



An Analysis of the Other in *The Grass Is Singing* from the Perspective of Post-Colonialism

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Abstract

As Doris Lessing's first published work, *The Grass Is Singing* depicts the social situation in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s under the apartheid system. It tells the tragedies of the white woman Mary, the white farmer Dick, and the black slave Moses. This paper examines the postcolonial other images in the novel from a postcolonial perspective. Starting from several important viewpoints of post-colonialism, it separately analyzes the reasons for the collapse of the identities of the main characters and the causes of their becoming others. Then it points out that several characters are unable to resist the oppression and reshape their identities. In the end, the paper reveals that only by eliminating the racial system, reducing the gap between the two sexes, and narrowing the gap between classes, can true harmony be achieved.

Keywords: *The Grass Is Singing*, Doris Lessing, post-colonialism, the Other.

1. Introduction

Doris Lessing is the most outstanding and brilliant female writer after Virginia Woolf. Her works deeply reflect the changes of human thoughts, emotions and cultures, and therefore Lessing has been praised as one of the unique western novelists who embraces sympathetic souls in the 20th century. *The Grass Is Singing* is Lessing's first full-length novel, which caused a sensation among the critics on its publication.

The Grass Is Singing is set in southern Africa and tells the tragic story of a white woman named Mary. Mary grew up in a poor family and was raised in an environment lacking family warmth. She was filled with fear towards men and marriage. Under the pressure of society, when she reached the marriageable age, she married a farmer, Dick. However, her married life was not satisfactory. The farm was managing poorly and the family was in poverty. She was forced to submit to life. But at this time, the intrusion of the black laborer Moses broke

her numb and chaotic life and she was attracted by gentle Moses. However, the social environment of racial discrimination doomed their relationship to have no good results. Eventually, Mary was forced to abandon Moses, and Moses, in a fit of rage, killed Mary.

The novel presents the social situation in southern Africa under the apartheid system, and describes the difficult survival journey of poor white immigrants. What's more, the novel touches upon the themes repeatedly expressed by Lessing in her creation, which are the survival environment and social status of women, and the racial discrimination system's impact on personal life. Through the portrayal of the typical tragic fate of Mary, the novel profoundly reveals the essential relationship between different races and social classes among people under the colonial ruling system, and analyzes the social root causing Mary's tragic ending.

Lessing's personal experience deeply shaped her writing. She was born in a British colonial official's family. In 1925, her parents moved to the British colony of Rhodesia in Africa. The Lessing family made a living by farming, but it did not bring them wealth. As white people, they were unable to truly integrate into the white culture. Their impoverished family circumstances made those wealthy British bourgeois look down upon and distance them. At the same time, as people from the colonial country, they were also regarded by the local blacks as European colonial invaders and unable to integrate into the local black community.

Those who were caught in the gap between the suzerain's and the colony's cultures would inevitably encounter a series of cultural identity issues. They could be recognized by neither the British colonists nor the colonized. They were excluded from both societies. This sense of being without belonging made Doris Lessing felt in a marginal state. The rootlessness and marginality in her cultural identity were

well reflected in her works. During her long writing process, Lessing always focuses on the fate of marginalized people and consciously constructed her cultural identity by depicting the survival status of marginalized people (Wang 134). Her early works are mostly set in South Africa and have a strong characteristic of autobiography, concerning people's survival condition. In 2007, Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature because of her gigantic literary achievements, becoming the eleventh female winner of this prize.

2. Post-colonialism

Post-colonialism has emerged alongside other theories in the last few decades, assisting in the tasks of decolonization conducted in the Western academy. It deals with the literature emerging in the countries that once were colonies and the works written by critics who set the colonial world as their writing background. Critics of post-colonialism try to explore the political, cultural and social effects of decolonization, attempting to challenge the Western authority and establish a new equal world after the colonial age. The concept of the Other is a very important concept in the field of post-colonialism.

