

Existentialism in Doris Lessing's *Grass is Singing*

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Abstract

This study intends to explore the elements of existentialism in Doris Lessing's "The Grass is Singing," examining the profound implications of isolation, identity, and the human condition within the context of colonial Southern Rhodesia. The narrative revolves around Mary Turner, whose struggle against societal and personal constraints embodies existential dilemmas. As she grapples with her identity in a patriarchal society, her descent into madness illustrates the existential crisis stemming from alienation and despair. The characters, particularly Mary and her husband, Dick, navigate the complexities of their existence, reflecting the philosophical tenets of existentialism, such as freedom, choice, and the absurdity of life. Through Lessing's depiction of their deteriorating relationship and the oppressive social environment, the novel reveals how existential despair can arise from the inability to forge authentic connections and confront the absurdity of existence. Ultimately, "The Grass is Singing" serves as a poignant exploration of the human condition, underscoring the struggles for meaning and identity amid the pervasive existential challenges of colonial life.

Keywords: Existentialism, Doris Lessing, The Grass is Singing, Colonialism, Identity, Isolation, Absurdity, Feminism

Existentialism

Doris Lessing was a British novelist, born on October 22, 1919, in Kermanshah, Iran, to British parents. She spent much of her early life in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) before moving to London in 1949. Lessing's works often explore themes of social and political upheaval, gender, and the human condition, reflecting her keen interest in these areas throughout her life. She gained international recognition for her nuanced portrayal of complex characters and social issues.

Her debut novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950), is a critical exploration of the racial and gender dynamics within colonial Southern Rhodesia. It tells the story of Mary Turner, a white farmer's wife, whose tumultuous relationship with her African servant, Moses, ends in her tragic death. The novel is notable for its examination of the destructive impacts of colonialism, racial segregation, and gender oppression on both the colonizers and the colonized. Lessing's portrayal of Mary's psychological disintegration and her struggle against societal norms highlights the novel's existential undertones, making it a profound critique of the human condition under colonial rule.

Lessing's body of work earned her numerous accolades, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007, where she was recognized for her deep exploration of the "epicist of the female experience" and her scrutiny of a divided civilization. Her literary contributions have cemented her place as one of the most influential writers of the 20th century, with *The Grass is Singing* remaining a seminal work that continues to resonate for its powerful social commentary and psychological depth.

Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing* explores the existential crises faced by its protagonist, Mary

Turner, against the backdrop of colonial Rhodesia. The narrative delves into themes of isolation, alienation, and the search for meaning, reflecting the existential struggles of a woman caught between societal expectations and her quest for individual identity. Lessing portrays Mary's life as a series of failed attempts to reconcile her internal conflicts with the external world, highlighting the existential tension between personal freedom and the constraints imposed by her environment.

The existential framework of the novel is evident in Mary Turner's trajectory from a seemingly independent woman to one entrapped by the oppressive structures of her society and marriage. Initially, Mary embodies a semblance of the existential 'free individual,' detached from traditional roles of marriage and motherhood. Her decision to remain single and focus on her career as a typist signifies her rejection of conventional expectations. However, this autonomy is superficial, as Mary's choices are influenced by societal pressures and her fear of judgment, particularly from her peers. Her eventual marriage to Dick Turner, a poor farmer, marks the beginning of her existential downfall, as she succumbs to societal norms she had previously resisted.

Mary's marriage is devoid of genuine emotional connection, serving merely as an escape from the perceived inadequacies of her single life. Her relationship with Dick is marked by emotional detachment and a lack of intimacy, both physical and psychological. This marital disconnect is not just a personal failure but also a manifestation of Mary's inability to confront her existential anxieties. She perceives her role as a wife in purely functional terms, devoid of the passion or companionship that typically defines such a relationship. This disconnect is reflective of her internal disintegration, as she struggles to align her self-concept with the reality of her circumstances.

Existentialist thought, particularly as articulated by philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, emphasizes the individual's responsibility to create meaning in an inherently meaningless world. Mary's struggle lies in her inability to assume this responsibility. Instead of actively shaping her own identity, she allows herself to be defined by external forces—her husband, societal expectations, and the racial dynamics of colonial Rhodesia. Her passive acceptance of these roles leads to a gradual erosion of her sense of self, resulting in a state of existential inertia.

