

Original Paper

Racism, Transformation, and Awakening—A Postcolonial

Interpretation of Identity in *The Grass Is Singing*

Zhaoyu Yang¹

¹ Xianda College of Economics and Humanities Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

Received: April 26, 2023

Accepted: May 5, 2023

Online Published: May 17, 2023

doi:10.22158/assc.v5n2p143

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/assc.v5n2p143>

Abstract

Doris Lessing's "The Grass Is Singing" depicts British expatriates' migration experiences accommodated into their new living and social surroundings in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to highlight the dilemmatic situation full of shocks and hardships those migrants confronted with in their lives as a result of dynamic colonial identities on African land. The purpose of this paper is to expound on racial discrimination against the native blacks in this novel, analyze the white hostess's identity transformation, and study the native's awakening of his ethnic consciousness. Since culture is by no means static, the resilience and adaptability of colonial societies should not be underestimated. Therefore, I argue that through learning how colonized peoples responded to the political and cultural dominance of Europe, the resilience and transformability of colonized cultures would change the characteristics of imperial culture itself in ways that have been both profound and lasting. The themes of racial discrimination, identity transformation, and the awakening of ethnic consciousness depicted in "The Grass Is Singing" continue to have important implications for today's society.

Keywords

Postcolonialism, racism, identity transformation, awakening, cultural identity, Southern Rhodesia, The Grass Is Singing, Doris Lessing

1. Introduction

The world of the 20th century was dazzled by massive migration, and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was one of the most compelling examples. The expatriates who led a life there not only relished the exoticism of colonial myth but also faced the impact of clashes between two or even more cultures. With the passing of Doris Lessing in 2013, aged 94, the world lost one of the most important post-war writers in English. Doris Lessing was born in Persia (now the Islamic Republic of Iran) to

British parents in 1919. Later her family moved to a farm in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Lessing, as an expatriate who led a life abroad, relished the exoticism of colonial myth and was exposed to multiple foreign cultures. Early life experience on the African continent exerted a decisive impact on the dramatic protagonists she molded in her early literary works, which enabled those novels to focus on a wide range of 20th century issues concerning the politics of race, and *The Grass Is Singing* is among them.

As a British resident of a colony in Africa, Lessing was equipped with dual identities: a white outsider in Africa and an insider from outside the African continent. Due to this Lessing experienced political, economic, and cultural situations of Africa from double dimensions as both a stranger and a native. On the one hand, her white heritage made it impossible for Lessing to be successfully assimilated into the local community. On the other hand, Lessing's long life overseas alienated her from her British mother culture, which reduced her to having a marginalized status in the motherland. She disclosed how African colonized peoples responded to the political and cultural dominance of Europe and how colonialism destroyed indigenous cultures from the perspective of a white colonizer with superior discourse. Thus, Lessing was also dedicated to observing the losses and senses of estrangement in white colonists' hearts on African land.

The Grass Is Singing is Doris Lessing's first classic novel (Lessing, 1950) which was published in 1950 when Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) still remained a self-governing British colony while Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) retained its status as a colonial protectorate. Set in Rhodesia, the novel is the story of Dick Turner, a failed white farmer, and his wife, Mary Turner, a dependent and disappointed woman (Lessing, 1950). Partly with her own life abroad as a prototype, Lessing portrayed Mary's marriage to a luckless farmer, a union doomed to failure before they had even met, and the story of the murder of a poor white woman by her black houseboy, an illustration of the tension between native subject and imperial power. The story is mingled with the harsh, majestic beauty, and the remorseless social values of the white of Southern Africa.

The Grass Is Singing is a poignant exploration of race, power, and oppression, and it continues to be relevant today as we continue to grapple with the legacy of colonialism and racism (Mutekwa, 2009; Wang, 2009). There have been plenty of literature based on *The Grass Is Singing* to elaborate racism (Ahmed, 2013; Schwarz, 2016) and Mary Turner's identity transformation (Wang, 2009) and her awakening (Zhang, 2017). However, one limitation of the existing literature on *The Grass Is Singing* is its tendency focus on Mary Turner's character and her psychological breakdown (Boruah, 2020), neglecting the broader social and historical context that shaped Mary's identity transformation, and thus failing to analyze the systemic issues of racism and colonialism that affect all characters in the novel. Another limitation of the existing literature is that most studies on *The Grass Is Singing* have a tendency to analyze the novel in its historical context, without exploring how it can offer insights into contemporary issues of racism and colonialism. Finally, with a few exceptions (e.g., Keramatfar, 2022), there is the dearth of exploration of awakening of the colonized African people from oppression by the

white. Much of the existing literature on *The Grass Is Singing* focuses on the white protagonist, Mary Turner, and her experiences, while overlooking the African characters' experiences of oppression and resistance, particularly in terms of their cultural and political agency.

