

Original Article

# Colonial Voices and Female Agency in Select Novels of Doris Lessing

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**Abstract** - Doris Lessing is known for being an 'outsider-insider' with regard to her British Heritage and colonial upbringing in Southern Rhodesia. The complexities of racial hierarchies and gendered subjugation in racial marriage are what she articulates in her works. In *Mary Turner* and *Martha Quest*, these contradictions of colonial binarism are exhibited through the internalized and constructed ideological racialism. Lessing is among the authors of works that confront the white settler epistemology. These fictions are soaked with the racialized theory of ethnicity, which is directly related to social theory, lived experiences, and power. The goal of this article is to illustrate the integrating aspects of literature, particularly in relation to decolonization and race, in Lessing's works.

**Keywords** - Doris Lessing, Critical Race Theory, Postcolonial Feminism, Settler Colonialism, *The Grass is Singing*, Race and Gender, African Literature, Whiteness Studies, Colonial Trauma, Resistance Literature.

## 1. Introduction: Rewriting from the Margins

Doris Lessing, a British writer born in Persia and raised in colonial Southern Rhodesia, holds a unique place in African literature. Her early novels, influenced by her experiences with both settlers and indigenous Africans, critique the systems of racial and gender oppression from an insider's perspective. While Lessing is not African by birth or ethnicity, her work, similar to that of Nadine Gordimer, shows what Gordimer describes as "looking at the world from Africa," instead of viewing "Africa from the world" (Gordimer 5). In this way, Lessing's narrative voice serves as both a witness and a challenger, providing fictional accounts of settler mentality and postcolonial disappointment.

## 2. *The Grass is Singing*: Colonial Intimacy and Racialized Subjectivity

Published in 1950, *The Grass is Singing* offers a bleak view of the settler household as a place of racialized gender violence. The character of Mary Turner shows the internalized biases and psychological harm resulting from her colonial upbringing. While her intense aversion to African servants might seem like a moral flaw, a closer look reveals her as a product of colonial trauma—a woman shaped by a culture that rejects indigenous humanity.

Mary's misunderstanding of her servant's avoidance of eye contact—"She did not know it was part of the native code of politeness... she thought it was merely further evidence of their shifty and dishonest nature" (Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 82) highlights what CRT scholars refer to as epistemologies of ignorance (Mills 18). In this context, racial misunderstandings are not random; they are reinforced by the structure of society.

## 3. Critical Race Theory and Settler Whiteness

Critical Race Theory (CRT) comes from American legal studies. It has since become a tool for understanding how race operates in society. In Lessing's African novels, whiteness serves as both a viewpoint and a way of knowing. It shapes how settlers see the African "other" and view themselves.

Mary and Dick Turner are "poor whites." They sit uneasily in the colonial hierarchy; they are economically marginal but racially privileged. Their adherence to racial boundaries compensates for their class insecurity. Cheryl



Harris's idea of "whiteness as property" explains how white settlers hold onto race as a final source of power, even when other aspects of life, like economic stability and emotional fulfillment, fail.

#### 4. Postcolonial Feminism and Racialized Gender

Lessing's novels are important for postcolonial feminist discussions because they highlight how colonialism influenced race and gender. Mary Turner's fear of African men comes from colonial sexual paranoia, an idea that depicts black masculinity as both overly sexual and less than human. Mary's eventual murder by Moses, her African servant, symbolizes the power shift that colonial ideas fear the most. The novel does not dramatize this event but shows it as a result of hidden violence and a society that refuses to acknowledge its own ethics.

Martha Quest, on the other hand, grows as a political figure. Throughout the Children of Violence series, she moves from simply observing racial injustice to becoming a hesitant member of white radical groups that want to support African independence. Her comments, such as "the African group, like a small starving child...was being torn to pieces by a group of adults fighting for the right to help it" (Lessing, *Landlocked* 56), criticize the paternalistic attitudes of colonial liberalism and the superficial support offered by white radicals.

#### 5. Literature as Political Praxis

In the introduction to *Nine African Stories*, Lessing writes, "Literature comes out of atmospheres, climates of opinion, everything that cannot be described by the economic and the sociological approaches" (Lessing 5). For her, literature does not avoid politics; instead, it serves as its closest expression. Lessing's narrative strategy fits with Frantz Fanon's call for a literature of decolonization—one that engages in the revolution by speaking from, not just about, the oppressed.

As Fanon states in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "To take part in the African revolution, it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people" (Fanon 198). Although Lessing is white, she writes from a moral perspective that seeks to avoid taking native voices. Instead, she aims to reveal the internal contradictions of whiteness in a colonial society.

#### 6. Conclusion: Toward a Decolonial Ethics of Writing

Doris Lessing's fiction encourages us to rethink the limits of African literature, racial identity, and ethical witnessing. Her settler background, often criticized, becomes a site of confrontation in her work. Here, inherited prejudice gets examined, empathy clashes with ideology, and the oppressed appear not as mere narrative devices but as historical figures.

In a time of renewed decolonial discussions, Lessing's African novels relate to today's issues of race, historical memory, and systemic inequality. By looking into the roots of racism and patriarchy within her own community, Lessing adds to a kind of "literary reparative justice." She insists that fiction can be a space for both reflection and resistance.

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