

# An Ecofeminist Interpretation of The Grass is Singing

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of the desolation of nature and female ecology in Doris Lessing's literary work *The Grass Is Singing* is interpreted from the perspective of ecofeminism. Mary, the heroine of the work, exists as an other in a patriarchal society, without the ability to express herself and without a real voice of her own, thus leading to a miserable life. Therefore, women have to get rid of their economic and spiritual dependence on men in order to fundamentally change their status. From the ecofeminist viewpoint, the white colonists, who are influenced by the patriarchal ideology, not only break the balance of the ecological system and gender relationship, but also cause the racial discrimination and class exploitation. The final tragedy in the novel stimulates people to consider deeply humans' contemporary way of thinking and living as well as other problems and appeals to people to maintain the social harmony and sustainable development.

## Keywords

The Grass is Singing; Ecofeminism; Nature; Woman; Harmony.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

Doris Lessing (1919- ) is a world-renowned British author who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007. Her debut novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, was published in London in 1950 and drew the attention of literary critics. As the virgin novel of Doris Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* reveals multiple relationships in the South African society and leaves readers enough reflective space. It has been attracting much attention of scholars from different perspectives both at home and abroad.

*The Grass Is Singing* focuses on the experiences of a young white girl, Mary, growing up in colonial South Africa and her eventual tragic death by a black manservant. Set in the African continent under British colonial rule in the mid-twentieth century, the novel shows the great destruction of the natural environment of the South African continent by white colonizers, and describes the tragic fate of women, blacks and whites at the bottom of society under sexism, racism and class oppression. While most critics have studied the work from the perspectives of feminism and colonialism, this paper will try to explore the theme of wilderness of nature and female ecology embodied in the work from the perspective of ecofeminism.

In *Understanding Doris Lessing*, Jean Pickering gives a detailed explanation of Mary's miserable fate and claims that Mary's destiny is caused by her living conditions instead of her personal reasons. The author describes how Mary is gradually destroyed based upon *The Grass Is Singing* and shows her great sympathy for Mary.

In *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness*, Roberta Rubenstein makes an analysis of the contradiction between Mary's minds and the social environment. The author believes that *The Grass Is Singing* presents Lessing's different angles of writing and prepares the ground for her later literary creation.

In *Doris Lessing's Africa*, Michael Thorpe describes Mary's fate in the colonial society and

analyzes her taboo relationship with her black servant. Michael points out that racial discrimination is the basic reason for Mary's final tragedy.

## 1.2. Purpose and Significance

This essay analyzes the novel from an ecofeminist perspective, revealing the ecological and feminist consciousness in the novel as well as Lessing's reflections on issues such as man and nature, gender, race and class, showing the topicality of Lessing's work. It is necessary for human beings to pay serious attention to the environmental protection because it is directly related to later generations. Meanwhile, the healthy relationships contribute to the development of the society. The balance of ecological system and the harmony of social relations are the base for the sustainable development of human society. Lessing appeals for environmental protection and social equality and expects to establish a harmonious world.

## 2. Connotation of Ecofeminism

The formation of ecofeminism was marked by the first introduction of the term "ecofeminism" by French feminist and writer Franois d'Aubonne in 1974. "Man is a singular creature. He has a set of gifts which make him unique among the animals: so that, unlike them, he is not a figure in the landscape--he is a shaper of the landscape." (Bronowski, 1973: 19) It emphasizes the intrinsic connection between women and nature, and organically links the fight for gender equality with the concept of protecting the ecological environment, with the aim of improving gender relations and repairing the relationship between humans and nature. Karen Warren, a representative figure of Western ecofeminism, believes that women and nature are subordinate "others" who are oppressed and dominated by a patriarchal society. Patriarchal and dualistic modes of thinking are detrimental to women and nature.

The core of ecofeminism is to link the male domination of nature and the oppression of women, to analyze ecological problems by criticizing male domination, and to find a way to liberate women and solve the ecological crisis by opposing male oppression. Ecofeminism criticizes the traditional masculine ideology and dichotomous value system, and on the basis of opposing the traditional masculine ideology and dichotomous value system, strives to reconstruct a better world in which human beings and nature live in harmony. Rosemary Luther, a representative of female ecotheology, proposes that dualism is the root cause of the long-term subordination of women and nature, and the main cause of the contemporary ecological crisis. Therefore, it is necessary to combine the liberation of women with the solution of the ecological crisis, and to develop a harmonious relationship between men and women, human beings and nature on the basis of dissolving and transcending dualism.

Women are closer to nature; whereas the tone of the male ethic is one of hatred of nature. The dichotomy between nature and culture, the separation of the physical (animal) world from the social (human) world, the distinction between male and female, and the cross-cultural perspective that groups women with nature, reproduction, materiality, and otherness; and men with culture, production, form, and selfhood; are part of a Western patriarchal ideology that seeks justification for the devaluation and rape of nature and women.

