

# An Interpretation of Mary in the Shadow of Colonialism in Doris Lessing's—The Grass is Singing

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## Abstract

Doris Lessing, one of the most popular writers of British literature in the second half of the twentieth century, is famous for her changeable styles of works and different perspectives all over the world. Reviewing from Doris Lessing's works, Marginal Man is the main clue in her literary creation. Most of characters she created in her works are living in the cracks of changeable era and cultural transformation. From the race of blacks and whites to the free female under the colonial background in 1950s and 60s; and then from the spiritual alienation under culture shock in 1970s and 80s to the difficult living conditions of the middle-aged and the aged in her later works, all of these characters are the unique microcosm of the Marginal Man created by means of blending Lessing's own experiences and emotional imagery. All of these novels transmit the rise and fall of deep culture and the sense of vicissitudes of life.

This thesis elaborates Mary, a Marginal Man in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* from three points of view—Mary's drifting, Mary's Constraints and Fears, Mary's Fleeing and Awakening. From it, we can understand that fleeing as her surviving way is to get rid of the shackles of life, moreover she bares the double loss coming from the external world and the innermost, and then she eventually makes for resistance and comes to her spiritual salvation in order to seek for her spiritual home. This thesis makes a good reflection on the real living conditions of marginal groups and guides people to establish correct social values to realize the social problems caused by marginal people and make some measures to solve some of them.

**Keywords:** Doris Lessing, marginal man, drifting, colonialism

## 1. Introduction

Doris Lessing is a British writer, a short story writer and novelist, essayist and critic as well, whose works enormously show solicitude for people in a tight spot of the social and political revulsion in different eras. With a comprehensive survey on Doris Lessing's works, we know the Marginal Man is the main character and typical delegation. Doris Lessing never stops appealing for the rights of racial people, males and females, the old and the weak, who are surviving on the margin, and she makes a great contribution to the career of drawing portraits for them by her writing. They are ordinary people who are disciplined and admonished by the centered social mainstream, but they are struggling to drift out of the center.

*The Grass is Singing* is Lessing's first novel that is set on the background of colonized southern Africa—Rhodesia. Lessing showed a vivid picture of colonialism to the readers. Colonialism is one kind of aggressive policy which is a great menace to world peace. For the developed countries, they have always followed up such kind of means in their relationship with the developing countries. The emergence of colonial power is the calamity of the colonized. Colonialism was not simply a system of exploitation man by man, but one whose basic objective was to absorb the benefits into the so-called "mother land".

The influence that leads to colonialism is the main reason for the heroine's tragic fate in *The Grass is Singing*. In this novel, Lessing creates a lot of characters as natural as though it were living. She firstly gives a show of present situation in South African colony under the apartheid regime to the western readers with undisguised emotions, and describes the poor white immigrants' difficult surviving process in the shadow of colonialism. And what's more, Mary Turner is the first marginal person in her works, she epitomizes all the characteristics of Marginal Man and its spiritual connotation. As a white woman in the colonial society, she is deeply constrained

by the colonialism and she begins to drift and flee from her prison-like predicament because of her awakening. On the surface, although she is a pathetic woman who is afflicted by physical or mental suffering on the colonial farm and ultimately a native bumped her off, actually she has been the one who is influenced and oppressed by the racism. So she is a sufferer of violence in the shadow of colonialism.

## 2. Mary's Drifting

Mary's drifting experiences are commonly believed to be the main clue of her tragic fate. Mary never stops her journey of drifting from the childhood to the youth, especially after her marriage. Mary spends her childhood in poverty in the backward occlusion of the small town. The rotten living condition and her parents' daily quarreling darken her life in her mind, which is difficult to be erased completely. She is brought up with accepting the educational opinion of being hostile to the "black beast", this kind of abnormal educational philosophy makes Mary hear-closed and hatred. The grey cloud of the war hangs over this generation and especially her childhood. Although she and her family endure the torment in the same condition of economic constraints, starting from her early age, her education of contrary to the reality and ideality, let her physical and mental development of health in the inferior situation. Her unhealthy mental development forces her to generate her own disgust resistance of opposite to the sex and marriage. Her inferior situation makes her have to escape from it, but just the drifting leads her fate into unimaginable tragedy step by step.

In the theory of Marginal Man, drifting is the main surviving way of marginal man. As a girl growing up gradually, she is really eager to get rid of poverty and of family living condition. Whether from the physical or mental aspects, she wants to live in a happy and free life in the future, and drifting is her inevitable result of her life. So, when she steps out the boarding school into the company where she finally finds a position, she is even satisfied with the dull work. Furthermore, because of her working in handy and her economic independence, Mary temporarily forgets her own inferior situation in her family and society. She thinks she can completely live without any interference from outside indeed. "Till...her father died. That removed the last link that bound her to a childhood she hated to remember. ... She was free. And when the funeral was over, and she had returned to the office, she looked forward to a life that would continue as it had so far been" (Lessing, p. 33).