Post-colonialism is a continuation of decolonization, carried on in the Western academy, often termed as Postcolonial Studies. As a branch of humanities, it denotes a collection of "theoretical and critical strategies used to examine the literary, political and historical culture of former colonies of the European empires, and their relation to the rest of the world." Generally speaking, postcolonial studies covers at least four distinct areas: imperial cultures, cultures of the colonized, cultures of resistance that opposed imperialism, and relationship between First World metropolitan and Third World peripheral cultures. This study is concerned with "both the material effects of colonisation and the huge diversity of everyday and some-times hidden responses to it throughout the world" (Zhu 285).

Post-colonialism is mainly a theoretical study on cultural differences. The differences mainly refer to the intricate and complex interrelationships between the original colonial powers and the colonies as well as the Third World during the colonial period.

Identity, the Self and the Other are popular topics in cultural studies within the post-colonial context. In post-colonial theory, the Western are often referred to as the subjective Self, while the people in the colonies are called the Other of the colonies, or simply the Other. As a representative figure of post-colonial theory, Edward Said pointed out in his representative work *Orientalism* (1978) that the West constructed the Orient as "the Other", and in the Western hegemonic rule over the Orient, the Orient became a "the Other" subordinate to the West.

Indian scholar Gayatri Spivak is another main representative of the Western post-colonial theoretical trend. As a female scholar from the Third World, she faces the double oppression of colonialism and male dominance, so her focus is mainly on the survival conditions of the lower-class people in the colonies, especially women. Spivak introduces a female perspective, highlighting the history and current situation of colonial female as silent "the Other", and leads post-colonial criticism to think about gender issues within the colonial society, enriching the concept of the simple Other of the orient.

Based on Spivak, Homi Bhabha proposes the issue of minority groups, viewing minority groups as constantly emerging "the Other", and further extending the post-colonial criticism's thinking to the society itself, focusing on the minority groups within the society (Deng 55).

3. Analysis of the Other Identity in *The Grass Is Singing*

The novel has three main characters: Mary, Moses and Dick, who are subjected to multi-pressures from gender, race and class, and

thus become the Other. The novel ultimately reveals the truth that colonialism is a tragedy for all.

3.1 Mary: The Gender Other in the Colonial Patriarchal Society

Under the rule of patriarchy, women, as the Other, have been in a subordinate and marginal position for a long time. The traditional male-dominated concept suppresses the development of women's self-awareness, reducing them to marginalized Second Sex. In the novel *The Grass Is Singing*, the female protagonist Mary loses her subjectivity and becomes a victim of patriarchal rule in the male-dominated society.

Mary's childhood was characterized by "the filthy little house on the steps, the rumbling train and the endless quarrels between her parents". Her father spent all day drinking in the small shop in the town, causing the family to be unable to make ends meet. As a result, her mother had to deal with household chores, sewing, and arguing with her husband over money every day. She also had to go to the shop to vent her anger. So Mary hated her father deeply, and after finding a job, she rarely saw her father. Although he loved her, he abandoned her, and the father and daughter did not correspond. For Mary, "shutting her father out was a way to avenge her mother's suffering before her death". However, under the influence of the patriarchal society, she and her mother both had rigid ideas of female servitude: men could do whatever they wanted without caring for the family, while women had to give birth to children and manage the household. It seemed that they were unable to escape this fate of serving men.

After her father's death, Mary felt free and at ease. She became the personal secretary of the boss and her salary was quite substantial, and she could definitely become independent. But this would go against the gender norm ingrained in her, because she was still a girl who needed a man to "take her out", "outside the

office and outside the club, her life relied entirely on men". When she reached the age for marriage, although she lived a very happy life alone, she was angry and sad when she heard her friends mocking her that "She has to marry someone older than her, a person in their fifties is suitable for her". In a patriarchal society, she gradually realized her identity as the Other and began to experience the existence of her identity crisis, so she had to change her original teenage appearance, abandon the previous thought of "looking down upon men", and pay attention to whether there were suitable men around for marriage.

