patriarchal and colonial structures in Southern Africa?

The objectives of this article are:

- To analyze the portrayal of Mary Turner's life from childhood to death in "The Grass is Singing" as a reflection of patriarchal and colonial culture in Rhodesia.
- To examine Doris Lessing's critique of prejudice, unfairness, and racial inequality in Southern Africa through the lens of Mary Turner's narrative.
- To explore the dynamics of the failed marriage between Dick and Mary Turner and its implications for the white colonial experience in Africa.

- To investigate the role of social, ethnic, and sexual barriers in shaping Mary Turner's subjectivity and contributing to her eventual demise.
- To elucidate how Lessing's depiction of Mary Turner's murder sheds light on the complexities of power dynamics, sexuality, and racial tensions in colonial Africa.
- To critically analyze the themes of white sexuality, black power, and colonial terror as portrayed in "The Grass is Singing" and their relevance to understanding the colonial experience in Africa.
- To contribute to existing scholarly discourse on Doris Lessing's portrayal of colonialism and patriarchy in her literary works, particularly in "The Grass is Singing."
- To offer insights into the socio-political implications of Mary Turner's murder within the context of Southern African history and colonial legacies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Grass is Singing is a serious examination of a woman's moral deterioration, which comes to symbolize the end of European rule in Africa, as well as an examination of the seemingly perpetual quartet of dividers: race, nation, gender, and class. This novel is written by an African author who happened to be in that region of the country and was intimately familiar with the living conditions of the locals. Doris Lessing was raised on a farm in Southern Rhodesia, thus she has firsthand experience with the discrimination and oppression that came with white colonial power. She uses her knowledge of colonial interactions in the apartheid-ridden Dark Continent as her inspiration. Like her prior novels *Children of Violence* and *The Golden Notebook*, *The Grass is Singing* illustrates the country's erotic, political, and intellectual progress. Mirza (2017). Mary Turner, the protagonist of *The Grass is Singing*, is much less complicated than the protagonists of *Children of Violence* Series and *The Golden Notebook*, but she shares with them a preoccupation with female sexuality, an obsession with self-analysis, and a conscious anxiety that is overwhelmingly male. Ahmed (2013).

Female power in Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* can be equated with sexual opportunity so long as it is experienced during the novel's protagonist Anna Wulf's and Molly Jacobs' time with their respective male partners. To avoid the oppression and confinement of cold relationships, "as Karl calls them, many women fantasize about becoming groundbreaking and triumphant once each of them acts as a free operator, unreservedly choosing the emotion that ultimately determines her fate," Consequently, Lessing's women choose their fate, and the overwhelming majority of them succumb to physical illness. Wulf concludes with a mental breakdown, a condition she reaches at the end of her exploratory existence and which is alluded to at the beginning of Lessing's story in *Free Women*. Lessing begins the *Free Women* with a conversation between Wulf and Jacobs, two women who appear to be autonomous and free. Ana, along with Molly in London, tells her, "The fact of the matter is, that to the extent I can see, everything's breaking up." Lessing (1962, P.15) Women's lives are typically viewed as culminating with marriage. In *The Grass is Singing* by Lessing, Mary is nearly coerced into an arranged marriage. In contrast to Martha from the same series, *Children of Violence*, Mary is allowed more freedom by her parents. Mary's childhood was traumatic because her alcoholic father regularly beat her mother Ahmed (2013).

Both *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys and *The Grass is Singing* by Lessing show how complicated the creation of racial identity can be. They have questioned conceptions of racial identity that persisted well into the middle decades of the twentieth century because they cannot

simply ignore a racist, colonial past. Lessing's novel confronts colonialism issues that were current at the time she wrote it, and as a result, its depiction of a colonist from the 1940s was highly controversial. Antoinette, the protagonist of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, suffers greatly at the hands of society's expectations for women and is ultimately doomed by the pressure to wed. Like Mary, Antoinette is a woman whose entire destiny is controlled. Furthermore, from a post-colonial viewpoint, the land itself is a character in both stories. In *The Grass is Singing*, the land is a source of conflict, but in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it symbolizes repressed sexuality and subversion. However, much can be learned about the novel's racial dynamics through how colonists and natives interact with the land.

In Just over two pages, Rhys sets up the conflict between white and black, Creol white and English, and white Jamaican society(colonial middle and upper-class) and her narrator Antoinette's white family over Emancipation. (Martiniquan widowed mother, two children). Savory (1998, P.136) Lessing uses an ironic narrative voice in *The Story of Two Dogs* to expose racial and economic discrimination in the settler community and undermine colonial discourse. Louw(2018). Jean Pickering(1990) identifies racial, economic, and gender inequality as the three most pressing social problems. Here is how Pickering characterizes the male-female connection:

Even though the white settlers themselves were raised in a class system, the group's class ideas have since been reduced to a binary of us white people and them, black people. However, there is an additional value system that further complicates things. White settler civilization places men much higher in authority than they do in "middle-class" England. Pickering (1990, P.19).