The novel's setting in colonial Rhodesia adds another layer to Mary's existential predicament. The oppressive social structures of colonialism, with their rigid hierarchies and racial divisions, exacerbate Mary's sense of alienation. Her interactions with the native servants, particularly Moses, are fraught with tension and ambiguity. Mary's harsh treatment of Moses and her subsequent fear of him reflect the existential guilt and anxiety she feels as a colonizer. Her inability to reconcile her humanity with the dehumanizing ideology of colonialism contributes to her psychological decline. Moses, in this context, symbolizes both the 'Other' and a projection of Mary's repressed fears and desires. Her complex, contradictory feelings towards him—ranging from hatred and fear to an unacknowledged attraction—highlight the existential conflict between self and other, subject and object.

Mary's existential crisis reaches its zenith in her interactions with Moses. Initially, she asserts her dominance over him, embodying the colonial mindset that views the native as subhuman. However, as her mental state deteriorates, she becomes increasingly dependent on Moses, blurring the lines between master and servant. This inversion of roles destabilizes Mary's identity further, as she is unable to reconcile her growing subservience to Moses with her belief in her own racial and social superiority. Her final moments, in which she passively accepts her fate at Moses's hands, signify her complete surrender to existential despair. The murder, therefore, is not merely an act of violence but a culmination of Mary's existential disintegration—a surrender to the very forces she sought to control.

The existential dimension of *The Grass is Singing* is also evident in Mary's relationship with her own desires and emotions. Throughout the novel, she exhibits a profound alienation from her own body and sexuality. Her aversion to physical intimacy and her inability to connect with others on an emotional level reflect a deeper existential disquiet. Mary's sexuality is not a source of liberation but a site of conflict and repression. Her attempts to suppress her desires—whether through her frigid relationship with Dick or her complicated feelings towards Moses—underscore her struggle to assert control over her own existence. This repression is symptomatic of a broader existential malaise, as Mary's inability to embrace her own desires ultimately leads to her psychological and physical downfall.

Lessing's portrayal of Mary's existential crisis is intricately tied to the novel's broader critique of colonialism and patriarchy. Mary's personal disintegration mirrors the disintegration of the colonial social order, as her interactions with the native servants reveal the inherent contradictions and moral bankruptcy of the colonial project. Her marriage to Dick, marked by economic hardship and emotional alienation, symbolizes the failure of the patriarchal ideal of domesticity. The Turners' farm, a microcosm of colonial exploitation and environmental degradation, serves as the physical and symbolic setting for Mary's existential unraveling. The harshness of the African landscape, with its relentless heat and isolation, reflects Mary's inner desolation and sense of entrapment. Lessing would later remark in her interviews that "If someone was to fit in the (colonial) society – they would become worse."

The existential themes in *The Grass is Singing* are further emphasized through the novel's narrative structure and style. The omniscient narrator offers a detached yet empathetic view of Mary's inner turmoil, allowing readers to witness her descent into madness while also critiquing the social and psychological forces that contribute to her plight. The novel's opening, which reveals Mary's murder at the hands of Moses, sets the stage for a retrospective exploration of the events leading up to this act. This structure, reminiscent of a psychological thriller, underscores the inevitability of Mary's fate while also inviting readers to consider the existential choices that shape her trajectory.

Mary's existential plight is compounded by her lack of self-awareness and introspection. Unlike the protagonists of many existential novels, who engage in philosophical reflection on their condition, Mary remains largely oblivious to the root causes of her despair. Her thoughts are consumed by immediate concerns—her dissatisfaction with her life, her conflicts with Dick, her fear of the natives—leaving little room for deeper self-examination. This absence of existential reflection is both a cause and a consequence of her disintegration, as Mary's failure to confront her own complicity in her suffering prevents her from finding any semblance of peace or resolution.

Mary never sought sex after her marriage and the lack of physical bond further strains her relationship with her husband. The narrator describes Mary having "an extraordinary ability to withdraw from the sexual relationship...Mary did not have to learn this, because it was natural to her." (GS 57-58).

The novel's portrayal of Mary's existential crisis is also notable for its exploration of gender dynamics. Mary's struggle is not merely an individual existential crisis but is shaped by her position as a woman in a patriarchal society. Her initial resistance to traditional gender roles—her rejection of marriage and motherhood, her focus on her career—can be seen as an assertion of existential freedom. However, her subsequent capitulation to these roles, and her ultimate subjugation to the men in her life, reflect the limited options available to women within the rigid structures of colonial patriarchy. Mary's existential crisis, therefore, is not only a personal tragedy but also a commentary on the broader social forces that constrain women's autonomy and agency.

