

An Ecofeministic Analysis of the Causes of Mary's Tragedy in *The Grass Is Singing*

Lei Zhu, Ziyi Huang

School of Foreign Languages, Nanjing Xiaozhuang University, Nanjing, China

Email address:

804481855@qq.com (Lei Zhu), 1349101748@qq.com (Ziyi Huang)

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Abstract: *The Grass Is Singing* is the first published book of Doris Lessing, a famous British female writer, whose novels are largely concerned with people involved in the social upheavals of the 20th century. This story is about a white farmer Dick and his wife Mary and their black servant Moses in Africa. In this novel, Doris Lessing presents readers with the tragedy of Mary, who has suffered a lot from the patriarchal ideology and racial discrimination in that society. This paper first analyzes the embodiment of Mary's tragedy from such aspects as her unhappy childhood, her unsuccessful marriage and her miserable ending, and then aims to probe into the causes leading to Mary's tragedy from the perspective of ecofeminism: as a colonist, she cannot harmoniously coexist with nature; as a woman, she cannot equally get along with men. In conclusion, her alienation from nature has caused nature to take revenge on her; the pressure from her incompetent father has distorted her view of men; the physical and mental oppression from her husband has ruined his illusion about marriage; the cruel revenge from her lover has directly resulted in her tragic ending.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Cause, Tragedy, Inequality

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction to Doris Lessing and *The Grass Is Singing*

Doris Lessing is a famous contemporary British writer, who is regarded as the greatest female writer after Virginia Woolf. Throughout her life, she has created a large number of works. With profound thoughts and unique perspectives in her works, Doris Lessing has established her position in the literary world. In 2007, she won the Nobel Prize in Literature, which made her the oldest female writer ever to win the literature award.

The Grass Is Singing is Lessing's debut novel, which brings her instant reputation. This novel focuses on the psychological depiction of a black manservant killing a white mistress, revealing the racial discrimination and oppression in African colonies. Mary, the heroine of the novel, is a white native in southern Africa. Born in a poor family, she hopes to get away from the living condition, which is almost the same as that of the blacks. Tired of his own job, Mary's father always vents his anger and dissatisfaction at home, which fills Mary with fear of men and marriage. However, under social pressure, she has no choice but to step into marriage. Unfortunately, after

she gets married, her husband is also indifferent to her. Later, the intrusion of Moses, a hired black worker, breaks into her numb life, and Mary is deeply attracted by him. However, she herself has also been so strongly affected by racial discrimination that sometimes she shows her contempt for Moses. After their relationship has been discovered, Mary is forced to abandon Moses by social pressure, which stimulates Moses to kill Mary in a rage.

Mary's tragedy lies not only in her inability to get rid of racial discrimination and colonial ideology, but also in the plight of gender inequality, which is closely related to "ecofeminism".

1.2. Introduction to Ecofeminism

Wang Yan points out that the study of western eco-feminism theory is marked by a French scholar Franois Boni's book *Feminism or Destruction* published in the 70s of the 20th century, in which the term "ecofeminism" was firstly mentioned. It contains two major components, ecology and women [1]. Yi Ni states that "the destiny of women is closely related to the destiny of the entire nature and human" [2]. According to Nancy R. Howell, "Ecofeminism is concerned

with connections between the domination of women and the domination of the nature.[3] ” Ecofeminists adhere to the belief that liberation of women and liberation of nature are inseparable, which mainly includes the following two points.

The first is anti-anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrists think that human interests are the origin of values and should be regarded as the basis of moral evaluation. Indeed, in the utilization and transformation of nature, human beings have really created brilliant achievements. However, in the meanwhile, they also do much damage to nature. Therefore, ecofeminists criticize the anthropocentric theory, claiming that the only way for human beings to overcome the survival difficulties is to show proper respect for nature and seek harmonious coexistence between human and nature [2].

The second is the anti-androcentrism. The androcentrism emphasizes the power of men in human society and degrades the status of women. It insists that women should be controlled by the male-centered patriarchy. According to Wang Yan, in this dualistic system, men are considered as the supreme center, acting as controllers of spiritual field, while women are regarded as subordinates to men, having their roles only in the physical area [1]. Ecofeminists oppose men's dominance over women, holding the belief that a harmonious world is based on mutual respect and understanding between men and women.