Because she couldn't separate her identity from society, and the patriarchal society defined women as being at home to support their husbands and raise children. Married women couldn't work outside, either. Under the invisible requirements and prejudices of society towards women, Mary, who had received a very good formal education and enjoyed a civilized and comfortable life, began to feel uneasy, lose her confidence, unable to recover, and even unable to survive, just because society regarded unmarried women as useless.

In the center of Western discourse, women were at the periphery of the discourse. Mary had no means to refute others' opinions about her or to have any other discursive power. Thus, marginalized as she was, she had no choice but to hastily get married under the pressure of public opinion, which indirectly led to her tragic situation.

So she met Dick. Although Mary and Dick were not in love, they got married for their own self-interests. Mary hoped to escape the prejudice of society against older unmarried women and regain her superiority over men. Dick wanted to find a wife to have children. In Dick's eyes, having a child was the most important thing, and women were merely tools for giving birth. He chose to marry Mary only because Mary seemed calm and had the qualities of a good wife. In his view, it didn't

matter who the marriage partner was; as long as the woman could have children and manage household affairs, which was the male-dominated society's expectation for women as the angel in the family. Therefore, the two got married without knowing more about each other.

After marriage, Mary, who settled on the farm, placed her hope for a better life on Dick, who mastered the farm. Although she looked down upon Dick, she still hoped to rely on him, "She needed a man stronger than herself. She would try to mold Dick into such a person. If his willpower was indeed stronger than hers and he truly gained the upper hand over her, then she would surely love him." But in Mary's eyes, Dick was still a child and couldn't be relied upon. Later in life, Dick's self-esteem also prevented him from listening to Mary's advice. He couldn't provide his wife with a rich material life, nor did he show the meticulous care or psychological comfort that a husband should offer. Even Mary's right as a mother was cruelly deprived by Dick as a reason for poverty. In nearly ten years of marriage, Dick had always refused Mary by saying that it would cost too much to install the ceiling. Mary had to endure the intense heat at home. And his incompetence and timidity left Mary speechless. Eventually, she felt that there was nothing to complain and fell into a state of speechless silence. Although Mary had always had an unnamed fear of blacks since childhood, she had to endure living under one roof with them. During several firings of blacks, Dick never showed any understanding towards her and even complained that,

I told you when I married you what you could expect. You can't accuse me of telling you lies, I explained everything to you. And there are farmers' wives all over the country living no better, and not making such a fuss. And as for ceilings, you can whistle for them. I have lived in this house for six years and it hasn't hurt me. You can make the best of it. (Lessing 96)

When Mary was determined to fire Moses, Dick shouted at her in a savage and rude tone,

“Mary, you must keep this boy. He is the best we have ever had.” He said again, after a silence, his voice ugly with hostility: “I can’t stand anymore changing of servants. I’ve had enough. I’m warning you, Mary.” Facing Mary’s silence and crying, he not only didn’t offer her comfort but also said in a language of an authority towards a subordinate, “Mary, did you hear what I said?” (Lessing 181)

He coldly kept Mary at a distance. And Mary could only endure Moses’ presence and her husband’s indifference.

What Mary did neither changed her impoverished situation nor relieved her sense of spiritual emptiness. She decided to leave the farm and return to the city. However, in a patriarchal society, women had no other options. Her social status had transformed from an economically independent white-collar woman to a poor and pitiful rural woman. Her boss asked her to return home and refused to provide her job. Therefore, she could only reluctantly follow Dick, who was searching for her, back to the farm and return to a life almost identical to that of her mother. She was defeated for the second time in life, and this blow almost made her numb. She realized that in a patriarchal society, she could only rely on her husband.