Taken together, this paper aims to address these limitations by first exploring how Lessing's novel challenges dominant narratives of white superiority and African inferiority, and how it can offer insights into contemporary discussions on race and colonialism, themes and insights can be applied to contemporary discussions on racism and colonialism, and how it can offer a deeper understanding of the legacy of colonialism in Africa and its impact on present-day societies. The paper also aims to analyze Mary's identity transformation in *The Grass Is Singing* through a postcolonial lens by linking to broader social and historical context that shaped Mary's such transformation. Finally, the paper aims to explore how the novel portrays the African characters as active agents in their own lives and struggles, how their experiences are shaped by their social, cultural, and historical contexts, and how the awakening among the black natives and growing awareness of the injustices and oppressions they face under colonial rule. The ultimate goal of the paper is to highlight the relevance of the issues of racism, colonialism, and oppression in the today's world, particularly in the context of ongoing struggles for social justice and equality that are the central goals of our current world (United Nations, 2015).

2. Racial Discrimination against the Natives by European Colonizers

Once the so-called civilized Europeans stride onto the primitive colonies, taking charge of those lands and governing the native dwellers at will, colonization is established. Then appear the colonizers, who are the governors and dominators of the colonies, and the colonized, the natives who are oppressed in their own motherland. To a large extent, the colonial aftermath combines the obfuscations of both *Verdrängung* and *Verwerfung*. Its unwillingness to remember what Bhabha describes as the painful and humiliating "memory of the history of race and racism" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 63) is matched by its terrified repudiation and utopian expulsion of this past.

Racism refers to "a system in which one group of people exercises power over another on the basis of skin color; an implicit or explicit set of beliefs, erroneous assumptions, and actions based on an ideology of the inherent superiority of one racial group over another, and evident in organizational or institutional structures and programs as well as in individual thought or behaviour patterns" (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 352). It is the colonizers' belief that only their own Anglo-European culture is the noblest and that the people of their own blood are well-educated and sophisticated. According to births, titles, qualities, and the more highly advanced technology, the white belongs to the highest social class. On the contrary, those indigenous are considered nothing but a group of barbarous, backward, and undeveloped inferiors. In truth, the forgotten content of postcoloniality effectively reveals the story of an ambivalent and symbiotic relationship between colonizer and colonized (Leela Gandhi, 2018).

Lessing's writing of colonial discourse in *The Grass Is Singing* is first reflected in the wording and tone

of the characterization. She depicted the imagery of white people in an appreciative tone but the imagery of black natives in rather insulting and discriminatory words. Mary Turner, the female protagonist in *The Grass Is Singing*, possesses all the genetic features of the white Europeans who are the ancestors of the Southern African migrants. Although both of Mary's parents are Southern Africans who even have never set foot on British land, for Mary, nostalgically speaking, England means "Home", and "Home" refers to Britain because of those letters and magazines from overseas. Mary had never come into contact with black African natives before, and she had been forbidden to talk to her mother's servants whom she had been afraid of. She had even been forbidden to walk alone in her childhood as she had been told that the black natives were so furtive, lowered, and nasty that they might do horrible things to her (Lessing, 1950).

After Mary married Dick Turner, the first native she had to deal with was Samson. Although Samson was a kind-faced respectful old native (Lessing, 1950) who with deference and courtesy was eager to show Mary, the bride, around the house, and despite there being a perfect understanding between Samson and his boss Dick, as Dick "locked up everything, but put out for use a third as much again as was required, which was used by Samson, who did not regard this as stealing" (Lessing, 1950, p. 49), there was still racial hostility between the couple and their servant. Once Samson had done something imperfect or ignored something, Dick unleashed his dissatisfaction with impolite and discriminatory words which reinforce the stereotype of native black inferiority and sluggishness:

"That old fool has let those dogs go again. I told him not to."

He explained: 'They get restless and go out by themselves, for hunting trips, if I am not here. Sometimes for days. Always when I am not here. He let them out. Then they get into trouble in the bush. Because he is too damned lazy to feed them.'

He sat heavy and silent through the meal, a nervous tension between his eyes... (Lessing, 1950, p. 62).