Mary's dementia is significant insofar as it provides an ironic lens through which to examine the broader psychiatric condition of the apartheid nation. The trope of insanity foreshadows J.M. Coetzee's recent depiction of apartheid as a collective lunacy phenomenon. Coetzee argues that historians have failed to address the force of the irrational in politics by attempting to demonstrate latent interests such as ethnic mobilization or class beneath the ideology of apartheid. He proposes that rather than attempting to make sense of apartheid rationally, what is required is "a tracking, a following in the footsteps of the movement in which ideas are displaced-reading, that is to say, rather than explanations" Coetzee(1991,p. 27). Lessing, a Marxist, viewed the European colonization of Rhodesia as an unjustified takeover of territory in the 1940s. Her autobiography, *Under My Skin*, describes how she became conscious of poverty in the bush as a youngster and how she became actively involved in South Africa until she left the country in 1957. She says that being poor was one of the two major themes of her formative years.

Modernist literature is, of course, replete with ontological insecurities, also known as "identity crises". Male protagonists, especially men, are more likely to have such crises, and they can be as young as Holden Caulfield or as old as Herzog. Female protagonists, such as Esther Greenwood in Plath's *The Bell Jar* or Maria in Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*, occasionally experience a crisis in fiction. Despite this, creative studies of ontological rarely show the material underpinnings of the problem, regardless of the sex of the protagonist or the author. (Zak 1972). Authoritative works such as *A Passage to India* (1924) by E.M. Forster, *The Raj Quartet* (1966-1973) by Paul Scott, and *Disgrace* (1999) by J.M. Coetzee all depict white women's attraction to black men as an indirect and humiliating form of apology. In all three works, white women are sexually assaulted by black males, but they never testify against their attackers out of some unexplained sense of colonial shame and duty. It is unclear why Adela Quested, Daphne Manners, or Lucy Lurie must suffer for the atonement of white guilt, as opposed to the male colonial slave-owner, administrator, or governor, in the fictional texts written by white men. (Wang.2009). My focus in this analysis of

Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*, is, however, on delving into the circumstances behind Mary Turner's murder.

COLONIAL NARRATIVES REEXAMINED: DECONSTRUCTING MARY TURNER'S TRAGIC FATE

Exploring Mary Turner's Deterioration

Understanding Lessing's Examination

Mirza (2017) delves into the intricacies of Mary Turner's moral decline in *The Grass is Singing*, emphasizing its symbolic significance in the context of European rule in Africa. Doris Lessing's intimate knowledge of colonial interactions, derived from her upbringing in Southern Rhodesia, serves as the backdrop for this exploration.

Female Sexuality and Power

Insights from Lessing's Works

Ahmed (2013) examines the portrayal of female power in Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, equating it with sexual opportunity experienced by characters like Anna Wulf and Molly Jacobs. Through their pursuit of autonomy, Lessing's female characters confront societal expectations, often leading to psychological distress, as observed in Anna Wulf's mental breakdown.

Marriage and Societal Expectations

Mary Turner's Plight

Ahmed (2013) highlights the pressure on Mary Turner to conform to societal marriage norms in *The Grass is Singing*. Unlike Martha from the *Children of Violence* series, Mary's upbringing, though traumatic, allows her more freedom, yet she still faces coercion into marriage, reflecting the pervasive influence of societal expectations.

Confronting Racial Identity

Comparative Analysis of Rhys' Work

The examination of racial identity in Lessing's novel, as discussed by authors like Savory (1998), parallels themes in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Both authors challenge prevailing conceptions of racial identity ingrained in colonial societies, with Lessing's depiction of a colonist sparking controversy for its confrontation of colonial issues.

The Symbolism of Land

Interpreting Land as a Character

Authors like Savory (1998) and Louw (2018) explore the symbolic significance of land in *The Grass is Singing* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. While in Lessing's narrative, the land serves as a source of conflict, Rhys imbues it with symbolism representing repressed sexuality and subversion, shedding light on the racial dynamics inherent in colonial settings.

Exposing Social Inequality

Insights from Lessing's Narrative Voice

Lessing's use of an ironic narrative voice, as discussed by Louw (2018), exposes social inequalities within settler communities in *The Story of Two Dogs*. Through this narrative technique, Lessing undermines colonial discourse and confronts issues of racial, economic, and gender inequality, as identified by Pickering (1990).

