

The Destruction of Diasporic White Individuals’ Sense of Identity in *The Grass is Singing*

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The importance of diaspora identity has grown in recent years as the world becomes more interconnected and diaspora individuals are increasingly involved in matters among different ethnics. *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing is considered one of the most outstanding works of literature after World War II. Interest in ethnic identity has been heightened. The book is recognized as an introspective reflection of the spiritual crisis suffered by diaspora people and societal crises of the time. The thesis will examine the oppression imposed by dominant white group by exploring the transformation of diasporic white individuals’ identity.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, diaspora identity, societal oppression

Introduction

Doris Lessing, the British Nobel laureate in Literature, is a great humanitarian who has consistently focused on social issues. Most of her works deal with racial issues, gender relations, colonialism, social justice and other manifold themes. *The Grass is Singing*, Doris Lessing’s debut work, presents the themes of colonialism and human degradation as well as the erosion of personal diasporic identity. *The Grass is Singing* depicts racial oppression and conflicts in the British-ruled South African colony. Mary, a white native of southern Africa, grows up in a dysfunctional family that leaves an indelible negative impact on her grown-up life. The affair between her and Moses arises as an attempt to fill the emptiness in her life, but the deeply ingrained racial discrimination ultimately leads to tragedy between them. Meanwhile, Marston’s intention to speak the truth is hindered and ultimately excluded by the core white community, reducing him to an insignificant role. This indicates the subjugation of the dominant white group over the disadvantaged white community. The book reveals the social problems caused by oppression, which exist both inside and outside racial boundaries.

Literature Review

Studies Abroad

Foreign studies of *The Grass is Singing* provide a broader perspective, which include themes of post-colonialism, feminism, and psychoanalysis, and have a high reference value. Fahim claims that Lessing’s novels “encompass a wide range, from the political and social issues of colonialism and Communism to psychological depths and mystical heights” (Fahim, 1994, p. 8). To further explain its central idea, the

perspective of post-colonialism is adopted. In Doris Lessing's Africa, Michael Thorpe considers Lessing to be an anti-colonial writer and commends her writing as "a source of wider insight into a general human condition" (Thorpe, 1973, p. 5). Thorpe points out that *The Grass is Singing* presents the hypocrisy of white civilization and reveals the eventual overthrow of white dominance by potential black power. Therefore, the theme of racial oppression is explored. However, other critics provide alternative perspectives, particularly from a feminist viewpoint. In "Pathology of Feminine Failure in the Fiction of Doris Lessing", Markow attributes female tragedy to failure in shouldering responsibility and addiction to romantic love. In addition, the heroine's tragedy has been interpreted through psychoanalytic lenses. Generally, critics tend to adopt Jung's and Freud's theories to analyze Mary's mental dissociation and the underlying causes. Critics like Roberta Rubenstein believe that Jung's theory has asserted great influence on Lessing. In *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the forms of Consciousness*, Roberta Rubenstein emphasizes that it is the influence of unconsciousness that attributes to Mary's tragedy. All these studies are intertwined since they each endeavor to unravel the underlying tragedy in the novel.

Studies at Home

Domestic studies on the works of Doris Lessing start later and have mainly focused on three areas: post-colonialism, eco-feminism, and psychoanalysis. Eco-feminism has gained increasing attention in recent years among these areas. For example, Ma Longyun examines the portrayal of women and nature as wastelands in the South African colony, where both are subject to the oppression of patriarchal cultural practices and economic systems. Likewise, in their paper titled "An Eco-Feminist Interpretation of *The Grass is Singing*", Yang Shihu and Ma Yilin analyze the relationships between people and nature, men and women, and women and nature in Lessing's work, highlighting her desire to promote gender equality and harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural world. While *The Grass is Singing* has been extensively studied from the perspectives of post-colonialism, eco-feminism, feminism, and psychoanalysis, there has been relatively little attention paid to the theme of diasporic identity transformation in the novel.

Thesis Statement

The thesis aims to delve into the oppression within and beyond the white community by analyzing the destruction of diasporic white individuals' identity.

Structure of the Thesis

The paper is structured into four sections. The first section will introduce the ingrained sense of identity in two diasporic whites, namely, the sense of white supremacy and the sense of white conquest. The second part examines how such identities ultimately crumble despite their initial beliefs. This is evidenced by instances of Mary's eventual equal treatment of Black Moses and Marston's abandonment of ranching in South Rhodesia. The third section explores the underlying reasons behind such transformations, which prove to be oppression within and beyond the white community. The final section presents the conclusion drawn from the preceding sections.

The Sense of Diasporic White Individuals' Identity

The sense of identity refers to how a person recognizes and defines themselves within society. When a person lacks mature thoughts and experiences during the formative years of sense of self-identity, he tends to conform to the feedback of a particular social class or group that can provide a sense of belonging. Society and education collectively play a crucial role in the process of shaping one's identity, involving various ethical, political, and personal choices. As a result of these choices, their subsequent actions are consistent with their sense of self.

