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A Study of Colonialism and Identity in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract

Doris Lessing's debut novel *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) provides a penetrating critique of colonialism, race relations, and identity in Southern Rhodesia through the lens of postcolonial theory. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's insights from *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, this study explores the psychological and social consequences of colonial domination for both the colonizer and the colonized. The novel portrays Mary Turner's gradual mental disintegration as a symbolic reflection of the moral decay of the colonial system. Fanon's concepts of alienation, internalized superiority, and the creation of the "Other" illuminate the tensions between white settlers and black natives, as well as the deep psychological fractures produced by racial hierarchies. The power dynamics between Mary and Moses, her African servant, reveal a complex interplay of dependence, fear, and suppressed desire, resonating with Fanon's analysis of colonial ambivalence. Through this framework, the paper examines how Lessing critiques the exploitative structures of imperialism and exposes its dehumanizing effects, revealing the identity crises and cultural dislocation endured within a racially stratified society.

Keywords: Colonialism, Post-colonial, Identity, Silence, Race, Gender

Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) stands as a compelling critique of colonialism, racial hierarchy, and identity formation in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Set against the backdrop of the British colonial system, the narrative unfolds the tragic story of Mary Turner, a white settler whose life gradually disintegrates under the weight of racial prejudices, cultural dislocation, and social isolation. The novel is not merely a personal tragedy but a symbolic representation of the psychological, social, and moral decay inherent within colonial structures. Existing scholarship has focused on race, gender, and power dynamics, yet often neglects a deeper psychological account of the colonizer–colonized relation. Here, Frantz Fanon's postcolonial framework–especially his analyses of othering, alienation, ambivalence, and colonial violence–supplies the critical tools to examine Lessing's exposure of imperial ideology and its psychic costs. Fanon's observations in *Black Skin, White Masks*–that "the colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards" (BSWM 9)–

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resonate with the settlers' insistence on European norms as measures of worth, while The Wretched of the Earth clarifies how colonialism operates through "naked violence" and yields only to greater force (TWE 23).

The narrative opens with the announcement of Mary Turner's murder and then reconstructs the chain of events that lead to it. Mary's childhood is marked by poverty and a loveless home; adult independence in town offers respite until social pressure drives her to marry Dick Turner, a struggling farmer. Rural isolation and financial precarity erode her emotional stability. She treats African workers with disdain, yet becomes increasingly dependent on Moses, her servant. The boundaries of power blur in their uncanny intimacy, and Mary's fear hardens into paralysis. The closing murder–foretold at the outset–returns as culmination rather than surprise, an act saturated with the contradictions of a violently stratified world.

The newspaper frame that opens the novel models the colonial gaze. Lessing begins with the public report–"Mary Turner, wife of Richard Turner, a farmer at Ngesi, was found murdered on the front veranda of their homestead yesterday morning. The houseboy, who has been arrested, has confessed to the crime" (Lessing 7–8)–and then immediately shows how white readers "turn the page," reassured that their assumptions about "natives" are confirmed (Lessing 8). Rather than dwell in sensationalism, Lessing turns to the private circuitry of inference, complicity, and silence within the white district, suggesting a tacit pact not to interrogate what the murder reveals about the whole colonial order (Lessing 9).

When the narrative shifts from the press to the farm, Lessing's descriptive realism anchors the social world in material detail. A scene set on the veranda after the murder notes "a puddle of rainwater … tinged pink," and dogs licking at its edge, before the camera of narration lifts to the veld and blue kopjes (Lessing 21). The weathered landscape, the bruised veranda, and the unromantic indifference of animals together deny the consolations of melodrama; the environment records violence as residue, as if the land itself has absorbed the rhythms of domination and reprisal. Lessing underscores the everyday infrastructures of settler life–the "store" with its mingled smells of dried blood, hides, fruit, and soap; racks of bright cotton dresses; and a proprietor marked as "alien" (Lessing 23–24). This mercantile hub, a colonial convenience and profit node, becomes the backdrop of childhoods and adult routines alike, and its sensory catalogue hints at how commerce and coercion intertwine.

Fanon's claim that "the settler makes history; his life is an epoch, an Odyssey" while the colonized are shunted outside history (TWE 27) clarifies the settlers' pretence to civilizational authorship. Lessing dramatizes this ideal of mastery as a brittle performance. Mary's managerial authority depends on a continual staging of superiority, a ritual that displaces her fears into racist caricature. When she confronts African women waiting outside the store, she recoils from their infant-feeding, their calm, their "bright-coloured group" set against green trees and grass; "Their babies hanging on to them like leeches," she tells herself, translating maternal care into disgust (Lessing 89–90). The moment is ethically indicting and psychologically diagnostic: what Mary cannot bear in herself–dependence, nurture, embodiment–she projects onto the "Other," then repudiates.