At that moment Mary is satisfied with her drifting life because of the present happiness and freedom. However good days are short-lived, she is trapped in another trouble when she originally thinks her life of drifting is over. While women will be full of consciousness and be inevitable to be married out of deference to the living regulation some time or other. Mary, who is in her prime, does not care about the surroundings and follows her usual way of doing things no matter what others say in spite of sulkiness. As she grew older, people's strange eyes and malicious words make her feel anxious daily. The traditional prejudice and social pressure let her notice that "and all the time, unconsciously, without admitting it to herself, she was looking for a husband" (Lessing, p. 46). She realizes that she has to begin her drifting life again.

In the prejudice of the traditional marriage concept, she chooses the most condescend idea to get married freely, and is eager to escape from the scandals. She would rather go back to the similar experiences of childhood than live in the city, which is full of unhappy experiences. Differently, after encountering with Dick, Mary desperately wants to get married immediately, without love however. She thinks another drifting life will be excellent and happy like before, because she places her heart and new life on Dick and his farm—a new environment being full of natural atmosphere. But unfortunately, she is glaringly wrong that her decision of drifting just makes her move from one difficulty into another. Mary's drifting means to leave her familiar living circle and to a strange farm land. Her drifting can't change her present situation of constrains by the traditional thoughts. Facing with a new environment, she and her soul feel a great conflict with the external world. She is given another hard beat by the harsh reality after suffering the failure of her desire for home. However Dick is kind and full of passion to farm, but he is so stubborn and incompetent that he ruins everything. Farm annual losses and home pennilessness force Mary to use out all her savings to improve the settings and living condition, but her action can neither change the poor situation, nor get rid of the spiritual sense of loss. She quarrels with Dick because of some trivial matters unconsciously in the tone which her mother used to quarrel with her father.

Mary cries and complains in a kind of dignified, martyred rage. She is afraid of accepting the reality of walking on her mother's old way, she is tense with hatred, weakening into self-pity. After the first conflict with Dick, she feels bruised and beaten, she is disappointed with Dick but she can not help relying on him. Day after day, she kills the dull and emptiness time in the dilapidated house. Finally, her confusion and spiritual conflict urge her to leave the narrow farm back to the town again, she makes courage to recover her previous life, and this is the only time she makes a struggle with her life. But Mary fails to own her position in the mainstream of the society, in people's opinion, her social status has transferred from the white-collar who is independent in economy into a

poor woman who lives in the countryside. Everything has been changed after her leaving, most importantly, Mary recognizes, "But it was the first time that she admitted to herself that she had changed, in herself, not in her circumstances" (Lessing, p. 90). And then, she has to follow Dick dispiritedly to the farmland, back to her life which is similar to her mother's fate. She experiences the second failure in her life, she has finished her drifting life from then on, and unluckily, she becomes so numb that she accepts the reality of her marginal status.

### 3. Mary's Constraints and Fears

In the colony, colonizers treat themselves as savers and dominators to help the colonized to exploit their homeland and seek for a new world. The colonizers advocate racism, which establish a basic discrimination between the white and the black, furthermore make a foundation for the immutability of colonial life as well. As a white woman brings up in the colony, Mary inherits the colonial and racial ideology from her parents. Her natures are mainly formed in her childhood so that her constrained thoughts become the primary reason of her tragic fate. She is deeply constrained by her family in her early time, especially from her mother. Mary remembers that her family is in the ordinary white working class with poor economic condition, which is not full of qualifications to be admired. So her whole family is expelled by the middle working classes because of the poorest living standard. This is also the bad influence of the war. In her eyes, there is no love in her family but father's drinking and mother's weeping. She understands that she is naturally classified to be her mother's confederate tool to struggle with her father. The endless quarrelling and complaints make Mary feel scared and sick of marriage and family. In addition, her freedom is really controlled by her mother's order. She is received the murmuring about being not to do this or that all day. There is no permission for her to make in touch with the natives indeed.

So on one hand there is no harmony between her mother and her, and on the other hand she is afraid of "cheekys" who may be bad for her. Just in Lessing's former writing style, mother and daughter will never be a harmonious pair to fight for their independence. Mary can't wait to break the constraint coming from her mother. When Mary heard her parents' death, she didn't go back to attend the funeral, because it is astonished that she can't help feeling free and unrestrained. From then on there is no link and bound to remind her bad memories. Therefore she is so busy enjoying her free life in the city in her own way, and what's more she believes that no one will stop her real pursuit, no natives and no sufferings of family.