Ecofeminism advocates the integration of the natural world with the feminist spirit. It believes that a culture should be built that is not separate from nature. Although ecological movements are not necessarily all feminist, the degree to which any profound ecological movement is gendered is shocking. It is shocking because profound ecological consciousness is a feminine consciousness, or, one might say, ecological consciousness is a traditionally feminine consciousness. Ecofeminists are concerned and distressed by the severe ecological destruction of the planet, the disappearance of forests, air pollution, and water pollution. They say, "We are working against ourselves. We no longer feel part of the planet. We see other creatures as

enemies, and we gave up on ourselves a long time ago." Ecofeminism suggests, "The rape of the earth in all its forms has become a metaphor, as has the rape of women on various pretexts."

Ecofeminists see a link between female oppression and the degradation of nature, advocate mutual care and respect, and oppose all forms of inequality. Focusing on ecofeminism is the key to maintaining social harmony and sustainable development. Maintaining ecological balance and focusing on social equality will enable humanity to have a better future.

### **3. The Oppression and Inequality in *The Grass is Singing***

#### **3.1. Oppression on Nature and Women in *The Grass is Singing***

Ecofeminists advocate respect for nature and women, arguing that patriarchal attitudes are at the root of the oppression of nature and women. Driven by profit, a large number of white colonists came to South Africa and greatly damaged the local natural environment. At the same time, due to the influence of patriarchy, men have always oppressed women. The heroine, Mary, is oppressed and discriminated against by her father, husband and black servants one after another throughout her life. In the novel, Lessing exposes the oppression of women and nature. As a female writer, she wants to build an ideal world where people and nature live in harmony and men and women are treated equally.

Mary, who grew up in a patriarchal society, was able to accept the constraints and oppression of patriarchal norms on women's behavior, and gradually incorporated her own thoughts, character and behavior into these norms. For example, the first day after Mary's marriage, when she just walked to Dick's farm residence, Dick came to Mary with a teapot and told Mary that she should do this kind of thing in the future, which directly indicates that Doing housework Kyung is Mary's future duties, and Mary also very obediently took the teapot, and to the tea. From this we can find that both Mary and Dick think that women deserve to do special household chores and are limited to that. However, the unsuccessful career and weak will, so full of patriarchal norms of Mary always despise their husbands Dick, despite their own ability to run the farm, but she always stay out of it, thinking that it is her husband's business not their own to do things, when her husband Dick let her down again and again, she turned, and relied on the patriarchal system with a strong body, strong character, more in line with the Moses, who is more in line with patriarchal standards of masculinity. Dick, who is also deeply involved in the patriarchal culture, is also anxious because he does not meet the standards of a male under the patriarchal culture, and eventually goes crazy due to mental overstimulation.

#### **3.2. Inequality between Races and Amid Classes in *The Grass is Singing***

Ecofeminists advocate the establishment of equal social relations and believe that the concept of patriarchy is the root of racism and class conflict. The notion of racial discrimination is deeply rooted in South African society. White colonizers brutalized blacks, and the government's disregard added to the misery of blacks. At the same time, inequality and prejudice existed in white society. The rich whites discriminated against the poor and considered their poor condition to be unworthy of white status. In her novel, Lessing reveals the inequalities in South African society and expresses her sympathy for the black and white poor. As a white writer, Lessing looks forward to building an ideal world of racial harmony and class equality.

The story takes place in the colonial period of southern Africa, the place because of the majority of farms, so the need for a large number of labor, and black people as the most important slave labor, making this place has become a gathering place of white and black people mixed. However, South Africa at that time had a deep racial discrimination ideology, which was deeply rooted in the mindset of almost every white person, and the hierarchy between white and black people was extremely strict. People living in this area during this period could not accept others

to scorn, challenge or break the boundaries between whites and blacks, nor could they accept themselves to make these actions, otherwise the results would be disastrous.

When Mary's warm relationship with Moses, a black manservant, is discovered by everyone, Mary finally succumbs to the social pressure of public opinion, which makes the racism in her perception prevail and drives Moses out of the farm, and Mary, who is almost broken, dies under Moses' knife. When everyone knew that Moses killed Mary, everyone acted unusually calm and indifferent, and even tried to cover up the truth of the matter, even when the police investigated the real cause of Mary's death, they also tried to cover up the actual situation, and finally did not publish the special relationship between Mary and Moses, and Moses was also used to fabricate the "theft caused the death of the mistress". The case was hastily closed on the charge of "theft causing the death of the mistress". All the people did not tell the straight picture of Mary's murder, either because they did not know the whole story, or because they tried to conceal the special relationship between the whites and the blacks, to maintain the so-called "unsullied" image of the whites, and to do their best to maintain their "superior status" over other ethnic groups. The story of the white man From this part of the novel, we can see that Mary, who has been living in this kind of social environment since childhood, naturally cannot escape from the concept of discrimination against blacks, even when she cannot help falling in love with Moses, although she has a deep love, but there is also discrimination from deep inside, as well as a deep sense of guilt for breaking this boundary. This series of complex feelings and contradictions in her heart constantly struggling, and the pressure and accusations from the outside world is the pressure of her breath. Whether it is an external reason or a personal one, the root cause comes from racial discrimination, therefore, the tragedy of Mary's fate cannot be separated from the persecution of the racial concept.