In addition to Dick's impolite and discriminatory words towards native servant, Lessing also portrayed the appearance of local female natives from Mary's perspective:

If she disliked native men, she loathed the women. She hated the exposed fleshiness of them, their soft brown bodies and soft bashful faces that were also insolent and inquisitive, and their chattering voices that held a brazen fleshy undertone. She could not bear to see them sitting there on the grass, their legs tucked under them in that traditional timeless pose, as peaceful and uncaring as if it did not matter whether the store was opened, or whether it remained shut all day and they would have to return tomorrow. Above all, she hated the way they suckled their babies, with their breasts hanging down for everyone to see; there was something in their calm satisfied maternity that made her blood boil. 'Their babies hanging on to them like leeches,' she said to herself shuddering, for she thought with horror of suckling a child. The idea of a child's lips on her breasts made her feel quite sick... (Lessing, 1950, p. 104).

Lessing's writing of colonial discourse in *The Grass Is Singing* is also revealed in discriminatory laws and practices imposed by white colonizers. At the beginning of the novel in Chapter One, Lessing

accounted for a murder mystery in which Mary Turner, wife of Richard Turner, a farmer at Ngesi, was found murdered on the front verandah of their homestead. The native houseboy, who had been arrested, confessed to the crime. After the police snapped the handcuffs on the houseboy, they saw Dick Turner come out of the bush. "They let him be, while keeping an eye on him, for he was a white man, though mad, and black men, even when policemen, do not lay hands on white flesh" (Lessing, 1950, p. 5).

In the workplace, the natives were treated as if they were machines (Lessing, 1950), born to exert themselves and shed sweat for the white yet with their wages often deducted and bargained over by the white for any loafing on the job or not obeying her summons, or even with no sound reason at all. After Mary sent away the first native servant Samson, then came another native asking for work. He wanted seventeen shillings a month. Mary beat him down by two, feeling pleased with herself because of her victory over him. That night, at supper, the native laid the table badly. Mary flew at him in a frenzy of annoyance. When the native had gone out, Dick tried to persuade Mary to take things easy with a new native servant, yet Mary retorted that: "But I told him! If I have told him once I have told him fifty times!" "But this is probably the first time he has ever been in a white man's house!" "I don't care. I told him what to do. Why doesn't he do it?" (Lessing, 1950, pp. 56-57) The next day at lunch, the servant dropped a plate through nervousness. Mary dismissed him at once. The third native boy came. Quite different from the previous servants, this boy had learned some native code of politeness to present a blank, neutral surface, and to answer in a soft neutral voice, and he replied gently to everything she said, "Yes, missus; yes, missus," not looking at Mary. But it made Mary angry that he would never meet her eyes. Instead of regarding it as a part of the native code of politeness not to look a superior in the face, she thought it was merely further evidence of their shifty and dishonest nature. She even felt she would like to pick up a plate and throw it in that native's face so as to make it human and expressive (Lessing, 1950).

In this novel, discriminatory practices by the white colonizers are especially featured by Charlie Slatter, a typical representative of the white dominant power's belief in farming with the sjambok which, as a motto which hangs over his front door says, "You shall not mind killing if it is necessary". When he killed a native in a fit of anger, he was fined merely thirty pounds. Moreover, it was Slatter who educated Dick Turner to buy a sjambok before a plow or a harrow when Dick started farming (Lessing, 1950). Mary supervised the natives unloading the dusty sacks from the wagon, holding them by the corners on their shoulders. They were like a human conveyor-belt. Swinging the sjambok from her wrist, Mary suddenly noticed that one of the boys was not working as he fell out of the line, standing by. After warning him to get back to work several times, the native still didn't follow the order but insisted on getting some water to quench his thirst. That lazy insolence stung her into such an inarticulate rage that she lifted her whip and brought it down across his face in a vicious swinging blow. A thick weal pushed up along the dark skin of the native's cheek, and from it a drop of bright blood gathered and trickled down and off his chin and splashed to his chest (Lessing, 1950).

Last but not least, Lessing's writing of colonial discourse in *The Grass Is Singing* is embodied in her

discriminatory depiction of the sights of Southern Africa as well as in the imagery of the “store”. As Lessing wrote in Chapter Two:

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 drops 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.

If one was looking for a symbol to express South Africa, the South Africa that was created by-financiers and mine magnates, the South Africa which the old missionaries and explorers who charted the Dark Continent would be horrified to see, one would find it in the store. The store is everywhere.....

It is always a low single-storied building divided into segments like a strip of chocolate, with grocery, butchery and bottle-store under one corrugated iron roof. It has a high dark wooden counter, and behind the counter shelves hold anything from distemper mixture to toothbrushes, all mixed together. There are a couple of racks holding cheap cotton dresses in brilliant colours, and perhaps a stack of shoe-boxes, or a glass case for cosmetics or sweets. There is the unmistakable smell, a smell compounded of varnish, dried blood from the killing yards behind, dried hides, dried fruit and strong yellow soap.....