But the good time doesn't last for so long. The shadow of the colonialism doesn't go far away from her heart. There is a great distance between ideal and reality. What she has accepted from her surroundings makes her form a traditional concept like the same generation to her grown up in the South Africa because of her conscious limitation. Due to the traditional pressure coming from her friends and society, her hurried marriage makes her into another constraint. It is obviously that Mary doesn't get well prepared for a marriage in her potential mind, let alone a wife. She is still feared of being involved in unhappy experiences like her childhood. It is inevitable that Mary is involved into the nightmare again, and a miserable life is waiting for her. Mary has resentment to everything, such as the living place, the black natives, her husband Dick, and herself. The burning of life and the constraint in the little house make Mary feel lonely and despaired. When she fails to seek her previously happy life, she completely realizes that this is her fate, and she will never find the spiritual home in her life. She has to seek another spiritual way of catharsis. As the time goes by, she has grown to be an absolute representative of the white colonizer on the natives, reflected particularly in maltreating the natives as an inferior race. Therefore when she has chance to make a deal with the natives, she revenges on the society through her colonialism power over the natives in order to balance her inner fear and the outer poor living condition. After experiencing failure trips of drifting twice, Mary really accepts the social reality. As a result she comes down to earth under double constraints, one is the external constraint of hostility to her living condition, and the other is the internal one coming from her racial and colonial ideology.

For Mary, she never has consciousness of natives as people who are equal to her, she just puts them on the place of being ordered. When Mary raises her whip to Moses and leaves a horrible scar on his face, the tragic relationship and the wheel of fortune between Moses and Mary have been turned. The conflict of colonial constraint and emotional desire must lead to Mary's tragedy. With the time passing by, Dick's spirit is increasingly deserting, nearly without a soul inside. However, instinct thought makes Mary want a baby to change her present living style, but only due to the poverty, Mary's strong living supporting point is completely collapsed with Dick's rejection. As a woman, although she owns a distinctive imprint of racial discrimination, in her potential opinion, she longs for comfort; care, love and strength. So she needs to pin her physical and mental hopes on Moses, she can't help being attracted by him, and accepts his comfort. But she can't forget their racial differences and employment relationship. So she still often shouts to Moses and oppressed blacks, even feels sick.

When she has emotional entanglements with black servant Moses, she is destined to be constrained in a marginal emotional problem. She struggles with herself all day, being both afraid of Moses' leaving and being desired comfort from him. But as far as the native is concerned, she is still responsive. This is the small part of her mind that is awake. All those scenes she will have liked to stage, but does not dare, for fear of the boy's leaving and Dick's anger, she acts out in her mind.

Mary deeply knows that since the colonizers have set foot on the African continent, they begin to set up their power emperor and carry out their high pressure policy on the colony. And in order to pretend to be a savor, they compose a song of colonial myth which the white will help the black out of the dark and uncivilize culture. Conversely, in Mary's heart, there is lying fear, fear for the revenge that will fall on her and her offspring sooner or latter, because she knows her committed unforgivable crime. Therefore, whether Mary's constraints or fears, they are the basic factors of spiritual characteristics in creating the Marginal Man. In addition, the marginal man appears only when group conflict emerges as a personal problem, through a "crisis experience". To some extent, Mary's constraints and fears are formed by the cultural conflicts between the colonizer and the colonized.

#### **4. Mary's Fleeing and Awakening**

Mary's fleeing is mainly caused by her complicated inner world, especially by her awakening of consciousness. In other words, Mary's fleeing is one way of her awakening. After drifting between the city and farmland, she finally realizes that she must run away from the place that constrains her not only from outside but also from inside. As a marginalized female, Mary breaks conservative thoughts and motivates new thoughts and innovations on the problems of dealing with relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In the beginning of this story, Mary's death just makes readers full of great interest to continue to read and check out the reason of it. With the development of the plot, the truth has been revealed from the hidden behind. On the surface, the native houseboy is seemed to be the murderer, but actually, the domination of the dark colonialism is the reason of Mary's marginalized status. The conflicts between the colonizer and colonized can't be conciliated, especially to Mary who has been grown up to look down upon natives. Viewing Mary's whole life, her fleeing is just the process of seeking for her own identity despite of her final death. It is not hard to find out that Mary never stops seeking her ideal home and surviving space. What's more, her fleeing is just the strong evidence of her conscious awakening from different biological stages, in the other word from daughter to wife.