Ecofeminism yearns for a pluralistic but equal society, in which there should be no class oppression. Having put forward a new set of ethical standards, ecofeminism not only has a great academic value, but also has an important reference significance for building a harmonious and equal society. Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*, which is abundant in ecofeminism, advocates equality between men and women and the harmony between man and nature.

2. Literature Review

The Grass Is Singing reveals the tragedy of women under patriarchal ideology and colonial rules. Experts and scholars at home and abroad have done some researches about the novel from different perspectives. Mohammad Kaosar Ahmed focuses on the analysis of Mary's psyche predicament and argues that sexism and racial discrimination are the main reasons for Mary's infertility and alienation from others [4]. Dominated and oppressed by her husband, Mary's basic request for pregnancy is cruelly refused for financial reasons, which urges her to separate from her husband; also, with contempt for black people, Mary herself cannot face up to her love with Moses, and therefore, she cannot really go into Moses' heart, which ultimately results in her psychological isolation. Joy Wang analyzes Mary's psychological change from guilty conscience to nervous breakdown [5]. He believes that the relationship between Mary and Moses is the key to saving Mary's inner guilt, but she fails to keep this relation due to the prevalence of racial discrimination. Thus, Mary's inner guilt turns into mental collapse. Anias Mutekwa and Terrence Musanga analyze Mary's tragedy from the perspective of colonialism. They conclude that, as a colonist,

Mary is eager to conquer nature like a man, hoping to control the African land and the black people, but refusing to get close to nature [6]. It is her disrespectful attitude towards nature that leads nature to take the revenge on her.

In China, Li Beibei analyzes the psychology of the heroine Mary from the perspective of spatial anxiety [7]. She thinks that the oppression of Mary's spatial anxiety comes from three aspects: depressing geographic space, constrained social space and depressed personal space. Li Beibei's analysis makes readers better understand the reasons why Mary chooses to escape from the African grassland. Wang Tingting concludes that Mary's tragedy is caused by her great pain in her miserable childhood, her self-deception before marriage and her anxiety after marriage [8]. Liu Yuting thinks that Mary's trauma accompanies Mary's whole life [9]. The trauma originates from her family, her marriage and the society, the combination of which leads to Mary's tragedy. In Luo Rong's opinion, Mary's financial difficulties and the oppression from others in the patriarchal system are the external causes of her tragedy, while her immature subjective consciousness, undeveloped sexual consciousness and distorted racial consciousness are the internal causes [10]. Zhao Wenting says that, in the patriarchal society, Mary is in the position of "the other", who has always been ignored and suppressed, thus losing her subjective consciousness and self-identity [11]. Meanwhile, her narrow-mindedness in race issues and distorted personality also result in her tragedy.

In brief, most scholars at home and abroad focus on the analysis of Mary's personalities and psychology. Some scholars also analyze Mary's tragedy, taking literary ethics as their perspectives. This paper aims to interpret Mary's tragedy from the perspective of ecofeminism, in hopes that readers may better understand the theme of this novel and realize the importance of the harmony between men, nature and women.

3. The Embodiment of Mary's Tragic Destiny

Ecofeminists advocate harmony between human and nature and oppose the oppression of women by men. The heroine of the novel, Mary, was born in the social background of gender inequality, so her tragedy is not accidental. Mary's tragedy is mainly reflected in three aspects: her unhappy childhood, her unsuccessful marriage and her miserable ending.

3.1. Her Unhappy Childhood

Born in a poor town in South Africa, Mary lives a very impoverished life. Both her brother and her sister die of dysentery. Mary has been alone all the time, with no companions. Her father is addicted to alcohol. The family cannot make both ends meet at the end of each month. Despite her mother's constant pleas to their creditor for an extension, the situation of the family makes no difference. Because of this, her parents keep quarreling with each other all the time. Sometimes her mother even takes it out on Mary, regarding her as the burden of the family. The poverty of her family

makes it difficult for her to get what she wants, which casts a shadow over her childhood.