UNVEILING COLONIAL TRAGEDY: THE COMPLEXITIES OF MARY TURNER'S FATE

Unravelling Motives: The Backdrop of Tragedy

Contextualizing Mary's Demise

The narrative delves into the aftermath of Mary's death, offering insights into the underlying motives behind the tragic event. Through a retrospective lens, the story unfolds, shedding light on the intricacies of Mary Turner's life and the factors leading to her untimely demise.

Family Dynamics: Seeds of Repression

Influences of Childhood Trauma

Mary's formative years are marked by the oppressive presence of her father, whose dominance and disregard for his family sow the seeds of repression. Witnessing her mother's helplessness and enduring their parents' volatile relationship, Mary grapples with deep-seated pain, shaping her outlook on femininity and sexuality.

A Quest for Liberation

Breaking Free from the Past

Seeking liberation from her troubled upbringing, Mary embarks on a journey of isolation, distancing herself from familial ties and societal expectations. Her pursuit of independence is fueled by a desire to avenge her mother's suffering and carve out a new path for herself.

The Illusion of Marital Bliss

Enter Dick Turner

Mary's marriage to Dick Turner, initially seen as an escape from loneliness, quickly reveals itself as a facade. Both parties enter the union to fulfil societal norms devoid of genuine affection or understanding. Their relationship becomes a battleground of unmet expectations and concealed truths.

The Mask of Conformity

Suffocating Societal Pressures

Mary's attempts to conform to societal standards of femininity and marital bliss only exacerbate her inner turmoil. Her façade of girlishness and immaturity serves as a defence mechanism against her deep-seated sexual phobia, perpetuating a cycle of repression and discontent.

A Descent into Madness

The Strain of Isolation

As Mary navigates the challenges of farm life and societal rejection, her mental and emotional state deteriorates. The strain of isolation, coupled with her repressed desires and unfulfilled dreams, pushes her to the brink of collapse.

The Collision of Cultures

Colonialism and Its Discontents

Mary's interactions with the native population reflect the deep-seated prejudices ingrained in colonial society. Her treatment of native workers, influenced by rigid colonial standards, further alienates her from those around her.

Forbidden Desires: Mary and Moses

A Taboo Romance

Mary's burgeoning attraction to Moses, her native servant, defies societal norms and colonial expectations. Their illicit relationship catalyzes societal upheaval, challenging the established order and inviting scorn and condemnation.

The Unraveling of Sanity

A Tragic Denouement

As Mary's mental state deteriorates, her infatuation with Moses intensifies, leading to a fatal confrontation. Her death at the hands of her native servant serves as a culmination of repressed desires, societal pressures, and colonial tensions.

Confronting Colonial Hypocrisy

Reckoning with the Status Quo

Mary's demise exposes the hypocrisy and brutality of colonial society, where racial hierarchies and gender norms dictate the lives of its inhabitants. Her tragedy serves as a stark reminder of the injustices perpetuated by colonialism and its lasting impact on individuals and communities.

The Echoes of Mary's Legacy

Interpreting Mary's Fate

After Mary's death, questions about her collaboration and Moses' motivations linger. Her demise, while tragic, symbolizes a liberation from the shackles of societal expectations and colonial oppression.

A Contested Narrative

Debating the Consequences

The novel's conclusion prompts reflection on the complexities of race, gender, and power in colonial Africa. Mary's fate, intertwined with themes of repression and desire, invites scrutiny and interpretation, challenging readers to confront the legacy of colonialism and its enduring impact on individual lives.

CONCLUSION

Mary Turner is incapable of comprehending her own identity due to the intertwining of so many conflicting colonial and gendered narratives. The colonial power asserts that she must act by the norms of her imperial character. Her disintegration too, must be suppressed because it poses a threat to the authority of the hegemonic category as a whole. At the time of her death, Mary exemplifies the abject: she is destitute, socially isolated, insane, sexually tormented, and awaiting death alone. Yet, this absolute state of humiliation enables her to emerge in a manner that finally gives her a sense of advancement and purpose. In the end, Mary is lost in the chasm between what others read about her murder in the newspaper and the truth about this catastrophe. What others know or appear to know are the power lines that white patriarchy and imperialism construct. It demonstrates that even reality is a product of ideology, and this is especially true when discussing women's sexuality. Mary's misery is not due to any personal failure on her part, but rather to the catastrophic results of imperial control over oppressed and oppressor alike. In sum, the novel, *The Grass is Singing* is an indictment of its protagonist, Mary, who lives at the centre of a closed white colonial society in southern Africa, where the intertwined discourses of class, race, and gender, lead her to exclusion, isolation, breakdown, and ultimately death.

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