For thousands of people up and down Southern Africa the store is the background to their childhood. So many things centered round it. It brings back, for instance, memories of those nights when the car, after driving endlessly through a chilly, dusty darkness, stopped unexpectedly in front of a square of light where men lounged with glasses in their hands, and one was carried out into the brilliantly lit bar for a sip of searing liquid ‘to keep the fever away’. Or it might be the place where one drove twice a week to collect mail, and to see all the farmers from miles around buying their groceries, and reading letters from Home with one leg propped on the running-board of the car, momentarily oblivious to the sun, the square of red dust where the dogs lay scattered like flies on meat and the groups of staring natives – momentarily transported back to the country for which they were so bitterly homesick, but where they would not choose to live again: ‘South Africa gets into you,’ these self-exiled people would say, ruefully. (Lessing, 1950, pp. 27-28)

From the description of sights of Southern Africa, it can be noted that racial discrimination is permissive in Lessing’s colonial discourse. The “store” imagery reflects the “colonial” imprint which shows the racial belief that with the arrival of white colonizers, stores sprang up as places where a wide variety of goods showed off the rich material life brought by the colonists to the colonies. Opposite to “store” imagery, the symbol of the whites’ prosperity, the sight of Southern Africa was a “dark continent” with insignificant clusters of ugly buildings and dogs lying scattered like flies on meat.

To sum up, regarding colonial discourse in Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing*, the white are the dominators while the black are the oppressed, which shapes the colonizers into a monitor, a superior, a guard, compared with the colonized who represents an instrument of production. Racism has penetrated

into facets of life in Southern Africa. Through the portrayal of the characters in the novel, Lessing highlights the need for empathy, understanding, and mutual respect between different cultures and races. The racism in *The Grass Is Singing* is indeed central to the novel's plot and themes. *The Grass Is Singing* is notable for its novelty and originality in its depiction of race relations in colonial Africa. One significant feature of *The Grass Is Singing* lies in its ability to shed light on the ongoing legacy of racism and colonialism in the contemporary world and prompt readers to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors towards race, and to engage with broader discussions around racism and colonialism (Mutekwa, 2009; Wang, 2009).

Racism and racial inequality continue to be pervasive problems in many parts of the world and continue to see the devastating effects of racism in various forms in around the world, including police brutality against people of color, discrimination in hiring and education, and hate crimes based on race or ethnicity (SDSN, 2020). *The Grass is Singing* serves as a reminder that racism is not just a historical issue, but an ongoing problem that requires continued attention and action. It encourages readers to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors towards people of different races and cultures, and to work towards creating a more just and equitable world. The novel's emphasis on the power dynamics of race and colonialism speaks to current debates around systemic inequality and institutionalized racism. The novel can help to promote greater awareness and understanding, and to contribute to efforts to address racial inequality and injustice.

Overall, *The Grass Is Singing* is a powerful critique of racism and colonialism. It appeals to greater awareness and understanding of the complex issues surrounding race and ethnicity. The novel suggests that it is only through recognizing and addressing our own biases and prejudices that we can begin to build a more just and equitable society.

3. Mary's Identity Transformation

"Cultural identity" refers to one's view of who he/she is, and how one defines himself/herself or common identification with a collectivity or social category (Urrieta & Noblit 2018). Cultural identity transformation emerges as a result of transnational migration (Frampton, 2009; Franz & Silva, 2020). As one of the important issues in the existing literature and cultural research, cultural identity provides post-colonialism with a complicated, dynamic, and controversial concept (Williams & Chrisman, 2013). It is the identity of a group or culture, or of an individual that is influenced by one's belonging to a group or culture, and the identity is usually related to place, gender, race, history, language, nationality, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and so on (Urrieta & Noblit, 2018). Influenced by the recent world of globalization, cultural identity has changed into a plural, shifting, and dynamic process. Thus, one's identity is changeable, and it's being molded and shaped into another form due to the interaction between the individual and the outside world (Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011).

In a broader sense, identity not only marks the distinction between "us" and "them" but also indicates a cultural subject's choice of a collective identity between a dominating culture and an oppressive one

(Urrieta & Noblit, 2018). Such a specific state of identity can be called “hybrid identity”. With such a “hybrid identity”, Doris Lessing herself is one of the migrant writers, and her novel *The Grass Is Singing* is not only a migrant novel investigating the concern of the postcolonial people and literature, but also a novel with powerful representativeness of flexible consciousness and an independent national identity. Mary Turner has experienced identity transformation which enables her to be a white stranger on African land with no sense of belonging to whatever side.

