



Intersections of Colonialism and Ecological Crisis: Examining Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* from an Ecocritical Perspective

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Abstract

Literary texts often reflect and engage with various ecological concerns, addressing issues related to the environment, sustainability, human interaction with nature and the impact of human activities on ecosystems. This interaction between human and the natural world is one of the key aspects addressed by ecocriticism. It examines how literary texts shape and are shaped by our understanding of the natural world. Ecocritical readings encourage readers to think critically about human interactions with the environment. Doris Lessing in her novel *The Grass is Singing* delves into the complexities of colonialism, racial dynamics, and the human relationship with nature. It explores the psychological and environmental consequences of the colonialism in Southern Rhodesia. The novel's portrayal of the environment is richly symbolic, reflecting the ecological consequences of colonialism and the complex relationships between humans and nature. The aim of this paper is to examine the novel from ecocritical perspective exploring the interconnection between colonial exploitation and environmental degradation.

Keywords: environment, nature, colonialism, ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is a literary and cultural theory that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment. It emerged in response to the growing environmental crisis and a heightened awareness of humanity's impact on the planet. By examining the representation of nature and ecological themes in literature, ecocriticism offers insights into cultural attitudes towards

the environment. This aids in our understanding of the intricate relationships that exist between literature, ecology, and society.

One of the fundamental tenets of ecocriticism is the acknowledgment that literature is not isolated from the environment. Rather, it is deeply entwined with the natural world. Ecocritics seek to understand how

authors engage with nature, environmental issues, and the human impact on ecosystems. They explore the ways in which literary texts reflect and shape cultural attitudes toward the environment and contribute to our understanding of ecological interconnectedness. In many literary works, nature serves more than just a background. It takes on a life of its own and acquires meaning. Writers often endow landscapes with metaphorical connotations that reflect contemporary values and cultural attitudes. Through an ecocritical lens, we can unravel the layers of meaning attached to natural settings, exploring how they contribute to the overall thematic richness of a narrative. In the words of Richard Kerridge:

Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint. Texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful or helpful effects. Beliefs and ideologies are assessed for their environmental implications. Ecocritics analyse the history of concepts such as 'nature', in an attempt to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present global ecological crisis. Direct representations of environmental damage or political struggle are of obvious interest to ecocritics, but so is the whole array of cultural and daily life, for what it reveals about implicit attitudes that have environmental consequences. (Kerridge, 530)

Literature has long been a powerful vehicle for exploring and disseminating ethical considerations. Through the lens of environmental ethics, literature becomes a dynamic space for examining moral dilemmas, ethical responsibilities, and the consequences of human actions on the environment. The ethical implications of a literary work in relation to the environment are among ecocritics' primary concerns. They investigate how writers address issues such as environmental degradation, resource exploitation, climate change, and the

consequences of anthropocentrism. The ethical perspective encourages readers to reflect on the moral implications of human actions depicted in the text and how these actions contribute to or challenge ecological crises.

In addition to such ethical considerations, ecocritics also examine the cultural and historical contexts of a literary text. The socio-cultural milieu in which the text is situated often shapes the characters' relationships with the environment. So, the exploration of the impact of historical events on ecological landscapes provides valuable insights into the broader ecological discourse embedded in the text. Colonialism, driven by ideas of dominance and exploitation, has profoundly shaped human interactions with the environment, resulting in ecological degradation and environmental injustice. Ecocriticism and colonialism intersect in a profound and complex manner, offering a lens through which to understand the environmental consequences of colonial endeavors and the ways literature engages with these themes. Colonialism often involved the systematic exploitation of natural resources in the colonized territories. The ecocritical viewpoint makes it possible to analyze the ways through which colonial powers, driven by economic interests, engaged in deforestation, resource extraction, and the imposition of foreign agricultural practices. This exploitation of nature served as a tool for both economic gain and the establishment of authority over the landscapes that had been colonized. Numerous literary works illustrate how colonial actions have an impact on the environment. Authors of such works address the effects of colonialism on the natural environment and explain how imperialist activities led to ecological damage and environmental injustices.

Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing* is a significant work which provides a critical examination of the effects of colonialism on the lives of individuals and the society as a whole. It offers readers a thought-provoking exploration of racial conflict and the complexities of human

relationships within the context of colonial Africa. Set in Southern Rhodesia, the novel explores the dynamics between the white colonial settlers and the indigenous African population. The story of the novel revolves around Mary, a white woman who marries a poor farmer named Dick Turner and moves to a remote farm. The couple's relationship is strained, marked by isolation, unfulfilled expectations, and a lack of understanding. Mary's life becomes increasingly isolated and suffocating as she struggles to adapt to the harsh realities of farm life and the complex racial dynamics of the colonial society. Dick's character also serves as a lens through which the dynamics of race, class, and power in colonial Southern Rhodesia can be examined. Dick Turner is a white farmer, and the racial tensions and social expectations that characterized the colonial context are centered around his marriage to Mary.

Dick's aspirations for success are intertwined with the exploitation of the land and the African workers, mirroring larger colonial patterns and their effects on the natural world and native inhabitants. As a white farmer Dick represents the colonial power structure. Dick's management of his farm and interactions with the African labourers are subject to certain expectations placed on him as a white man in a position of authority. However, despite his privileged position in the racial hierarchy, Dick struggles with loneliness and difficulties of farming in a hostile environment. His character serves as a commentary on the dehumanizing effects of colonialism, both on the colonizers and the colonized.

The novel explores the intricate relationship between man and the environment. Its portrayal of the Southern Rhodesian landscape, the agricultural practices on the farm, and the broader ecological themes contribute to a nuanced understanding of environmental issues within the context of colonialism. The arrival of farmers as colonial immigrants in Rhodesia and their use of the land

for farming disrupt the natural environment and the ecosystem. For these farmers, financial gain was the primary goal and not the development and preservation of the Rhodesian lands. The novel demonstrates how the network of the colonial systems altered the appearance of the Rhodesian landscape.

As the railway lines spread and knotted and ramified all over Southern Africa, along them, at short distances of a few miles, sprang up little dorps that to a traveller appear as insignificant clusters of ugly buildings, but which are the centres of farming districts perhaps a couple of hundred miles across. They contain the station building, the post office, sometimes a hotel, but always a store. (Lessing, 31)

At the expense of exploiting Africa's natural resources, the infrastructure was built for the colonial settlers' financial benefit. Trees had been cut down in order to make room for the rail and road networks and the construction of different centres. It demonstrates the harm that colonial activities caused on the environment. The novel shows that the actions of the white farmers were responsible for environmental degradation as they showed little concern for the preservation and sustainability of the Rhodesian landscape. Instead, they perpetuated different farming malpractices and mishandled the land in order to achieve their colonial goals.

The novel offers a vast canvas for an analysis of environmental issues. The Turner farm, described vividly by Lessing, becomes a microcosm reflecting the environmental consequences of colonial exploitation. Lessing skillfully interweaves the personal and the political, illustrating how the oppressive structures of colonialism manifest not only in interpersonal relationships but also in the abuse of the natural world. The environment of Rhodesia is a living example of the ecological damage caused by human activity. Dick

Turner's land was owned by miners who removed every tree in the area, exemplifying the exploitation of natural resources for financial benefit.

Years before he bought the farm, some mining company had cut out every tree on the place, leaving nothing but coarse scrub and wastes of grass. The trees were growing up again, but over the whole there was nothing to be seen but stunted second growth: short, ugly trees from mutilated trunks. There wasn't a good tree left on the farm. (Lessing, 86 – 87)

The tone of the novel is greatly influenced by the Southern Rhodesian landscape which Lessing's prose captures in great detail. The harsh environment greatly influences the lives of the individuals on the Turner farm. The relentless heat and the arid conditions contribute to the isolation and tension felt by the characters. This representation of the environment serves as a metaphor for the harsh realities of colonial life, where the exploitation of the land and its inhabitants are intertwined with the struggle for survival. The farming activities, which illustrate the unrelenting quest of profit and control, highlight the detrimental effects of a colonial mentality that prioritises monetary gain over environmental conservation.