Even after Mary’s death, she remained an overlooked and maligned figure within the patriarchal and the white supremacist society. When the police chief investigated the situation at Dick’s house, he seemed to have already guessed the reason for the murder. Therefore, he showed compassion for Dick, but had extreme contempt and anger towards Mary. He directly stated,

“Women are pretty bad that way, in this country, very often. My old woman

drives me mad—it’s something about this country, They have no idea how to deal with niggers..Needs a man to deal with niggers. Niggers don’t understand women giving them orders. They keep their own women in their right place.”

Throughout the sheriff’s entire interrogation and investigation, they only mentioned Mary once, and this mention was merely a matter-of-fact, cold statement. Mary’s death did not stir their emotions; they would not shed a single tear for her. What angered them was Mary’s extremely evil behavior, that her flirtation with the black slave had completely humiliated them, so Mary’s death actually became a form of relief for them, although no one knew the details.

Mary’s life was full of pain and contradictions. She yearned for independence and freedom, but it was impossible to achieve within the patriarchal system. Her thoughts were marked by the influence of patriarchy. She longed to change her life but placed her hopes on her husband Dick. After the failure of the rebellion and complete despair towards Dick, her world had already collapsed. She became a walking corpse in the patriarchal society, and the inevitable outcome of the contradictory development of her life was her death.

Furthermore, Mary was also a victim of colonial injustice and racial discrimination. Mary was a native white person from southern Africa. From her childhood, she developed the racial discrimination belief that “white people are inherently noble while black people are inherently inferior”. Her mother warned her to stay away from the black indigenous people since they are filthy and might do terrible things to her. The long-term colonial education made her form a strong sense of white pride and superiority. Therefore, Mary was always critical of the servants and harshly treated them. As a defender of colonialism and racial discrimination, Mary had to uphold the dignity and status of white people in front of the black

people. She often appeared arrogant and rude in front of the servants and treated them like animals.

But as a woman, deep down in her subconscious, she still longed for the love from the male. Moses' care and protection awakened the long-suppressed desire for the male within her. On one hand, Mary relied on him emotionally and physically. On the other hand, she did not forget the racial differences between them and still treated him as a superior, domineering over him. The longing for love and the rejection of Moses' black identity led Mary into a great contradiction. Eventually, Mary mercilessly drove Moses away, and this caused Moses' hatred towards her, which led him to kill Mary.

In Lessing's writing, Mary has become an outright enforcer of colonialism and racial discrimination. She is forced into this struggle between the so-called superior race and inferior race, a struggle entirely caused by colonialism and racial discrimination. On one hand, due to the constraints of the social system and people's prejudices, she is completely unable to control her own destiny, becoming a pitiful weakling, alienated and marginalized; on the other hand, she is also an accomplice to the evil colonial system, taking on the role of a cruel white employer. In this struggle, Mary's soul and humanity have been extremely distorted: as a person, her conscience still exists; but as a colonizer, the dignity of the white colonizers is something she must uphold. It causes her soul to struggle painfully in the narrow gap, and her already fragile soul to waver on the verge of collapse (Zhao 190). In other words, because of her compromise with male authority in the binary opposition and her compromise with colonial ideology and colonial society, she has headed towards destruction.

3.2 Dick: The Other among the White Colonists

Dick was a white farmer living in Africa. However, due to poor management, his farm

ran into debt every year and he was alienated by other white farmers.

White immigrants came to South Africa for the purpose of making money. The vast land of South Africa was their source of wealth. Although Dick was a member of the white society, he was different from other colonists. He was the only white person who loved this land, and this was also the source of his tragedy. He grew beans, cotton, and Indian hemp, which were crops of little value, but refused to grow tobacco which Charlie and most white people relied on to make money. This lack of social integration made him alienated from the white society.

Due to Dick's disastrous management of the farm, his family was on the verge of bankruptcy. Although Dick belonged to the White brothers, his situation was not much better than that of the indigenous people under his control. His existence challenged the racial superiority of the colonists, and the unfortunate failure of this white person became a racial disgrace in the white society.