On the one hand, longing for a well-off life with an independent financial state, Mary worked in an office in town and inherited from her mother an arid feminism, leading the comfortable carefree existence of a single woman in South Africa (Lessing, 1950). Although Mary still took delight in her single life after 30, she felt a twinge of unease at the thought of people’s gossip that she would turn imperceptibly into one of those women who have become old without ever having been middle-aged: a little withered, a little acid, hard as nails, sentimentally kindhearted, and addicted to religion or small dogs (Lessing, 1950). Her stun and outrage reached a climax after she accidentally overheard her friends’ conversation which was full of mockery and contempt:

“She’s not fifteen any longer: it is ridiculous! Someone should tell her about her clothes.” “How old is she?” “Must be well over thirty.”

“Why doesn’t she marry? She must have had plenty of chances.”

There was a dry chuckle. “I don’t think so. My husband was keen on her himself once, but he thinks she will never marry.....”

“She should marry someone years older than herself. A man of fifty would suit her... you’ll see, she will marry someone old enough to be her father one of these days.”

There was another chuckle, good-hearted enough, but it sounded cruelly malicious to Mary (Lessing 1950, pp. 38-39).

That little accidental overhearing, apparently so unimportant, which would have had no effect on a person who had the faintest idea of the kind of world he lived in, had a profound effect on Mary, which indicates that Mary inevitably would be the prey for patriarchy. And soon Mary married Dick Turner and assisted him with farming from which Mary regained so-called superiority of white authority, with her sjambok swinging vicious blows to the natives, and thus she realized her conversion from an old pitiful virgin and a laughingstock into a hostess of white authority.

On the other hand, although she had white skin and possessed an education in tune with the social ideology of the whites, for Mary, the word “Home”, spoken nostalgically, meant England, despite the fact that both her parents were South Africans and had never been to England (Lessing, 1950). What connected Mary to “England” were only overseas letters and magazines. The store was the real center of Mary’s early life. It was in the store that she spent her miserable childhood with an alcoholic father and a workaholic mother who worked herself into a passion of resentment since the poor white family in South Africa hardly made ends meet. After marrying Dick, an unsuccessful white farmer after countless futile attempts to make a profit from his land, raging at Dick seemed to Mary a failure in

pride, since Lessing noted:

The women who marry men like Dick learn sooner or later that there are two things they can do: they can drive themselves mad, tear themselves to pieces in storms of futile anger and rebellion; or they can hold themselves tight and go bitter. Mary, with the memory of her own mother recurring more and more frequently, like an older, sardonic double of herself walking beside her, followed the course her upbringing made inevitable (Lessing, 1950, p. 98).

Always facing bad seasons and sitting tight on debts, Dick never seemed to make any profits to support the family, leading the other whites to consider the Turners the worst among the whites in Southern Africa. This embarrassing financial dilemma isolated Mary from her white neighbors and friends. Charlie Slatter was a typical representative of the whites' dominant power—wealthy, powerful, and superior to all others. He and Mrs. Slatter lived nearest to the Turners. Mrs. Slatter was an amiable soul and very grieved for Mary who had married a good-for-nothing like Dick. In order to express her sympathy and show her friendliness to Mary, she often sent notes to invite Mary to evening parties. However, all these proposals were declined by Mary who was ill at ease in crowds and who was suffering from agonies of being looked down upon among the white habitants.

Moreover, Tony, a British young man who had been in Southern Africa for only a couple of months, saw those peculiarly ugly, blue native fabrics around Mary's house, didn't mind at all. The British young man was even in a good mood of elation to appreciate the seemingly exotic things in the house, because in Tony's opinion, the Turners were not qualified white colonizers in view of their poverty-stricken living condition that almost signaled a potential assimilation into the native community, which would have shocked everybody in the white world. In one word, the loneliness and lack of companionship made Mary "a strange, silent and dried-out woman" (Lessing, 1950, p. 158) who was more and more estranged from the white world despite her swinging sjambok in hand which symbolized white colonizers' superiority. From a white hostess of superiority to a freak on Southern African land, Mary wandered around the margins of the white community.

Still, on the other hand, the native houseboy Moses pushed Mary into the cold unfathomable abyss by murder, which made Mary absolutely repelled by the white side, for she had finally been conquered by a native. It was Mary Turner's poor economic basis and her seclusion from the white world that resulted in her solitude which ignited her craving for other people's company, and Moses became Mary's sole partner since Dick must go outside early and come back home late. Moses once gifted Mary a handle-less cup of bush flowers which were in crude yellows, pinks, and reds. They thrust together clumsily, but made a strong burst of color on the old stained cloth. Thus, gradually, the original "boss and servant" relationship turned to be an ambiguously romantic one which forced Mary to grow a sense of fearful curiosity about Moses whom she had to touch in terror (Lessing, 1950). Moses was powerful and commanding, yet kind, while Mary was covert, undermined with fear, not like a mistress watching a servant work. In front of Moses, she tried her best to restore the authority and dignity of the whites, but after some time, she was more and more conscious of Moses's power which rendered her a

strong and irrational fear, and a deep uneasiness. Her act of weeping and resisting Moses's departure indicated the resignation of her authority, and later, she discovered Moses's attitudes towards her were no longer docile, but so challenging that made the white colonizer Charlie, the representative of the white community stunned:

It was the tone of Mary's voice when she spoke to the native that jarred on him: she was speaking to him with exactly the same flirtatious coyness with which she had spoken to himself.