## 4. The Wasteland-like Female and Natural Ecology in *The Grass is Singing*

### 4.1. The Grass is Singing in the Wasted Natural Spheres

The title of *The Grass Is Singing* is quoted from Eliot's *The Waste Land*. "In this decaying cave surrounded by mountains, in the pale moonlight, the grass sing." Several descriptions of nature in the work show the author's concern about the wilderness of natural ecology: the unpredictable weather, the land so dry and cracked that no more crops can grow, the mighty lightning and thunder from above, the crazy grass that want to swallow up the huts inhabited by humans, etc. The "wilderness" of this once lush, once vibrant African savannah began long before Dick bought the farm: a mining company cut down every tree in the area, leaving only some crude undergrowth and rolling wasteland. Mr. Slater's farm is simply without a tree, the farm plowed a big furrow, how many acres of good black fertile land have become barren because of abuse. But he made money after all, this is the "real thing".

In the face of man's greed, nature brought mankind a terrible punishment. The land of the farm was so barren that it would become a wasteland, and no more fertile crops would grow; the land where the trees were cut down and the ore dug up was split into ravines. Humans are constantly destroying the natural environment and modifying it, and their unbridled destruction has caused unrecoverable wounds to nature. In the novel, Africa's land was dotted with small patches of suburbs, as if they were sick and broken. Even the initially fertile farms are not inexhaustible, and the land gradually becomes barren. In the process of conquering nature and transforming it, human beings have destroyed the surrounding environment and ecological balance, and have deeply affected the sustainable development of human beings. Therefore, if human beings want to continue to survive, they can only change their concepts, oppose anthropocentrism, and emphasize the harmony between human beings and nature in order to maintain ecological balance and sustainable development.

## 4.2. The Grass is Singing in the Wasteland-like Female Ecology

Another important theme of *The Grass Is Singing* is the “wilderness” of the human spirit, which embodies the theme of women's oppression under the patriarchal society and their division by repression, and provokes serious thoughts on women's issues in the context of colonialism. Mary had an unfortunate childhood, with an alcoholic father and a mother who was overwhelmed by life. She lived and grew up in a poor and sorrowful environment, which had a great influence on her character and life orientation as an adult. She had no aspirations or pursuits for marriage and only wanted to escape from marriage and family to avoid repeating her mother's mistakes. This mentality laid the groundwork for her later marital misfortune. “She heard people talk about those intricate emotional experiences and could not help but feel amazed and even a little afraid. She tried her best to avoid them” (Lessing, 1950). The mean and worldly things her girlfriends said behind her back against her started to shake her. She has been unconsciously searching for a husband ever since, even though she refuses to acknowledge the practice in her own heart. She had a happy, single life until she was thirty, supporting herself by her own labor.

As she grew older, the years passed, and people around her looked at her differently, Mary had to give in to the world and circumstances, and finally married Dick, a white farmer she met in a movie theater, and lived in a humble tin house, suffering both materially and mentally until she fell apart. So, from the beginning, their marriage was not based on love, which foreshadowed the misfortune of Mary's later marriage. Her husband was a cowardly and incompetent man, and she was unwilling to admit the failure of her marriage, but chose to escape; when she had an affair with the black Moses and was forced by the pressure of the world to admit her choice, she betrayed her lover. It can be seen that the patriarchal society's repression and bondage to women makes women have no sense of their own independence and can only get the approval of people around them through marriage.

Dick is a cowardly man who lacks initiative and does everything half-heartedly. When Dick asks Mary to come to the farm with her, she says, “I hate your farm, I hate it, I don't want to bother with it.” (Lessing, 1950). When she finally realized Dick's weakness and lack of will, and the relationship between the couple, she just “never had the slightest hope” for anything. Mary said to herself, “Never again should I suggest anything to him, or try to stimulate him to understand” (Lessing, 1950). In the face of her life and emotional difficulties, she adopted an evasive attitude, abandoned herself, and plunged herself into a quagmire from which she could not extricate herself. “Step by step she had come to this point, becoming a woman with no will power, sitting on a dirty, smelly, broken couch, waiting for the darkness to destroy him. That's what she deserves, and she knows it perfectly well herself” (Lessing, 1950).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Mary, the heroine of *The Grass Is Singing* exists as an Other in a patriarchal society, without the agency to express herself, without a real voice of her own, which is what ultimately leads to the tragedy of her life. Therefore women have to get rid of their economic and spiritual dependence on men in order to fundamentally change their status. It is on the basis of dissolving and transcending dualism that a harmonious relationship between men and women, between human beings and nature, can be developed. From an eco-feminist perspective, the white colonists under the influence of a patriarchal society not only destroyed the natural ecosystem and the balance of gender relations, but also triggered racial discrimination and class oppression in South African society. The tragedy shown in the novel triggers profound thoughts on the thinking patterns and lifestyles of human beings today, and calls for people to maintain social harmony and sustainable development.



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