

## Original Paper

# Analysis of the Causes of Mary's Tragic Fate in *The Grass is Singing* from the Perspective of Postcolonial Feminism

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### Abstract

*In The Grass is Singing, Doris Lessing describes Mary as a repressed figure in a patriarchal society, which contains profound reflections on the relationship between women and gender discrimination as well as racial problems. The existing studies explore the reasons for Mary's tragic fate from various perspectives. However, most of the previous studies concentrated on the anti-patriarchy theme by unfolding the female's anguish and misery. Few studies paid attention to the tragedy of the Other and the reversal of this identity. Consequently, this paper analyzes the novel from the perspective of postcolonial feminism and employs "the Other" theory to probe into the influence of gender and racial discrimination on the destiny of the character, revealing the root of Mary's tragedy. The detailed study of Mary's tragedy aims to represent her life and ends with a profound meditation on human beings. It can not only emphasize the significance of achieving female subjectivity but also indicate possibilities for women to consciously participate in society and create their own social values.*

### Keywords

*Postcolonial feminism, the Other, Tragedy, Subjectivity*

## 1. Background

*The Grass is Singing* is the maiden work of British writer Doris Lessing. This novel has gained wide attention for many years, especially after Lessing won the Nobel Prize in 2007. The researchers have studied it from various theoretical perspectives of feminism, ecofeminism, postcolonialism, and even space theory in order to deeply reveal the reasons for the tragic fate of the characters and arouse wide social attention to women's survival and contemplation of women's freedom.

The first focus of the studies abroad is on the feminism embodied in *The Grass is Singing*. Critics of this trend mainly concentrated on the tragic fate of the female characters under patriarchy. Markow (1974) addressed the female protagonists in an effort to understand how men and women should

interact and he added that the lack of economic independence and the women's need for romantic love are often the main causes of their failure. Zhang (2011) also stated that women in a repressed position in a patriarchal society must strive for equal economic status and be liberated from their economic dependence in order to change their current survival situation.

Similarly, with the growing prominence of ecological problems, studies from an ecofeminism perspective have increased. The basic argument of ecofeminism is that the same ideology that endorses gender oppression also recognizes that of nature (Jin, 2004), but there were different views on the relationship between gender and nature.

Ma (2012) argued that nature is not represented by women, but by Mary's incompetent husband who intuitively follows the "land ethic" and his inner "ecological conscience", trying to build a utopia on the farm where land and people coexist in harmony. Conversely, another argument suggested that under the domination of this male-centered ideology, women are not seen as independent individuals and they are in the same oppressed position as nature (Yao & Tian, 2019).

Overall, an in-depth study of this work is conducive to enriching the understanding of feminism and ecofeminism and correcting some misunderstandings about it.

Analysis from the perspective of postcolonialism is another focus of researchers. Xia (2001) believed that colonial education cultivated a strong sense of superiority in Mary, so she finally gave in and trampled on her normal relationship and natural emotions with the black servant. It can be said that the struggle between society and individuals led to her tragedy. However, other authors have proposed different ideas. Wei (2009) argued that attributing the social roots of Mary's fate to colonialism eroded a part of the objectivity of the work. This concept, inherited from the traditional culture of white people, creates an unconscious collusion between Mary's tragic fate and colonialism. She was unable to narrate beyond the colonizer's perspective (Zhao, 2012). While focusing on women's survival, the above authors paid special attention to the complex and sensitive racial issues, deeply revealing the racist ideology concealed in people's lives.

Another trend was to analyze the novel from the perspective of space theory. The representative figure Lefebvre (1991) proposed that the space we focus on has three types: material, spiritual, and social. Based on space theory, Zhao (2009) mentioned that Lessing is adept at turning the architectural space into a specific ideological issue by means of spatial transformation, and examining the appearance of architecture is to interpret human values. Li (2012) argued that the space constructed by the novel can be divided into a dominant male space and a subordinate female space. Ultimately, women were bound to the closed internal space of family, thus losing the ability to control their own destinies. Then Li (2017) found that in an opposite racial space, the relationship between men and women of different races was condemned by the whole society, and therefore the subjectivity of Mary gradually collapsed. It can be seen that research in this period focused more on the impact of social and spiritual spaces on Mary's fate. Later, researchers provided specific explanations for Zhao's claim. Jiang (2017) proposed that the houses in the novel exhibited an evident dependence on social space. For example, unlike the

circular houses of black people, white people's houses must be square, which is considered to be a clear sign of their intellectual superiority over local black people. It suggested the difficulty of constructing a personal space.