The labor regime translates projection into policy. During the monthly payout ritual, the boss-boy calls names while Mary tallies wages; half-

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crowns are deducted for minor insubordinations, and murmurs rise among the men. "The average wage was about fifteen shillings, for the month" (Lessing 107). The parsimony is structural, not incidental; Lessing's arithmetic becomes a moral ledger that reveals the calculus by which settler comfort rests upon black precarity. Fanon's diagnosis of colonial economics–deprivation as method, hierarchy as pedagogy–fits precisely: the colonized learn inferiority by design, while the colonizer stabilizes identity through the degradation of others (TWE 42–43).

The farm's material privations–ceilingless rooms, heat like a pressing weight, tobacco crops ruined by late rain–intensify domestic strain and inward collapse. "It is so hot down there," Mary pleads, instinctively withdrawing from the fields and the men whose labor she supervises (Lessing 62). Heat here is not just climate but a suffocating register of social antagonism. The "obsession" with heat fuses with Mary's obsession with surveillance–"supervising that native"–and with her wish to retreat (Lessing 62). The double motion typifies colonial ambivalence: the colonizer needs the colonized, and yet cannot endure proximity.

Lessing records the minutiae of Mary's psychological oscillations. On one page she experiences "sad clearsightedness," a briefly lucid perception of her life and marriage; on the next she desires to erase that clarity, to return to illusion (Lessing 132). She watches Dick with pity and contempt–"so nice," so lacking the "iron" that would bind him (Lessing 132–33)–and secretly savors his abjection when he kisses her hand and asks forgiveness (Lessing 58). These details matter because they show how the economy of humiliation structures settler identity: superiority becomes a narcotic felt in the body. Fanon's insight that identity under colonialism is a theatre of masks–"the mother country's cultural standards" supplying the script (Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks 9)–finds concrete life in Lessing's scenes of domestic ritual, where even the arrangement of curtains versus ceilings can index authority, shame, and longing (Lessing 58).

The Mary–Moses relation crystallizes these contradictions. Lessing avoids melodramatic overstatement, relying instead on tone, gesture, and the choreography of rooms. There is a quiet but definitive reversal once Mary's rage yields to dependency. The text does not memorialize a single whipping scene as a theatrical pivot; instead, it tracks a more insidious slide from command to need. When Mary weeps "helpless and weak" before Moses because she cannot face Dick's anger, he stands behind her in silence; she feels "shaking with sobs again, there, in front of the native!" (Lessing 146). Soon after, he brings her a tray: "pinks and reds, bush flowers, thrust together clumsily, but making a strong burst of colour on the old stained cloth." He waits, "propitiatory," for approval; she cannot give it (Lessing 150–51).

In the fevered nights while Dick lies delirious, Mary lies on the sofa listening. She "smelled the hot acrid scent of native bodies… only the soft noise of steady breathing." She imagines, then hears, Moses move through curtains and back into the kitchen; "She thought: soon he will be coming back. She lay still, so as to seem asleep" (Lessing 157–58). The lines are extraordinary because they capture a relation without dialogue: surveillance, anticipation, fear, and a strange reliance. To the white district, any suggestion of intimacy is scandal; to Mary, dependency is both relief and terror. Fanon's description of ambivalence–fear shadowed by fascination–locates this unstable circuitry precisely: the colonizer who would

refashion the colonized "discovers in this other his own fragility" (BSWM 112).

The community's policing of racial boundaries accelerates the crisis. When Mary speaks to Moses with what Charlie Slatter hears as "flirtatious coyness," he is jolted less by impropriety than by the destabilization of the code that secures their world (Lessing 174–75). That same code surfaces grotesquely in the opening pact of silence–"'A bad business,' someone would remark"–which signals the determination to prevent a single murder from becoming an indictment of the system (Lessing 9). Mary's peculiarity–her failure to keep "distance," her inconsistent cruelty and dependence–becomes the community's alibi for reasserting distance as the essence of civilization.

Lessing's style intensifies as Mary faces the approach of death. The last movement of the novel reads like a fever dream of enclosure, with the house "now a shell of amber light and shadows, hollowed out of the wide tree-filled night" (Lessing 148). In the climactic vigil, Mary sits alone upon "the old sofa… facing the long vigil of her death" (Lessing 199–200). The narrative thins to sensation: "a vast black body, like a human spider, was crawling over the roof, trying to get inside… She was alone. She was defenceless" (Lessing 202). The scene is ethically risky–relying on a racialized imaginary of menace–but Lessing frames it as Mary's perception, the last metamorphosis of her fear into mythic form. Meanwhile Moses moves with unhurried certainty through the rain, handling, hiding, then reclaiming the weapon (Lessing 204–05). Lessing refuses a final speech of justification, denying readers the comfort of confession or ideology in Moses's mouth. The absence is strategic: it is a negative presence, a silence that gestures to subaltern opacity and to the fact that the white narrative cannot, or will not, hear.