First, Mary and Dick's poor living condition made their white group disgrace.

Living the way they did! That little box of a house – it was forgivable as a temporary dwelling, but not permanently. Why, some natives (though not many, thank heavens) had houses as good; and it would give them a bad impression to see white people living in such a way. (Lessing 3)

Their poor living condition did not get sympathy or help from their white group, however the couple were looked down upon by them and treated as monsters. When people talked about the couple, their mood was always so bitter and casual, as if they were talking about the misfits or outlaws. The Turners were disliked, although few people among neighbors met the Turners. They never went to the local party, the banquet or the sports meeting, so

people always thought this couple had something to be ashamed of. The hypocrisy of the white civilization was presented by the rich whites' attitude toward the poor whites.

Second, as a little farmer, he had no place in front of the big farmer. His so-called good friend Charlie seemed to help him because of the first rule of the South Africans: You shouldn't let your white brother fall into an irreparable state, otherwise, the blacks will think they are as noble as you white people. But in fact, Charlie didn't like him at all and was always calculating when Dick's farm collapsed, planning to buy Dick's farm to expand his own farm and make more money.

He needed Dick's farm badly, because the farms that bounded his on the other sides were taken up. He knew exactly what he wanted to do with it. Dick's farm consisted of a little bit of everything. He had a hundred acres of that wonderful dark soil; and it was not played out, because he had looked after it. He had a little suitable for tobacco. And the rest was good for grazing. (Lessing 195)

Poor farmers like Dick were plundered by Charlie through swallowing their farms. Charlie, as the representative of the large farmer, his own interests was always the first. To them, the first rule of the South Africa was in fact just for their own interests. The first rule of the South Africa was the White Civilization.

Third, to the whites, poor people's life was not important. Mary's death was indifferent for the white collective. What the whites were more concerned was whether the poor whites lost their face. Her death was the relief for the collective whites because the poor couple were separated from the white group. "They apparently did not recognize the need for esprit de corps; that, really, was why they were hated" (Lessing 3). After Mary was murdered, the Sergeant came to investigate the case. But neither the Sergeant nor Charlie did mention the victim Mary, except that the Sergeant said

"Better get her out of here. It is too hot to wait". It seemed that the Sergeant did not want to know the truth of the murder during his talk with the new comer Tony.

In fact, they all knew the murder was not so easy as that a white woman was murdered by her black houseboy. The white civilization never allowed a white woman had close relation with a black man. However Mary broke the white civilization. She was hated by all white group because she made them felt ashamed. It was just because of keeping the white civilization that Mary's death was not investigated further. The murder ended quickly and hurriedly.

The first rule of Southern African society was obeyed to save the whites' face and collective spirit. However Mary and Dick, as the poor whites, violated the whites' collective spirit. And the contradictory relationship between the poor whites and the collective spirit was irreconcilable, which showed the hypocrisy of the White Civilization. What they call the collective spirit was merely to protect the rich.

On the other hand, his characteristic was also cowardly, which also accelerated the occurrence of the tragedy. Raewyn Connell believes there are many types of masculinity and divides them into four categories, dominant, subordinate, borderline and collusive. Dominant masculinity has brutal and aggressive behavior, primitive desire, absolute dominance. Subordinate masculinity is timid, weak, gay, Oedipus Complex and so on. The confrontation with dominant masculinity ends with a tragedy of subordinate men and marginal women.

Dick was weak, lacking in willpower and disorganized. Faced with the hardships of life, he attributed the hardships to the government group that favored blacks and Mary's abandonment. Therefore, Dick's life was doomed to be hopeless. Eventually, the land he regarded as a treasure was taken over by Charlie. The sudden death of his wife and the loss of the land sent Dick into a state of madness,

and it also signaled the end of his journey to find himself.

Therefore, the Turner family was constantly marginalized by the white society and became the Other in a foreign land. Their tragedy shows the hypocrisy of the white civilization.