Diaspora means any group of migrants and their descendants who retain connections with their places of origin. Early education about their homeland culture can lead to their strong attachment to the ancestral homeland for diasporic people. According to Safran, diaspora communities view their ancestral places their true home. As a result, diaspora groups are often committed to preserving the spiritual and cultural practices of their home country, potentially causing social conflicts in their later intercultural lives.

Mary's Sense of White Supremacy

Mary, the protagonist, is of British descent in Southern Rhodesia where racial segregation is enforced. The white and black populations were highly segregated, with the former devaluing the latter as barbaric and claiming their lack of moral virtues to justify denying them equal rights. Mary's family education is also inappropriate. When she is a child, the adults don't allow her to go out for walks alone. If she asks for the reason, they inform her in a matter-of-fact voice that the natives are nasty and might do horrible things to her (Lessing, 1950, p. 77). From the societal to the familial level, white supremacy is firmly entrenched and Mary is no exception to this influence.

As she grows older and becomes Dick's wife, Mary makes her first reluctant contact with black people while taking care of household. She treats their old servant Samson harshly, which leads him to resign from his job. She even feels shocked and repulsed as she witnesses Dick and Samson bid farewell to each other with some personal consideration for the native people (Lessing, 1950, p. 87). Additionally, she expresses her dissatisfaction with her living condition by abusing black handmaids to gain a sense of domination over them. Mary's inhumane conduct towards black men stems from her distorted sense of white superiority. Furthermore, her sense of white supremacy is reinforced by the unfair treatment to blacks.

Marston's Sense of White Conquest

After World War I, the British government encouraged its citizens to expand their colonies, which motivated many families to move to Africa in search of wealth and the opportunities to establish new territories. Marston belongs to this group and embodies the colonialist ideals that were prevalent at that time. Thus, he immigrates to African land as both a colonizer of Africa and an imperial diasporic figure.

Influenced by his remote cousin's tobacco myth as well as what he learns about imperial colonialism from the book, Marston's sense of white conquest seems to be innate. With a strong sense of white conquest, Marston leaves his promising office job but comes to Africa. While helping Charlie take over Dick's farm, Marston realizes that his presence will sever Dick's passionate attachment to the farmland. However, he makes excuses to justify his behavior by claiming that small farmers' farmland will inevitably be swallowed by larger farmers (Lessing, 1950, p. 256). Besides, Marston is too delighted to ignore his disagreeable surroundings that he has been exploited by local white community. The strong feeling of white conquest leads Marston to become Dick's

oppressor and constitutes the reason for his spiritual dilemma in the future. In addition, the novel depicts how Mary hastily turns over Marston's suitcase to find the colonial book of Rhodes that Marston has brought with him from thousands of miles (Lessing, 1950, p. 256). Mary's narrative perspective makes it evident that Marston's ardent desire for conquest is constantly preoccupying his thoughts.

Destruction of Diasporic White Individuals' Sense of Identity

Hall suggests that our identities are not fixed, but are rather an ongoing process of transformation influenced by varying cultural landscapes. This constant evolution can often destabilize our original concept of self. Public self-consciousness refers to being aware of how others perceive us, often resulting in potential self-regulation and social apprehension, while private self-consciousness involves introspection and self-examination of one's personal thoughts and emotions. Mary and Marston both experience a contrast between their private and public self-consciousness in a new cultural context due to their diasporic journey, which leads to their ultimate erosion of their original self-identity.

Equal Treatment of Moses by Mary

Identification is inseparable from the socio-cultural context. Identity cannot be confirmed without a specific social environment. Mary, an English descendant, yet lives in Africa. She retains collective memory of imperial culture but to undergo a clash between the hegemonic imperial culture and the indigenous African culture. Mary is surprised to find that black Moses dares communicate with her in English that white people forbid blacks to use (Lessing, 1950, p. 256). Moreover, although Mary and Moses both live out of contact with the outside world, Moses would pore over the old newsprint spread on the table and questioned whether Jesus think it right for people to kill each other (Lessing, 1950, p. 256). Though in her efforts to maintain her belief in white supremacy, Mary is challenged by Black Moses' implied criticism and his stronger decisiveness compared to White Dick. Moses' powerful display of humanity poses a threat to Mary's sense of white supremacy and forces Mary to treat him equally. In the meantime, due to her poverty, she is excluded from the core of white community. The weak tie to white culture makes her shake self-identity in the face of powerful black culture.

With undermined sense of white superiority, Mary violates the taboo that whites can't have affection for blacks, which is discovered by Marston. Mary immediately drives Moses away due to her maintenance of innate sense of white supremacy. However, her final attempt to give explanations to Moses is evidence of the deconstruction of her white superiority. In the black empowerment, Mary established a private consciousness that forces her to treat Moses in an equal way, whereas her public self-consciousness is rooted in racial apartheid. As a result of misalignment between her public self-consciousness and private self-consciousness, Mary is compelled to confront her inner thoughts and ultimately destruct her societal-labeled self-identity.