To sum up, all the research mentioned above has great academic value and helps the present study a lot. However, this paper attempts to adapt a more comprehensive perspective of postcolonial feminism in order to reveal the root of Mary's tragic fate.

## 2. Significance of the Study

In *The Grass is Singing*, the public values and moral ethics in the white community result in the character's tragedy. In Mary's process to find her own value, her social status limits her self-perception and finally deprives her free way of life. Additionally, Mary's psychological space reveals her long-suppressed spiritual desire. It is the dual pressures from both social and gender that distort Mary's mental spirit and lead to her tragedy. Exploring Mary's life and her inner world is conducive to analyzing the reasons for the gradual decline of female subjectivity. At the same time, women are encouraged not to change themselves arbitrarily under external pressure. While maintaining gender balance, they should have a correct understanding of their own values, and advocate for women's rights through reasonable and correct ways so as to achieve the awakening and maturity of women's self-awareness.

## 3. Theoretical Basis of the Study

The Other is a prominent terminology in postcolonial theory. Generally speaking, the Other is a reference that is both distinct from and related to the Self. By establishing the Other, one can better understand oneself. This chapter briefly introduces the connotation of the Other and the formation of postcolonial feminism that is closely integrated with the Other.

### 3.1 The Connotation of the Other

The systematic discourse on the concept of "the Other" first appeared in the early 19th century. Hegel employed the dialectical interaction between the slave master and the slave to demonstrate the contradictory and interdependent nature of the Self and the Other which means the understanding of human identity often depends on the Other.

As time goes by, the connotation of "the Other" becomes more abundant. The postcolonial theory that emerged in the 1970s believed that European empires often regarded themselves as Self, marginalizing colonial peoples by labeling them as ignorant, barbaric, and inferior and ruling them with economic and political advantages in order to rationalize their colonial behaviors. As a result, the colonized people could only obtain the status of the Other and were in a state of control and slavery.

### 3.2 The Formation of Postcolonial Feminism

After the 1980s, as a female scholar in the Third World, Spivak shifted her research focus to the living conditions of the lower class of the colonial people, especially the situation of women. By focusing on

the marginalized identity consciousness that is regarded as the Other in both the Western/Eastern and Male/Female binary oppositional pattern, postcolonialism and feminism organically combine to form postcolonial feminism, thus compensating for the absence of a gender perspective in postcolonial theory. Based on postcolonial feminism, this paper explores Mary's fate by discussing the identities of gender Other and racial Other respectively.

#### **4. Analysis of Mary's Tragic Fate from the Perspective of Postcolonial Feminism**

In *The Grass is Singing*, the patriarchy was so overwhelming that even the white female could not escape the second sex position as the gender Other. Additionally, racial discrimination was a major issue in South Africa throughout the colonial era. The British colonizers dehumanized the natives and gradually led to the reversal of the Other status. This chapter explores the double oppressions exerted on Mary and seeks to comprehend how Mary became the Other and ultimately paid the price for her actions.

##### *4.1 Oppression of the Female as the Gender Other*

Beauvoir (1974) mentioned that she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute--she is the Other. In terms of economy, men and women are two different classes; In terms of profession, men have better positions that earn a higher salary and have more opportunities for success than women. Within the hypocritical white community, men were believed as the sovereign Subject and women as the Other who must conform to the patriarchal values. As a result, women who did not adhere to these societal standards would be marginalized. This patriarchal cultural standard dominated by men was mandatory, forcing women to unconditionally obey patriarchy, never allowing them to have their own thoughts and lives, and thus becoming completely subordinate to men. This also had a subtle impact, leading women who have long been influenced by patriarchal culture to gradually internalize this moral standard into their own value orientation, thereby hindering their pursuit of liberation and freedom. It can be demonstrated that these women were destined to be isolated as the Other under such a patriarchal culture.

##### *4.1.1 Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity*

Masculinity refers to the value interpretation of historical and socio-cultural norms attached to the gender traits possessed by men. It is a psychological structure, a behavioral norm, or a set of social expectations and constraints (Jin, 2023). In *The Grass is Singing*, white farmers Charlie and Dick appeared as colonizers in South Africa. Therefore, the construction of their hegemonic masculinity was first reflected in establishing their dominant positions among the local black indigenous people. As a vicious colonizer who severely exploited the local laborers, Charlie treated laborers not as humans but as machines that could constantly bring him economic benefits. As Cesaire (1972) contends that no human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an

instrument of production.