In the context of existentialism, freedom is often defined as the ability to make meaningful choices and

take responsibility for one's actions. Mary's life, however, is characterized by a series of choices made under duress or in response to external pressures. Her decision to marry Dick, her treatment of the native servants, her final acceptance of her fate—all these actions reflect a lack of true existential freedom. Mary is not an agent of her own destiny but a passive participant in a predetermined narrative, driven by forces beyond her control or comprehension. This lack of freedom is both a cause and a symptom of her existential despair, as Mary's inability to assert control over her own life leaves her vulnerable to the destructive forces of her environment.

Luce Irigaray in her essay *And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other* asserts that the daughter after maturation “understands the emptiness in the mother's life which leads her to live her own life through her daughter. Finally, comes the daughter's realization that the duo is locked in such negativity, that they are “captives of our confinement”. (Irigaray 1980)

The existential dimensions of *The Grass is Singing* are not limited to Mary's personal crisis but extend to the novel's broader critique of colonial society. The rigid hierarchies and dehumanizing practices of colonialism create an environment in which genuine human connection and self-actualization are impossible. The colonizers, trapped in their roles as oppressors, are as alienated and dehumanized as the colonized.

When Mary was left to manage natives, “And she really like it. The sensation of being boss over perhaps eighty black workers gave her new confidence; it was a new feeling, keeping them under her will, making them do what she wanted.” (GS 112)

Mary's interactions with the natives, marked by inhumanity then fear, hostility, and misunderstanding, reflect this existential impasse. The inability of the characters to transcend the barriers of race and class is emblematic of the existential condition of colonial society, in which individuals are estranged not only from each other but also from their own humanity.

In Doris Lessing's "The Grass is Singing," Mary's husband, Dick Turner, is profoundly affected by the disintegration of their marriage and the societal pressures surrounding them. Initially, Dick appears as a man burdened by the expectations of colonial life in Southern Rhodesia. His efforts to maintain his farm and support Mary become increasingly strained as her mental health deteriorates and her resentment towards their isolated existence grows. As Mary withdraws into herself, often retreating into bitterness and despair, Dick finds himself caught between his responsibilities as a husband and farmer and his inability to connect with Mary emotionally. The stark contrast between his practical approach to life and her spiraling discontent leads to a profound sense of frustration and helplessness, ultimately isolating him further.

Dick's emotional turmoil deepens as he grapples with feelings of inadequacy and failure. The pressures of a harsh environment, compounded by the racial tensions of the era, amplify his struggles, leaving him feeling trapped and powerless. As Mary's mental state declines, their home becomes a place of unspoken conflict, mirroring the broader societal breakdown. Dick's attempts to understand or support her often end in futility, leading to a gradual but palpable shift in his character. The emotional strain transforms him, eroding his initial resolve and optimism, and reflecting the broader themes of disillusionment and despair that permeate the novel. Ultimately, the deterioration of their relationship serves as a poignant commentary on the impacts of colonialism on personal lives, leaving Dick haunted by the loss of the woman he once loved.

The existential crisis in *The Grass is Singing* is ultimately a crisis of identity. Mary's inability to define herself outside of the roles imposed on her—wife, colonizer, woman—leads to her psychological

disintegration. Her murder at the hands of Moses is not only the culmination of her personal tragedy but also a symbolic act of liberation, as it frees her from the existential burden of a life lived in bad faith. In her final moments, Mary's acceptance of her fate, her recognition of the futility of her resistance, can be seen as a form of existential surrender—a recognition that, in a world devoid of inherent meaning, the only true freedom lies in the acceptance of one's own absurdity.

In conclusion, *The Grass is Singing* offers a profound exploration of existential themes, using the personal tragedy of Mary Turner to illuminate the broader human condition. Through its portrayal of Mary's descent into madness, the novel interrogates the limits of personal freedom, the burden of social roles, and the existential consequences of living inauthentically. Lessing's critique of colonial and patriarchal structures is intertwined with her exploration of existential despair, creating a narrative that is both a psychological study and a philosophical inquiry. Mary's story, with its blend of personal anguish and social critique, serves as a powerful reminder of the existential struggle to find meaning and identity in a world that often seems hostile to both.

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