The native replied, with a rough offhand rudeness: "Oranges finished."

"I know they are not finished. There were two left. I know they are not."

...Mary was appealing, looking up at the boy, almost confiding in him.'

"Oranges finished", he repeated, in that tone of surly indifference, but with a note of self-satisfaction, of conscious power that took Charlie's breath away (Lessing, 1950, p. 203).

However, though Mary enjoyed Moses's companionship a lot, she still couldn't get rid of the ideological influence of British white people's racial discrimination against the black natives. Therefore, at the sight of the gift of flowers, what troubled her most was the evidence of Moses's desire to please her and his waiting for a word of approval and pleasure from her. Sexual issues always become inseparably bound up with ethnicity, and after Tony accidentally discovered the affairs between Mary and Moses, he harshly commanded Moses to leave as soon as possible. Mary shouted suddenly "Go away" over Tony's shoulder at Moses, the native. Tony realized that in this way Mary was trying to assert herself, and more accurately, she was using his presence there as a shield in a fight to get back the white authority she had lost (Lessing, 1950). It was Mary's verbal hostility that brought the intention of murder into Moses's mind. In the end, Mary's life was claimed by Moses which symbolizes a native's victory over a white colonizer.

All in all, it's noteworthy that Mary experienced an identity transformation in which she had been an old pitiful virgin and a laughingstock at first, then a hostess of white authority, yet later marginalized by the white community as a freak, and finally yielded to death, which insinuates that Mary made a concession to both black and white worlds, a prey for colonialism and patriarchy. She was no longer in a position that was either absolute affirmation or absolute negation towards the two extremes: "... She has forgotten what her own people are like. But then, what is madness, but a refuge, a retreating from the world" (Lessing, 1950, p. 215)? Consequently, she kept away from the two as a result of her identity transformation. The misplacement from both the white and the native worlds thrust Mary into a plight of a white stranger on African land. At the end, she has recognized and rejected her own prejudices and has begun to develop a sense of empathy and understanding towards those who have been marginalized by society. This transformation represents a powerful critique of the system of racial hierarchy and colonialism that defines Southern Rhodesia.

ary's identity transformation is a crucial aspect of the novel, as she moves from a young woman with hopes and dreams to a woman trapped in an oppressive system that ultimately drives her to madness and murder. Through Mary's identity transformation, Lessing explores the ways in which racism and

discrimination can distort a person's sense of self and limit their potential for growth and fulfillment. Overall, Mary's transformation in *The Grass Is Singing* highlights the ways in which colonialism and racism shape the identities of both the colonizers and the colonized. It underscores the need for empathy, understanding, and mutual respect between different cultures and races, as well as the importance of acknowledging and challenging the systemic injustices that underlie these dynamics. It calls for a society that values diversity and promotes equality and justice for all. Unlike most studies in the existing literature on *The Grass Is Singing*, this paper analyzes the process of Mary's identity transformation in depth, explores the complex factors that contributed to her transformation, offering a fresh perspective on *The Grass Is Singing* and contributing to a deeper understanding of the novel's themes and implications.

4. Awakening of the Ethnic Consciousness

According to the biblical account, Moses was the leader of the nation of Israel when they were delivered by almighty God out of slavery in Egypt until the time when they were about to enter the promised land of Israel. Moses in the biblical record ranks among the mightiest men. His prophetic power, spiritual insight, and leadership qualifications justify this rank. In *The Grass Is Singing*, it was Moses who was the pioneer of giving the first blow towards his white hostess since he courageously justified his legal right of getting some water to relieve his thirst. His use of English when questioning the war and whether "Jesus thought it right that people should kill each other" undoubtedly proved that Moses must have been literate and enlightened despite the thought of "cheek" and resentment by Mary (Lessing, 1950). Through the murder committed by Moses, Lessing gave her hints of the final collapse of colonialism by some descriptions of the living beings in nature:

She stood in the doorway looking down over sweep of sere, dry vlei. Somewhere in the trees he was waiting; somewhere in the vlei was the young man, who would come before the night to rescue her. She stared, hardly blinking, into the aching sunlight. But what was the matter with the big land down there, which was always an expanse of dull red at this time of year! It was covered over with bushes and grass.