Fanon's analysis of anticolonial violence helps to read the ending without romanticizing it. "Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence" (TWE 23). Equally stark is the claim that "at the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex" (TWE 51). The point is not that violence is good in itself, but that in a system founded on force, refusal is forced to speak the language of its world. Lessing does not glorify the murder; she catalogs its banality–the pink tinge of rainwater, the dogs' tongues, the ordinary furniture–and thereby denies both exculpation and spectacle. The murder is an unbearable fact and a legible symptom.

Mary's subjectivity, carefully traced, proves constitutively colonial: fashioned against the "native" and yet fearful of being alone, tethered to an authority that is sustained by domination and yet collapsing from within. Her recoil from black women breastfeeding (Lessing 89–90), her preference for curtains over ceilings (Lessing 58), her pride in Dick's pleas (Lessing 58), her horror in nights of breathing (Lessing 157–58): these are not trivialities but the grammar of a life built on distance and dependence. Fanon's contention that the settler's story is "the history of his own nation in regard to all that she skims off, all that she violates and starves" (TWE 27) gives a macro frame to these micro scenes. Lessing's novel, by contrast, writes the un-history of the farm–the ledger columns, empty barns, the "fifteen shillings," and the monthly ritual of payment (Lessing 107–11)–and thereby reveals how that grand settler "history" is paid for in wages of humiliation.

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If Lessing's technique at times risks reproducing racialized sensoria (smell, dark bulk, spider), her narration insists on rendering them as Mary's projection rather than objective truth, and then offsets them with documentary textures–the store's smells (Lessing 23–24), lists of accounts (Lessing 118–19), the mechanics of disease and weather (Lessing 125–26, 132). The cumulative effect is to hold the reader within Mary's failing world while continually pointing to the world beyond her–a world of laborers, of gossiping districts, of police protocol and branch telephones, of minimal wages and dependent prosperity.

Critics have long read *The Grass Is Singing* as a study in Manichean binaries (JanMohamed), a feminist portrait of a woman's breakdown (Merivale), and a realist condemnation of settler mores. This paper enlarges that conversation by using Fanon to track the interior steps by which hierarchy becomes a need. In this sense, the "Other" is not simply an object misrecognized but the very crutch that keeps Mary upright until the crutch becomes the instrument of her fall. Her dependency on Moses is not an exception to colonial structure but its truth: the colonizer requires the colonized materially and psychically, even as the ideology requires denial. Lessing shows the denial failing: the "propitiation of the flowers" (Lessing 150–51), the late-night crossings through curtains (Lessing 158), the fear of being "defenceless" (Lessing 202).

The final pages turn from the psychology of a woman to the sociology of a district. After the murder, a choreography of management commences: Charlie Slatter's efficient interventions, the curious absence of telephone use in favor of personal notes, the spectacle of a confession (Lessing 9–10). The system closes ranks, staging order as if the farm's catastrophe were a discrete thing, a "bad business" (Lessing 9). But the novel has already shown that the conditions of this "business" are everywhere: in the wages envelope, the store's inventory, the drought's arithmetic, the gossip's code. In that sense, Mary's death is not an event but an exposure.

Fanon is often simplified as an apostle of violence, yet his project is a transformative humanism: decolonization not only of territory but of consciousness. Lessing's novel anticipates this by suggesting that neither Mary nor Moses can be fully human within the perimeter of the farm as colony: she is trapped in the costume of superiority; he is kept outside speech. Where Fanon sees "compartments" carved into the colonial world, Lessing paints the rooms and verandas of one such compartment until the reader can feel the heat that enforces it and the silence that sustains it. Even the land–"the veld," the rainy season, the quickening grass reclaiming the paths (Lessing 194, 198)–seems to remember other uses, other times.

In closing, The Grass Is Singing reads, through Fanon, as an anatomy of identity ruined by domination. Colonialism organizes the senses and feelings–smell, heat, disgust, pity, dependence–into a pedagogy of distance; it manufactures a superiority that must be performed and re-performed until the performance fails. Lessing's refusal to grant Moses a confessional speech is not a failure but an ethical decision about who has been allowed to speak and under what conditions. The novel's answer to "why" is structural, not personal: because a world of "naked violence" (TWE 23) produces counter-violence; because a hierarchy that must deny relation breeds a relation it cannot bear; because an order that calls itself civilization depends on the everyday rituals of humiliation that are finally visible in a

ledger, a tray of flowers, a night of breathing, a veranda at dawn.

By weaving Fanon's language of othering, alienation, and violence into Lessing's fabric of detail, we see how the novel exposes the intertwining of psychic and political domination–and why, at its end, the district's silence is not simply shame but strategy. Lessing's realism complicates the moral geometry, refusing both exoneration and demonization. What remains is a record of damage and a critique of the world that produced it. That critique is as much about the colonizer's self as it is about the colonized's suffering, and its lesson is Fanon's: liberation demands the end of roles that unmake persons.

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