Not only does Mary suffer physically, but she also suffers spiritually. "Home", in traditional sense, is a warm place, but for Mary, "home" is just a symbol of a sad memory. The image of "home" in Mary's mind has been completely destroyed by her father's indifference and her mother's complaints. What remains in her memory is only the endless quarrels between her parents. Her father never shows concern for her. Therefore, when her father dies, it has not caused any "ripples" in her heart. She leaves home at the age of sixteen to work in the town, hoping to find a new way of living, and she hardly goes back home after her mother's death. From this, it's not difficult to infer that, unable to feel the warmth of her parents, Mary does not have any attachment to her family. For Mary, leaving home is, to some extent, a relief. Having lived in such a stifling family since her childhood, Mary has a strong desire to escape from her family. The lack of warmth in her family makes her childhood very unhappy, which paves the way for her gloomy future, including her unsuccessful marriage.

3.2. *Her Unsuccessful Marriage*

Having experienced such an unhappy childhood and witnessed her mother's failed marriage, Mary has developed a fear of marriage and men. She does not have any desire for marriage, because she is reluctant to follow in her mother's footsteps in marriage. She seems to show no interest in men at all, thinking that men do not have any fun. Chen Haiyan points out that Mary is unconsciously trying to stay away from marriage because of the shadow her unhappy childhood and her parents' failed marriage have cast on her [12]. It is apparent that Mary has not got ready for marriage. In fact, she instinctively rejects it. She is afraid of getting married. Being psychologically troubled by marriage carries a foreshadowing of her unsuccessful marriage.

However, her girlfriends speak ill of her behind her back and this makes her hesitate about whether she should get married or not. Besides, public opinions about women also force her to look for a husband. Apparently, a hasty marriage cannot provide a safe harbor for her. Both Mary and her husband Dick think there is no need to have a honeymoon. Dick claims that he can't afford it and Mary also thinks that she does not need it. Obviously, with no mutual love as its basis from the very beginning, their marriage is doomed to be a failure.

Besides, Mary imagines that her husband should be a strong-willed man who knows how to achieve success by making great efforts. However, Dick is so weak-willed that he has no plan for future. As Liu Yuting points out, Mary is disappointed by Dick's incompetence, stubbornness, and timidity, and Dick's failure in running the farm frequently frustrates Mary [9]. Her spiritual depression always accompanies their unsuccessful marriage life.

3.3. *Her Miserable Ending*

Moses, a black servant who is considerate, well-mannered

and well-built, enters Mary's life, which should have been the turning point in her unhappy life, but their encounter turns out to be a tragedy. Undeniably, this relationship provides her with a temporary refuge. Gradually, she begins to abandon her original "unreal self". Moses' masculine charm attracts Mary so much that she has developed a real affection for him. To some extent, Moses is considered by Mary as the Savior who comes to rescue her. Moses is different from other black people because of his distinct personality and rich knowledge, according to Wang Yan [1]. However, an affair between a white mistress and her black servant will never be forgiven in that society.

When Tony finds out Mary's affairs with Moses and drives him away with a brutal reprimanding, Mary's consciousness of her identity as a white woman is suddenly aroused. Therefore, she turns to stand on Tony's side and shouts at Moses. At this moment, the revolutionary spirit of anti-racism that has just sprung up in her subconscious is ultimately killed by external factors. Such a scene is vividly depicted by Lessing:

"Go away," she [Mary] said suddenly, over his shoulder at the native. Tony realized that she was trying to assert herself: she was using his presence there as a shield in a fight to get back a command she had lost [...] "No," she screamed. "Go away." (Lessing, 1950: 94) [13]

In the end, Mary succumbs to the pressure of white society and drives Moses away, which insults Moses' dignity as a man. Finally, Moses raises the sword to vent his hatred to Mary on the night of lightning and thunder. It is the intense conflict between her inner emotional desire and racial consciousness that destroys her original perfect fantasy and becomes the trigger for her death, which ultimately drives her to abyss of tragedy.