When she was young, she is a daughter who doesn't enjoy the family love and happy life not in a day. Accompanying with her growth is just father's maltreatment and mother's complaints. So afterwards she makes a firm decision that she will never walk the old way as her mother's. After marriage, she is pushed into a turbulent world where she plays diverse roles in her daily life. In the beginning, she is so meek that she manages housework well as a good wife. She tries to balance the great distance between the ideal and reality. Then she can't bare the poor living conditions and force herself to be busy doing the housework to change the surviving space. Finally she exposes her dissatisfaction in struggling against her husband and runs back to her previous space in town which is doomed to fail into practice. In order to struggle against her fate, Mary fled from her tragic life and poor living condition time and time again. After her first fleeing Mary begins to act as an efficient helper of her husband who is really not good at farming. She becomes to realize that she is not strong enough to be independent. So she begins to adapt to master the business of farmland. After she successfully asks Dick to plant some other things for money, she finds a new form to let her feel satisfied in her innermost part. However, she doesn't complete her work as a wise adviser because of her gradual reliance on Dick in material and spirit.

Her later role of a despairing hostess who is trapped in a forbidden love affair of white and black which leads her into the ending of death indignantly. Widely speaking, Mary is not a successful wife in harmony to the traditional concept when she can't help exposing her superior capability and disobedience to her husband. And what's more she rejects to accept the sympathy from her white neighbors as her counterparts out of self-esteem and maintains to be a marginal one from both the white colonizer and black colonized.

Whether she flees from her farmland or she escapes from the dilemma of the relationship with Moses, she has ever tried to flee and pursue her spiritual homeland. It is not difficult to find out that fleeing is the only way for Mary to protect herself. Unfortunately, when she flees away, she is brought back to the brutal reality once again. The rotten living condition and spiritual suffering make her feel disappointed at her life, so she chooses to hide in her inner world. She eventually succumbs to the patriarchal society and the racial consciousness, their ambiguous relationship violates the taboo of colonial society. Because of the elements of society, history and present life, Mary is just a poor weak young woman who can not guide her own way and control her personal fate. But her marginalized personality makes her in a painful constraint between inner experience and moral judgment, she is nearly engulfed by more hysterical despair. This abnormal relationship can't last for a long time,

Mary knows that the contradiction of her callousness and regret will lead her to the tragic ending, and nobody can save her out of the constraints.

Mary gains insight into herself, at the last dawn of her life, she immerses with infinite nostalgia into the beautifully natural change, and she can feel the life beat around her. But she knows she is on the margin of the world, she has been abandoned by the social mainstream out of the center. It is obvious that the social system and the majority's attitude undoubtedly are the main courses, but her own weakness is also undeniable one of factors. Mary Turner has never been able to integrate into her surviving groups, her spirits always passively accept the mercy of environment and fate. She has never understood the essential meaning of freedom, her emotion is unstable to adapt to the changing society and environment. Her inferior position in sense and emotion pushes her into the painful abyss. Although she wants to fight against her fate and present condition, but she is prevented and hesitated by the narrow racial consciousness, she fails to make a profound thought on her and her social relationship. The loneliness and despair, the resistance and compromise are closely connected with each other, and truly reflect Mary's characteristics in her spirits. She doesn't want to be on the margin, but the reality doesn't give her chance to make a choice.

Mary is bound to experience such kind of process on her way of seeking freedom. The Marginal Man doesn't exist in the world initially, it is the era and the society that produce them. The whole story is a tragedy not only belonging to Mary, but also belonging to the Marginal Man. Such kind of group can not find their spiritual homeland, they will be on the way forever, never be accepted by the mainstream. Lessing's writing will make readers follow the heroine's spiritual experiences to recognize Mary's marginalized orbit and sympathize the suffering of Marginal Man.

## 5. Conclusion

*The Grass is Singing* makes use of an ironical way to the dilemma of Hegemony composed by the white settlers to sustain their colonial society. At South Africa, as a victim of the colonial shadow, Mary has her own wailing to the colonialism as a marginal woman. She is a symbol that stands for the acuity contradiction between the white and the black, the colonizer and the colonized. Mary's fleeing leads her not only to the end of her life, but also to the freedom of new survival. At each transitional point, she does make her own decision to choose her way from all her varied surviving stages. As a white woman in the colony, how to get rid of the constraints of the old social system and the traditional sense of family is becoming Mary's main goal. She wants to break out the constraints of social mainstream to seek self-improvement; she also wants to escape from her fate of pretending marriage. All of these thoughts of breaking constraints lead Mary to the margin of society. Finally, she is inevitably influenced and constrained by the colonial racist ideas. Although her fleeing can't save her fate, she wants prove whether she can seek for her spiritual homeland. Mary Turner behaves in a fit and proper way, and her death just lets her out of the constraints and makes her soul come to peace eventually. As a delegation of colonial background, Mary's emotion is built on a rational basis. Despite of constraints and fear, she still lives in her own way fantastically without any regrets in the end. It also can be concluded that women's pursuit of freedom for themselves is Lessing's purpose or pursuit as well. Mary, who is combined with her characteristics of strength of freedom-worship, self-esteem, talent and her weakness of easily surrender to her inner fear and the constraint of the colonial society, represents her pursuit with her awakening consciousness of freedom and independence.

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