Panic plucked at her; already, before she was even dead, the bush was conquering the farm, sending its outriders to cover the good red soil with plants and grass; the bush knew she was going to die! But the young man... shutting out everything else she thought of him, with his warm comfort, his protecting arm..... (Lessing, 1950, p. 228)

In *The Grass Is Singing*, the natives' counterattack in self-defense against the whites' injustice unveils the evidence that the natives began to be conscious of their willingness to express their dissatisfaction under the suppression of the colonizers and their rights as human beings. The natives' resentful revolt is represented through Moses's revenge on Mary after he lived in a condition of in-between and unhomeliness as a result of his ethnic consciousness awakening. As this saying which was put forward by Bhabha goes, "Nation could not return to their settled and independent life again without noticing

that they had learned many foreign ideas and ways, which they had unconsciously adopted, and come to feel here and there previously unrecognized spiritual and intellectual needs” (Bhabha 1994, p.11). It is by the oppressiveness of the colonizer’s culture and ideology that the natives undergo their identity transformation. The transformation contradicts their usual image, and then they try to end their plight by the declaration of war against the whites. As vague and shadowy character as Moses may have been in this novel, he was its most impressive hero, whose shining human nature would be implanted deeply in every reader’s mind. It is his dauntless heroism that interrogates the superiority of the colonizers.

While the novel portrays the African characters as victims of colonialism, it also highlights their resistance and resilience in the face of oppression. One of the novel’s most important themes is the awakening of Africans to their marginalization and oppression. The awakening of ethnic consciousness and growing awareness among Africans in the novel can be seen as a precursor to modern-day social movements and calls for decolonization. This awakening leads to Moses’s transformation into a politically assertive figure, the one who challenges the status quo and demands change.

As is implied in this novel, overwhelming darkness may endure for a night, but it will never overcome the radiant brightness of the morning. The hegemony imposed on the natives by the colonizers will fade as time flies; simultaneously the natives are struggling for their own liberty and human rights. And Moses, the leader of the natives, intended to find a way to reset the African natives’ identity due to his ethnic consciousness after being negated by the white world, leaving the colonial edifice confronted with its unprecedented crisis. Overall, *The Grass Is Singing* depicts the awakening of ethnic consciousness among the black natives of Southern Rhodesia in the face of oppression and racial discrimination. It highlights the importance of cultural identity and the struggle for self-determination in the face of colonialism and racism.

Different from most previous studies that have failed to fully explore the complexities of the novel’s portrayal of African consciousness and resistance, the analysis of Moses’s awakening and the growing awareness of the other African characters in this paper can provide a more nuanced understanding of the African characters’ struggles, agency, and subjectivity, and help shed light on the psychological and emotional toll of colonialism and racism on African individuals, and provide insights into the ways in which marginalized communities can resist and challenge oppressive structures and assert their agency in the face of adversity.

5. Conclusions

This study of *The Grass Is Singing* is novel in its interpretation of the character’s identities: Mary Turner as a figure of white delusion and Moses as a figure of religious symbolism. Mingled with African imagery and myth to reflect on the British colonial experience, Lessing questions the primacy of British power with the surprising murder at the end. She successfully portrays both white identity anxiety and black identity awakening. The white British immigrants take pride in their imperial superiority, but they could hardly be expected to find any sense of belonging to their new continent

without some form of cultural integration. Their chauvinism and racism keep them from fully communing with the local peoples and their cultures. Overall, in writing *The Grass Is Singing*, Lessing provided international readers with new perspectives on post-colonialism by exemplifying how the lifestyle and ideology of white colonizers dominated and influenced the natives with prejudicial attitudes towards race and identity.

From the wording and tone in the characterization of characters to discriminatory laws and practices imposed upon black natives, from the “store” imagery to the sights of Southern Africa, Lessing managed to confirm the existing racism which holds that humans may be divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called “race” in political, economic and legal institutions and systems. *The Grass Is Singing* is a powerful novel by Doris Lessing that delves into the complex themes of racism and oppression in colonial Africa.

As for identity issues, it can be concluded that her transformation from an old pitiful virgin and a laughingstock, to a hostess of white authority, to a freak marginalized by the white world, to a murder victim by a native, and finally a white stranger vanishing from the African land, Mary’s identity transformation ensures the dynamics, resilience, and adaptability of colonial societies by which the natives have been motivated to fight against racial inequalities in wealth, income, education, health care, and civil rights.