3.3 Moses : The Other as a Black Person

When *The Grass Is Singing* was published, the white class in South Africa not only enjoyed the white racial privileges, but also owned half of the land in the area. At that time, the white population accounted for only 4% of the total African population. South Africa began to implement the apartheid system in 1913, which allowed the British colonial rulers to use the law as a weapon to blatantly deny the citizenship rights of the indigenous black people, even stripping them of their basic human rights, causing the political and economic status of most indigenous black people to be continuously marginalized. This intensified the conflicts among African ethnic groups and led to the emergence of ethnic movements across Africa, in an attempt to resist the colonial rule over the black people (Li 44).

In the white-dominated areas, the indigenous people lived in the marginalized areas. This harsh living environment symbolized their social status as the Other. Just as Edward Said quoted Marx's words at the beginning of his book *Orientalism*: They cannot describe themselves; they can only be described. The black people described by the whites were inferior and uncivilized savages. The stereotype that black people were intellectually inferior had become a prevalent ideology.

At the beginning of the novel, when the news of the black Moses killing the white mistress was published in the newspaper, people all over the country were "angry, but with a mixture of pride" because their stereotype of black people was confirmed. Especially every time a black indigenous person

committed theft, murder or rape, the whites would have this feeling. Because of the black's identity, he had the nature of theft and so on, and this nature could never be changed. Later, the whites regarded this incident as a topic, but it was not because of the murder itself, but because they wanted to strengthen their stereotype of the blacks, warn future generations, and reinforce the racial segregation system.

The novel also contains many descriptions of whites as sacred and blacks as dirty or racial segregation. For instance, when Dick learned of his wife's death, he seemed to go mad, but no black police officer came to control him because "black people are not allowed to touch the bodies of white people, not even black police officers are allowed to do so." Also, a black man was not allowed to stay with a white woman, even if the woman was dead. And when Tony saw the affair between Mary and Moses, he also criticized Mary, saying "This kind of relationship is like having a relationship with a wild animal."

In the white world, there is a white culture, which will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it. So, above all, it cannot afford failures, such as the Turner's failure. (Lessing 30)

However, in the face of such unfair treatment, the black people had no choice but to accept it. The master was wary of his possible theft, but the black servant, Samuelson, didn't care at all and let it go as it was. To the whites, as slaves, blacks had no right to speak. Even reasonable expressions of demands were not allowed. For instance, Moses expressed his need for water in words, but when he tried to assert his right to speak, he was met with a whip instead. The whites had the backing of police,

courts and prisons, while the blacks had nothing to rely on but to endure in silence.

Moses was a rebel, a contender for the right to speak. However, his rebellion was helpless and silent. Eventually, it was brutally suppressed. He resisted Mary's harsh demands by taking a passive and non-cooperative approach. He wiped the blood from his face. There was a somber and hateful expression in his eyes. His resistance was entirely silent, expressed only through his eyes. When the dignity of a human being was brutally trampled upon and the inner hatred could no longer be quelled, he adopted an extreme form of resistance: murder, and thus paid the price of his life.

On this colonial land of South Africa, the black people were the lowest form of existence. They had no right to speak for themselves and could only be the Other in the white society.

4. Conclusion

Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*, as a profound post-colonial literary work, takes the apartheid society of South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s as its background. Through the tragedy of three characters with different identities, it reveals the darkness of colonial rule, patriarchal oppression and class solidification and the essence of the Other phenomenon in the colonial social. This paper, from the perspective of post-colonialism, interprets the multiple connotations of the Other identity of the three protagonists. It finds that in the colonial social structure which Western white supremacy is the core, the marginalization and alienation of the individual are not a single result of race, gender or class factors, but the joint effect of the interweaving and mutual influence of multiple oppressive forces. Their failure in the resistance also tells us that only through multi-factor analysis can we break through the predicament of becoming the Other.

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