4. The Causes of Mary's Tragedy in Terms of Ecofeminism

According to ecofeminism, women should be regarded as equal as men; women and nature should get liberated. With the natural environment and the social environment combined together, it can be concluded that Mary's tragedy is mainly rooted in two aspects: her unbalanced relationship with nature and her unequal relationship with men.

4.1. *Her Unbalanced Relationship with Nature*

This novel is set in the background of South Africa in the early 20th century. In this primitive grassland, the colonists excavate the land at will for their own economic interests, destroy the natural environment and break the original ecological balance, leaving South Africa, a source of energy and raw materials, in ruins.

4.1.1. *Her Struggle Against Nature*

In the eyes of the colonists, the exploitation of nature must be centered on profit, regardless of the environmental damage and ecological imbalance caused by it. The novel states that

during World War I, with the skyrocket increase of maize prices, many farmers only plant maize on their farms in the hope of making a quick buck. During World War II, the demands for tobacco grow so much that farmers devote their land to growing tobacco and build warehouses and huts to store the tobacco leaves. In order to save costs, the local colonists are not willing to equip themselves with standardized tobacco processing facilities. The burning of tobacco inevitably causes serious air pollution in the colonies, and sometimes even causes fires, which brings huge losses to the local people.

Mary, as a white woman living on this land, also hopes to make a great profit on this fertile African savannah. It is mentioned many times in the book that Mary and her husband try to grow beans, cotton and Indian hemp on their farm, but all their efforts end in failure not only because these crops are not suitable for local natural conditions but also because they are not adept at the management of their farm. She firmly believes that she is just an intruder in South Africa continent. Zhang Yanling & Zhang Liqian point out that, like most of the white settlers, Mary considers nature as a platform to grab money and tries every means to make profits from the fertile plains of South Africa [14]. In South Africa, people's excessive reclamation of land, uncontrolled exploitation of nature and indiscriminate deforestation have seriously damaged the local ecological balance and have further intensified the conflict between human and nature.

Also, she is strongly hostile to the land where she has grown up, the plants on this land and the black who live here. As Wang Yan said, "her life on the farm is a struggle against nature, and terribly, she gets a sense of achievement from it" [1]. Mary regards her relationship with the earth as a "battle of wills" and she also likes "the feeling of fighting with the farm". She is never used to going near the bushes around her. She knows that after her leaving, the vigorous plants will soon devour and destroy the place where she once lived. "She is not willing to walk into the bushes, and accordingly she couldn't feel happiness through living in harmony with nature, which is the main cause of her tragic ending [1]". In her life, Mary Turner never really enjoys the quietness and peace of nature, and she never lives in harmony with it. She has nothing but hatred for nature. She always feels alienated from the farmland she lives on.

4.1.2. *Nature's Vengeance on Mary*

As the ecosystem is destroyed, nature also retaliates against the colonists in the form of various natural disasters. In Mary's eyes, the farm land is so barren that there will be no crops on it. Cracks appear in the land where the trees have been cut down and the ore mined. She cannot enjoy the original beauty of nature any more because everything in her eyes is colorless now. When she looks up at the sky, there is no cloud in the air, for it has been dimmed by smoke; when she overlooks the hills, the hills are misty with smoke; when she looks at the prairie, the prairie has been on fire for weeks. She can even feel the smell of smoke on her tongue... Worse still, the fire even destroys the cowsheds, leaving only black ruins as far as the

eye could see. That is all Mary can see. There is no birdsong and no smell of flowers. Instead, there is just smoke and fire.

Mary does not get what she wants from the land, but puts herself in a devastated wilderness. Incapable of getting material satisfaction, she gets lost gradually and her character has become distorted. Being very stingy, she haggles over everything. For some of the leftovers of their meals, whether it is a cold potato or a slice of bread, she asks about its whereabouts. When the Slater couple come to visit Mary, Mrs. Slater sincerely praises Mary's arrangement of the house and expresses willingness to make friends with her. However, Mary just ignores her kindness. Looking at her broken teacup, tin tray, and faded cotton blouse, she feels very ashamed. It is apparent that there has been something wrong with her personality, which has a negative influence on her ability to get on with others.