Compared to Charlie, Dick was more concerned with exerting his desire for control over Mary (Zhou & Yu, 2021). Dick regarded marriage as a dream, and Mary was just symbolically equated to the women on the poster. He needed Mary to take care of his household chores, and when he saw Mary decorating his house warmly, he could almost imagine the blueprint for a better life. His desire for the image of a “wife” far exceeded his personal appreciation and identification with Mary (Zhang & Li, 2013). After they got married, Mary moved to Dick’s farm. Dick displayed his dominance over Mary and reminded her of the job that was exclusive to her. After his command was carried out, Dick was pleased with his superiority. As the ideological construction of gender keeps males dominant, Dick viewed Mary as the required Other through whom he projected his role as subject. It can be said that the construction of hegemonic masculinity makes it difficult for women like Mary to escape the status of the Other.

#### 4.1.2 Collapse of Female Spiritual Awakening

In a patriarchal society, women often do not have their own set of values. Therefore, they can only passively accept external male values (Zhang, 2011). Mary and Dick had their first conflict over the use of water. Besides, compared with Dick, Mary was better qualified to run the farm because she ascertained the reasons for their failures exactly and suggested growing tobacco which was more profitable. However, her abilities provoked Dick’s grudges. Dick no longer allowed her to participate in farm management. Mary’s inner world was severely distorted by the external male value system and women’s expectations for their growth were also lower than those of men. This psychological disadvantage allows women to consciously conform to social norms and attach themselves to male power, making the social gender system tighter. It can be said that it was this internal value system that led to her tragic fate.

If the dry and cracked land was described as a metaphor for the spiritual desolation of modern Westerners, then the scorching summer of African farms must symbolize the withering spirit of Mary. In fact, nature was Mary’s inner devil. And then she heard it, that the sound she could never bear, the first cicada beginning to shrill somewhere in the trees: It was the sound of the sun itself, and how she hated the sun (Lessing, 1950). The spiritual and physical oppression that Mary felt was the natural objects on the farm (Lu, 2016). She attributed her death and destruction to the failure of long-term human and natural confrontation, without realizing that the oppression of women’s lives by the social system, class, and cultural prejudice was the cause of her unfortunate life.

#### 4.2 *Oppression of the White Female as the Racial Other*

The Subject has different identities at different periods (Zhang, 2017). Mary adopted a new identity as a white slave owner after getting married. As a harsh master, she bullied black people indiscriminately and drove them to work as machines. The first positive response to Mary’s hegemony came from the natives’ deliberation of her deduction of wages. When she was annoyed by the natives’ sluggish reply to her demands, she claimed to deduct their wages. Therefore, the indigenous expressed their

resentment by sulking and stirring up an unexpected uprising. Moreover, when Moses disobeyed Mary's wishes and therefore got punishment, he gave a grudging look to Mary and it was this look that turned her stomach liquid with fear (Lessing, 1950). At this point, the dominant position of white people was disintegrating, and the status of the Other was moving from black to white. (Du & Shi, 2011).

Moses was conscientious and considerate. When Mary begged him to stay to escape Dick's reprimands, he gave Mary additional considerations and this imperceptibly helped them to forge a new relationship between them. As a white person, she discriminated against and excluded him; As a woman, she was infatuated with him and relied on him. In the context of racial discrimination, Mary's emotions and rationality clashed. The more she resisted, the more her racial consciousness blurred, the more her female self-awareness awoke, the more her identity as a white slave owner split. She eventually transcended the racial boundary between black and white and developed an intimate relationship with Moses. Having submitted to Moses's tenderness and gentleness, willingly acted out the role of an ordinary woman in such a man-dominated society. It can be said that the awakening of black people and the lack of Mary's subjectivity carried a foreshadowing for her final tragic fate.

#### 4.2.1 Self-Reconstruction of the Black People

The people of the colonies have been deprived of their right to speak up for themselves, the history belonging to the colonies can only be described by their suzerainty. In *The Grass is Singing*, the first two black natives who served as servants on Dick's farm completely lost their subjectivity and were in a state of silence. When Mary suspected that the first black male servant Samson had stolen something. Samson did not have the opportunity to explain and the situation of the second servant was also similar. However, the third male servant named Moses changed the previous situation of black people being "speechless". When Mary supervised the farm, Moses demanded to drink on hearing Mary's irrational order. He said in his native tongue, "I want to drink" (Lessing, 1950). His demand was quickly rejected by Mary. Then Moses made a second attempt to make himself understood by explaining it in shaky English; When Mary scolded Moses, he replied, "I scrubbed it this morning" (Lessing, 1950). It was obviously shown that Moses's words, which all included the first-person "I" as the subject were marked by a keen sense of self-awareness. Similarly, the novel endowed black people with great potential to resist oppression by writing their bodies in a muscular and powerful manner. All these factors provide a reasonable explanation for Moses kills Mary and finally causes her tragic ending (Xu & Wang, 2020).