It is worth noting that the title *The Grass Is Singing* has a symbolic meaning. On one hand, it implies that the grass-like natives are wailing for their miserable destiny on this colonized land. On the other hand, seen as a whole, the author of this paper prefers the interpretation that the natives are singing a song for victory for the defeat of colonization. It is the growing national consciousness and conflicting cultures of both the colonizers and colonized that arouse the decline of hypocrisy and corruption of the colonial power. In this regard, Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing*, published in 1950, is a prophecy of Southern Rhodesia’s eventual transition to majority-ruled Zimbabwe in 1980.

The Grass Is Singing is groundbreaking in its portrayal of the complexities of racial relations in Southern Africa. The novel is among the first to explore the issues of racism, colonialism, resistance and awakening of ethnic consciousness in such a nuanced way. Lessing’s exploration of these issues remains relevant today that encourages us to reflect on our own beliefs and behaviors and work towards creating a more just and equitable world. Since culture is by no means static, the resilience and adaptability of colonial societies shouldn’t be underestimated. Therefore, I argue that through learning how colonized peoples responded to the political and cultural dominance of Europe, the resilience and transformability of colonized cultures would change the characteristics of imperial culture itself in ways that have been both profound and lasting (Ashcroft, 2001).

This paper has provided a critical analysis of three themes of Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing*: racial discrimination, identity transformation of the white female protagonist, and the awakening of ethnic consciousness among the colonized native Africans. These three themes are the core of the novel. In analyzing these themes, this paper not only explored the social and historical contexts that caused

racism, Mary Turner's identity transformation, and the awakening of the African natives, but also made connections with today's relevancies, yet all of which have been overlooked in the existing literature. As a result, this paper offers a more nuanced interpretation of these issues in global climate which is conducive to global diversified democracy as well as maintenance of political equality. In short, this paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the novel's significance and relevance to contemporary discussions on social justice and resistance by shedding light on the ways in which marginalized communities can challenge oppressive structures and assert their agency.

References

- Ahmed, M. K. (2013). Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*: Anatomy of a female psyche in the midst of gender, race and class barrier. *International Journal of English and literature*, 4(1), 11-16. <https://doi.org/10.5897/IJEL11.119>
- Ashcroft, B. (2001). *Post-colonial transformation*. London: Routledge
- Bhabha, HK. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Boruah, A. (2020). Psychological ruptures in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*. *International Journal of Management*, 11(12), 53-56. <https://doi.org/10.34218/IJM.11.12.2020.006>
- Frampton, E. (2009). *Horrors of the breast: cultural boundaries and the abject in The Grass in Singing*. In A. Ridout, & S. Atkins (Ed.), *Doris Lessing: Border Crossings* (pp. 15-25). New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Franz, M., & Silva, K. (2020). *Migration, identity, and belonging: Defining borders and boundaries of the homeland*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429469374>
- Henry, F., & Tator, C. (2006). *The colour of democracy: Racism in Canadian society* (3rd ed.). Toronto: Nelson Publisher.
- Jensen, L. A., Arnett, J. J., & McKenzie, J. (2011). Globalization and cultural identity. In Schwartz, S., Luyckx, K., & Vignoles, V. (Eds.), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 285-301). New York: Springer.
- Keramatfar, H. (2022). Moses and power: Mimetic desire in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*. *Neophilologus*, 106, 729-740. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11061-022-09736-7>
- Lessing, D. (1950). *The Grass Is Singing*. London: Michael Joseph Ltd.
- Mutekwa, A. (2009). Gendered beings, gendered discourses: the gendering of race, colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism in three Zimbabwean novels. *Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 15(5), 725-740.
- Schwarz, B. (2016). The fact of whiteness: Doris Lessing's "The Grass Is Singing"—A Historian Notebook. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 127-136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2016.1122273>
- Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). (2020). *SDSN Statement on racial inequality*. Retrieved from May 8, 2023 <https://www.unsdsn.org/sdsn-statement-on-racial-inequality>

- Accessed on United Nations. (2015). *Transforming Our World: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations General Assembly A/RES/70/1. New York: The United Nations.
- Urrieta, L. Jr., & Noblit, G. W. (2018). *Cultural constructions of identity: Meta-ethnography and theory*. Oxford University Press: Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190676087.001.0001>
- Wang, J. (2009). White postcolonial guilty in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*. *Research in African Literatures*, 40(3), 37-47. <https://doi.org/10.2979/RAL.2009.40.3.37>
- Williams, P., & Chrisman, L. (2013). *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Zhang, H. (2017). An interpretation of Mary in the shadow of colonialism in Doris Lessing's- *The Grass is Singing*. *Higher Education Studies*, 7(4), 55-60. <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v7n4p55>