One of the main environmental challenges the novel addresses is water scarcity. Lack of water on the farm is one of the major problems faced by settlers trying to begin farming in that area. Lessing's depiction of the struggle for water resources underscores the ecological realities that shape the characters' lives. The novel's references to draughts and Dick and Mary's yearning for rain highlight water shortage as a significant environmental issue.

And then the drought began. [D]ay after day the great clouds banked up, and day after day the ground grew hotter and hotter....Then, one afternoon, there was a

slight shower...Again the drought began, and the weeks passed without a sign of rain. At last the clouds formed, piled up, dissolved. Mary and Dick stood on their verandah and saw the heavy veils pass along the hills. Thin curtains of rain advanced and retreated over the veld; but on their farm it did not fall... (Lessing, 130)

The exploitation of nature and the domination of Africans were interconnected aspects of colonialism. The exploitation of the natural world was accompanied by the imposition of racial hierarchies and other oppressive social structures during colonisation. One of the main defences used for the economic exploitation, cultural hegemony, and enslavement of the African continent was the image of Africa as dark and primitive. One of the colonial myths and metaphors that reflects colonial attitudes towards the natural world is the idea of Africa as a hostile wilderness. The notion of Africa as a "dark continent" contributes to the construction of African nature as wild and untamed that must be subdued. In this context, the remarks made by Mutekwa *et al* (2013) are noteworthy:

Colonial attitudes toward the natural environment are also mediated by colonial metaphors and myths of Africa as a "dark continent" where the image of Africa is that of a hostile wilderness waiting to be opened up, penetrated, and tamed by Western technology....The construction of Africa as a "dark continent" means that African nature is othered at two levels, namely, that of nature in general, and secondly, in its construction as the savage and threatening Other. This implies that it can only be controlled and dominated through brute force. (242 – 243)

The colonial perceptions of Africa as a place of wild nature to be exploited and tamed is the backdrop against which the environment

is portrayed in *The Grass is Singing*. Mary has no connection to her environment. The human and nonhuman aspects of her environment frighten her. Charles Slatter does not care for the environment. Lessing uses characters like Slatter to highlight the environmental concerns while indirectly criticizing colonialism. Financial gain was the main priority for white farmers like Slatter, who utilised the land anyway he pleased and took advantage of the environment. Lessing describes Mr. Slatter's farm as almost without trees. When he initially arrived there the land was ecologically sound since it was covered with trees. However, Charlie has overused the land for tobacco farming, cuts down the remaining trees and sells them as firewood. He even discourages Dick from planting trees and persuades him to cultivate Tobacco instead:

Mr. Slatter's farm had hardly any trees left on it. It was a monument to farming malpractice, with great gullies cutting through it, and acres of good dark earth gone dead from misuse. But he made the money, that was the thing. It enraged him to think it was so easy to make money, and that damned fool Dick Turner played the fool with trees.... He spent three hours trying to persuade Dick to plant Tobacco, instead of millies and little crops. He was very sarcastic about those "little crops," the beans and cotton and sunhemp that Dick liked. (Lessing, 81)

In terms of environmental sustainability, Charlie Slatter and Dick are portrayed as having opposing perspectives. Charlie shows little concern for the long-term viability of his farm. His overuse of the land for tobacco production and the removal of trees are reflections of his self-centered economic goals. Due to his capitalist mindset, Charlie was unable to consider how his harmful actions were affecting the environment. On the other hand, Dick Turner demonstrates his concern for environmental sustainability by planting trees and engaging in other eco-friendly activities.

Dick even was not ready to cultivate tobacco considering it as "an inhuman crop." (81) However, in spite of his efforts to restore the sustainability of the farm land through tree plantation, Dick's environmental behaviour is paradoxical in that he commodifies farm animals only for financial benefit. In a similar vein, Dick views the African labourers as "savages" and attempts to "manage" them in order to get them to work on his farm and generating income for him.

To conclude, Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* offers a rich and multi-layered exploration of the environment in the context of colonial Southern Rhodesia. By fusing ecological themes with the story's larger social, racial, and psychological aspects, Lessing creates a nuanced and thought-provoking portrayal of the complex web of relationships between individuals, society, and the environment. These literary representations contribute to our understanding of how the environment became a contested space, subject to the power dynamics of colonial relationships.

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