#### 4.2.2 The Loss of Mary's Subjectivity

At that time, numerous European conquerors in South Africa, striving to drastically take over the land and establish colonial rule, using the local Africans as their slaves. For those white settlers, the difference between Africa and Britain was equivalent to that between black and white people. Due to their fair skin, white colonizers believed that they were the "chosen people" and that other colors, such as yellow and black, deserved to be inferior. It was under the influence of these values that Mary

consciously stayed away from the black indigenous people as they were inferior. On the other hand, due to the fact that other European white descendants were the only force in South Africa that could compete with the British, Mary's identity as a white colonizer of the British Empire deprived her of the right to integrate into the whole white community. Racial discrimination trapped Mary in a situation where she completely lost identity recognition so the presence of the black servant Moses became the last straw that crushed Mary, causing her soul to completely collapse and her deep desire for men gradually awakened. However, under the constraints of traditional moral disciplines, the relationship between Mary and Moses is defined as incest. For black society, the white colonizer Mary was the racial Other; For white society, they felt insulted and ashamed by Mary's murky relationship with Moses and Mary's death became a relief for them. Therefore, the blurring of identity led Mary to completely become the racial Other, turning into the biggest victim of racial discrimination.

## **5. The Enlightenment of Mary's Fate to the Female**

Women should not be defined as reproductive machines, nor should they fall into the stereotypes of social traditions. Women should be loved, independent, and intelligent. This chapter elaborates on the difficulties women face in pursuing their self-worth and seeks possible solutions for the realization of women's subjectivity.

### *5.1 The Dilemma of Women*

Unequal gender and racial consciousness deprives women of their social discourse rights and isolates them from the margins of society, resulting in female "aphasia". As a way to satisfy their own demands for social identification, women can only passively accept dominant conventional principles. When a woman denies her true values, she has to deconstruct herself in exchange for social recognition, taking mainstream social discourse as her own discourse and traditional social standards as the basis for shaping herself, thereby further making herself a vassal of society and a soulless shell.

### *5.2 The Realization of Female Value*

Although Mary's final fate was tragic, it cannot be denied that during her time alone, Mary received a secondary education and was able to show exceptional work skills. This also highlights that in the construction of female spiritual subjectivity, knowledge plays a crucial part and can even be considered a prerequisite for women to achieve full freedom. Additionally, the acquisition of knowledge also means that women can be more economically independent. The reason why Mary often fell into emotional instability after marriage was precisely because she had been helping her husband manage the farm and did not have her own actual income. Economic dependence inevitably made Mary an accessory to her husband. Therefore, if women want to realize their own value, they must strive for the right to education and achieve economic independence which will inevitably bring about the independence of women's personality and spirit, stimulate their creativity, as well as the possibility of independent thinking and subjectivity. However, the path for women to achieve subjectivity is not

always smooth. On the one hand, it may attract resistance from traditional culture. On the other hand, it is easy to go to extremes and thus cultivate another form of hegemony.

Consequently, developing female subjectivity necessitates not only the efforts of women but also the formation of a social consensus to break away from the Other status and strive to create a more equal and harmonious relationship between people.

## Conclusion

In *The Grass is Singing*, the realistic work with an anti-colonial theme, the tragedy of the “Other” is depicted throughout the novel. Lessing portrays the deplorable living circumstances of white women as well as the black indigenous people in the African colonial society. Throughout Mary’s life, she experienced restrictions and oppression by the dominant patriarchy and was hurried into a loveless marriage by social conventions, which made her the unavoidable Other of the male. Besides, the black people never acknowledged the white women as their masters, despite the fact that the white women belonged to the white class and thought they were superior to the black. The natives had intense prejudice and animosity towards white women, which undoubtedly solidified their status as the Other. The detachment from culture, severe racial confusion, and gender discrimination left her life off track and gradually weakened her self-consciousness. This paper is acutely aware of these problems and delves into the lives of indigenous people, especially white women. Supported by postcolonial feminism, focusing on the conflict and integration between heterogeneous cultures not only encourages women to seek self-awareness and get rid of their subordinate status as the Other, but also calls on the whole society to create a harmonious atmosphere for women’s pursuit of subjectivity. However, analyzing the causes of Mary’s tragic fate from the perspectives of gender and race issues has always remained focused on the external reasons. The lack of attention to Mary’s personal inner world and spiritual division is undoubtedly the limitation of this paper, which also provides broad space for further exploration of Mary’s survival dilemma.

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