Her blind pursuit over material desire but failing to get it makes her spirit become increasingly empty. Her hostility to motherland ultimately determines her unhappy life and causes her physical and mental misery. In this wasteland, Mary lives like a walking dead, with her personality gradually divided and her spirit gradually alienated. It suggests that man and nature are a harmonious and unified whole. If humans fight against nature, they will inevitably end in failure. As Wang Yan points out, "only back to nature, could women's instinct be re-aroused... The relationship between women and nature is non-separable... They need to hold hands and support each other. [1]"

4.2. *Her Unequal Relationship with Men*

As a woman in the patriarchal society, Mary cannot avoid oppression by men. Throughout Mary's life, three men are important to her. They are her father, her husband, and her lover, the combined power of whom leads to her tragedy.

4.2.1. *Pressure from Her Father*

First of all, Mary has an unhappy family. In the patriarchal society of that time, father plays an important role in a family. In Mary's mind, "the miserable life of her mother and her poor childhood are all caused by her father's irresponsibility and incompetence" [1]. Throughout her childhood, her father has never taken up the responsibilities for the family. Influenced by her mother's complaints, Mary also thinks of her father as alcoholic and incompetent. Little by little, Mary begins to have a hatred for her father, unconsciously blaming him for the misfortune of the family. Hoping to get rid of the bondage from her father, she keeps striving for freedom and independence, but always ends in failure. In the male-dominated society, Mary has to accept her own unfortunate fate with resignation.

Meanwhile, for a woman, her first impression of society after birth is often the first male image she gets contact with in her life [15]. For young Mary, society is an abstract concept, which manifests itself in the specific form of her father's poverty, alcoholism and cowardice. Her perception of males in society is only limited to the image of a cowardice like her father. Therefore, in Mary's eyes, men, who are weak and

incapable, cannot provide her with security, according to Wang Yan [1]. Obviously, such stereotypes of her father's image in her mind also affect Mary's subjective understanding of men in society.

Mary is deprived of the right to be a happy daughter in the plight of life at the age when she is supposed to be loved by her father. Even in her adult life, she never liberates herself from the shadow of her father. Having witnessed her mother's painful marriage, Mary rejects love and marriage from the bottom of her heart. Also, she develops a tendency of sexual repression and apathy, which lays the foundation for her unhappy marriage as well. It suggests that her father has exerted a negative influence on her marriage, which brings about her tragedy.

4.2.2. *Oppression from Her Husband*

Her parents' unhappy marriage casting a shadow on her mind, Mary has been refusing to get married. She fears that, in the married life, she has to live under the pressure of her husband, which may make her life miserable. However, forced by public opinions about women, she still accepts Dick's proposal.

Before marriage, Mary lives independently and earns money to support herself, but after marriage, Mary has been materially imprisoned by her husband Dick. Wang Yan proposes that Dick does not understand the meaning of life and marriage and he only regards marriage as a social standard. Dick does not have any idea about how to fulfill the duties of a husband [1]. He only utilizes marriage to realize his illusory motivation, hoping to find a woman who can accompany him to realize his dream. He always refuses to meet the demands of Mary's essential material requests. When Mary first comes to the farm, she finds it unbearable that there is no ceiling at home. She asks Dick to put up the ceiling in the house, but Dick rejects Mary's request and claims that he has no money; when Mary wants to take a "shower" with the water in a bucket, Dick cruelly scolds her for the reason of wasting water; when Mary persuades Dick to change his business model after his failure in managing the farm, Dick directly ignores Mary's requirements...

Dick's various stringent requirements make it unbearable for Mary to live together with him. Therefore, Mary tries to escape from her husband's oppression. But Dick begs Mary not to leave, and Mary consents to her husband. As usual, she helps Dick take care of the farm and helps him save the living costs of their family. But even so, Dick never really cares about Mary, nor does he think about how to make his wife happy. Dick never knows what Mary wants. When Mary says she wants a child, Dick always refuses on the ground of financial difficulties. Mary longs for a child to relieve her spiritual loneliness, but even such a basic requirement between husband and wife is coldly refused by Dick, which has done damage to Mary mentally. As Wang Yan said, "Dick Turner is totally a man of inability: he never makes money as a farmer; he fails to satisfy physical and emotional need of his wife as a husband. [1]" He not only turns a blind eye to Mary's inner pain but also enjoys self-satisfaction by

oppressing her. It is also such a kind of prolonged mental oppression that has badly hurt Mary's spirit.