Marston's Eventual Abandonment of Ranching

The sense of identity changes and shifts with cultural contexts and social circumstances, as Homi Bhabha states. Marston, is dispersed in Africa that is separate from his place of origin, England. Being a member of diaspora allows him to have direct association with local whites and blacks. When he observes Charlie's perception of Mary as a threat to the white interests as well as his lack of empathy for Mary's death, Marston's belief in the togetherness of white community is shattered. Besides, Marston comes to realize that if he exposes

the truth about the miserable tragedy of Mary, he may face warnings from the white police and Dick who represent the white authority (Lessing, 1950, p. 32). Instead of becoming the master of the farmland, Marston finds himself marginalized within the local white community, facing the uncomfortable reality of being perceived as “the Other.”

The choice between strong and weak cultures in identity can produce intense ideological shocks and great spiritual suffering, Tao Jiajun argues. With the shock of local circumstances, Marston’ sense of white conquest is severely disrupted. Despite his role in oppressing Dick with Charlie, he still firmly believes in the rightness of pursuing the dream of conquest. However, encountering obstacles in his pursuit of justice for Mary and deception from the local upper-class white people, he realizes he and Mary are reduced to the oppressed, too. This realization brings about a great inner conflict: his public consciousness still identifies him as a conqueror, while his self-consciousness tells him that he is the oppressed one. Eventually, He begins to flee the farm that used to be his yearning place of colony and gives up being a rancher in Africa. The gap between his public and private consciousness pushes him to forsake his previous identification as a conqueror.

Causes for Change in the Sense of Identity of Diaspora whites

Mary and Marston are in disruptive self-identity and mental dilemma. The very core of this crisis is defined as the dualism inherent in the society where the central whites ceaselessly seek their interests. According to logocentrism, the traditional way of thinking about Western metaphysics is based on the dichotomy and determines the relationship between the first and second terms of each antithesis as the center and edge. The core white group of people oppress others in order to secure their extra benefits in the name of holding the position of the center.

Mary’s Doubt about Oppression beyond the White Community

In the context of traditional white supremacy, there is a belief that whites are superior to blacks. According to this principle, whites slander blacks and even regards blacks as beasts which can bring peril to them. However, during her interaction with black Moses, Mary finds that his thoughts, behaviors and language are the same as whites except for skin colors. Moses also has humanity as whites do. Mary’s converse self-consciousness generates a question in her mind about whether it is justified that whites oppress blacks or not.

Through Moses’ defiance, Mary’s sense of white supremacy begins to shift and comes to recognize the oppressive nature of the treatment that whites have historically imposed on blacks, which involves dehumanizing them. To dehumanize blacks is the act of denying them their full range of human features, emotions, and rational faculties that are considered important to being human, in order to deprive them of equal rights and opportunities. Therefore, Mary’s failing to complete her self-identity is attributed to her growing doubt about the oppression that extends beyond the white community.

Marston’s Negation of Oppression within the White Community

The core white circle unites its members based on shared characteristics. However, there can be individuals who prioritize their unique private self-identity over their group identity. For instance, Mary breaks racial taboo and has a relationship with Moses, which can be perceived as undermining the white authority over the black

population. Consequently, Mary is ostracized by the primary white community, illustrating a division within the white community between central and peripheral individuals.

When Marston tries to uncover the truth behind Mary's death, he faces threats from Charlie, a rich white local and the local white policeman. The rest of local white population presume that blacks are guilty of all crimes, thereby thinking Moses is due to be hanged. Pursuing justice for the miserable equates to disrupting the core interests of the white community. Marston comes to see how the core white group protects its interests, even at the cost of oppressing its own members. This realization compels him to flee from managing Charlie's farm.

Charlie remains as indifferent as before and is even relieved since he no longer needs to hire Marston after successfully taking over Dick's farmland. Marston is duped again into excavating copper mineral under the illusion of high profits. Unfortunately, the local cost of living was so high that his dream of starting a business was once again dashed (Lessing, 1950, p. 37). These experiences lead him to understand the exploitative nature of the core white community, causing him to return to the office work he previously despised. Thus, his fragility of self-identity can be traced to his denial of internal oppression within the white community.

Conclusion

The diaspora experience provides an opportunity for a clearer understanding of public and private self-identity. When the cleavage arises between the public and private self-consciousness, the original public self-identity shaped in homeland's culture can be considerably affected. The damage to sense of identity occurs because private self-consciousness is typically in opposition to public self-consciousness. Furthermore, the shift in self-identity might be linked to a deeper comprehension of social relationships.

For Mary and Marston, the evolution of self-identity is paralleled by their perception of oppression from the central whites who hunt constantly their own interests. Despite being white themselves, they still sense the oppression from the central people. The white community is consequently narrowed. Given the power dynamics that exist between and within these different groups, it isn't a world where all kinds of identities are equally valuable, but a space where diasporic members are faced with discourses of exclusion and oppression.

The Grass is Singing portrays the spiritual world of two white individuals in diaspora. Both figures find themselves journeying towards a daunting spiritual wilderness, further amplifying the theme of diaspora's identity crisis. While the oppression these two diasporic persons suffer is varied in feature and Lessing doesn't offer solutions to it, she expresses concern for whites' spiritual world, which still holds a warning and thought-provoking significance nowadays. The unique diaspora aesthetic also creates more possibilities for cross-cultural critique and a better understanding of equality.

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