4.2.3. *Revenge from Her Lover*

Having experienced the pain of family and marriage, Mary is eager for warmth and comfort. So when she bursts into tears in front of Moses, despite her inner contradiction and struggle, she still can't help but accept the kind consolation offered by the black man. To some extent, Moses' presence compensates for Mary's psychological trauma. Moses has such personalities as courageousness, manliness, tenderness and gentleness, which are exactly what Dick lacks. She can cry loudly in front of Moses, asking him to do anything for her. She can seek spiritual comfort from Moses. The way Mary has treated him convinces Moses that she loves him. The appearing of Moses in her life undoubtedly brings great comfort to Mary.

First, it can be analyzed from the perspective of Moses, the black manservant. On the one hand, under the influence of androcentrism, Moses, as a male, yearns to conquer his white mistress. As Yi Ni proposes, "the native black men hold that women are in the submissive position [2]." Therefore, when Moses works at Mary's house, he repeatedly challenges Mary's inner bottom line. When Mary asks Moses to work, he always gives a cold response to her. And sometimes he even indifferently ignores her instructions. Also, "Moses takes advantage of Mary to show his dignity as a man [2]." He takes care of Mary in daily life, which makes Mary depend on him both physically and mentally. Gradually, making use of Mary's affection for him, he even deliberately annoys her and gives her instructions to do something. He wants to raise his self-esteem in front of the proud white woman. He even enjoys the feeling of conquering her. After a few practices, he successfully reduces Mary's authority and even scolds her many times.

On the other hand, as Yi Ni points out, Mary's hatred towards the black has been aroused since her childhood [2]. She is deeply inculcated with the idea that black people are second-class citizens. In Mary's eyes, black people are naughty, dirty and untrustworthy. The racial discrimination has already been firmly rooted in her mind, which makes her instinctively full of hostility and wariness to black people. Also, in South Africa where racial discrimination is prevalent at that time, such a shady relationship between Mary and Moses will undoubtedly be condemned by society. Therefore, when their relationship is discovered, she is filled with fear and contradiction. On the side of the white people, Mary has no choice but to make the decision to abandon Moses. At that moment, Moses suddenly realizes that he cannot change the fact that he is inferior to his mistress. With his dignity badly insulted, Moses cannot bear such humiliation. Finally, having run out of his patience with the intolerable situation, Moses takes revenge on Mary with a sword.

For the two of them, Moses and Mary, one hopes to subdue women from the standpoint of men, while the other wants to belittle blacks from the perspective of whites. It is the unequal and contradictory relationship between them that makes

Moses lose his temper and leads him to kill Mary without mercy, which results in Mary's ultimate tragedy.

5. Conclusion

With her inherent sincerity, unique perspective and broad mind, Doris Lessing has created rich images of women and analyzed significant historical issues in her works. She pays much attention to many historical topics, such as feminism, colonization, race and gender issues and so on. As a classic, her novel *The Grass Is Singing* also focuses on ecofeminism. As the heroine of the novel, Mary has a tragic fate --- her unhappy childhood, her unsuccessful marriage and her miserable ending. Through the ecofeministic analysis of the causes of Mary's tragedy, this paper comes to the conclusion as follows. As for the relationship between human and nature, Mary's struggle against nature, including her hostility to nature and her alienation from nature, has caused nature to take vengeance on her both physically and mentally. As for the relationship between men and women, Mary suffers a lot from three men --- her father, her husband and her lover. Her father's incompetence and cowardice have negatively influenced her opinions of men and marriage; her husband's money-oriented values and indifferent attitudes have caused her great pain; her lover's hatred for her after being abandoned has directly cost her her life. To sum up, in such a society, where men and women are not in an equal position and where human and nature cannot live in harmony with each other, Mary's fate is doomed to be a tragedy.

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