Individual Resistance: Body Narrative in *The Grass Is Singing*

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Abstract: Body writing is one of the core themes of Doris Lessing's famous work *The Grass Is Singing*. The novel fully demonstrates the connection between bodies, racism, and colonial power by focusing on the bodies of three main characters, exposing the decline of colonial power and responding to the independence movements of contemporary African colonies. This paper delves into the body changes of protagonists with different skin colors to explore their individual resistance consciousness and related power relation changes, thus discussing the significance of body writing as a legitimized narrative technique to interpret social reality.

1. Introduction

The debut novel, *The Grass Is Singing* is the masterpiece of British author Doris Lessing, which catapulted her to fame. The novel title is quoted from *Then Spoke the Thunder* in *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, which contains a great number of allusions and implies the vanishment of Western modern mythology. Lessing cleverly turns a poetic line into the title of the novel and portrays the living conditions of the people in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) under British colonial rule by tracing the protagonists' life experience. This novel was published during the African independence movements. Due to its clear political inclination, it sparked widespread discussion, and Lessing herself was banned from entering South Africa and Southern Rhodesia by the white regime for nearly half a century. Since Lessing won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007, the academia has once again sparked a wave of research on this novel. The research topics vary from feminist consciousness, postcolonial interpretation, psychological explanation of characters, to subjectivity construction. Some scholars have also explored the spatial imagery and structure in the novel, while some scholars have studied its body narratives, as Tan has pointed out that Lessing "implies the inevitable decline of colonial rule through the contrast between the bodies of the white and the black."[1] Famila believes that Lessing's African books "are concerned not so much with 'the colour problem' as with the human problem."[2]

Based on the current research, there is limited exploration of body writing in *The Grass Is Singing*, and therefore is still room for further exploration. In the mid of the late 20th century, the research on body gradually came under the spotlight of modern and contemporary philosophical field, and the turn in philosophical research also opened the criticism of body writing in literary research. According to Deleuze's description, "Every relationship between forces constitutes a body - whether chemical, biological, social, or political."[3] As it is suggested, any two unbalanced forces, as long as they form a relationship, constitute a body. Foucault also pointed out that "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies."[4] Thus, the body is essentially subject to the intervention of power and domination as a productive force, and through which power spreads and flows. In *The Grass Is Singing*, it is evident that the physical differences and changes of the protagonists, Mary, Dick, and Moses, reflect the binary opposition between the colonizers and colonized, implying the precarious state of the white colonial empire at that time. However, in addition, it also reveals the change process of power in the colonial society, that is, there is sustained resistance in both the disciplined colonial families represented by the three protagonists and the colonized black population, and the original power relationship eventually reverses and subverts. Therefore, based on the theory of body narrative, this paper will conduct a detailed reading of *The Grass Is Singing* and explore the relationship between the body narratives of different protagonists and power transitions.

2. Body Narrative in *The Grass Is Singing*

The Grass Is Singing is set in British-ruled Southern Rhodesia in southern Africa in the 1930s. With a reverse chronological approach, the novel begins with a mysterious murder case and depicts the tragic story of the female protagonist Mary, who transforms from an urban white-collar worker to a farm madwoman and murder victim after being married. At first, the theme of this novel may appear to be a common emotional tragedy, but in reality, Lessing touches on many themes more than that. Lessing herself had lived here for a long time, so she had witnessed and observed the fragmented society during that period. Although criticism has pointed out that at that time, Lessing was isolated from the black community and lacked direct communication with the local community, "this did not weaken the expressiveness of the political themes of the novel."[5] Lessing narrates through a murder case from the taboo affair between a white woman and a black man, integrating discussions on ethnic, racial, gender, and class issues, demonstrating the hierarchical structure of colonial power discourse, as well as the insignificant yet tenacious resistance hidden under power of each individual with their pathological or healthy bodies.

2.1 The Resistance of White Male Bodies

There is a clear and cruel division of power among the white population in the colonies who appear to be dominators, and those who do not accept the rules of colonial order can only become objects of domination. In the 1890s, Britain began to occupy Southern Rhodesia, and in the following decades, the political power in Southern Rhodesia fell into the control of the white colonizers, leading to a large number of white immigrant settlers, including not only British whites but also non-British whites. Over time, there were also native white South Africans. Under the influence of settler colonialism, national identity gradually became one of the key words in the society of Southern Rhodesia, leading to class divisions within the white population. At this moment, "white workers were essential yet subordinate allies in the settler colonial structure."[6] In the novel, the boundless land was occupied by white farmers and divided into pieces, "whose soil looks outraged by those pretty little suburbs creeping over it like a disease."[7] Charlie and Dick were both farmers, but Charlie was "a proper cockney",[7] a selfish and condescending representative of the white minority privileged class. He was "a shortish, broad, powerful man", "shrewd, watchful, and a little cunning."[7] Consistent with his appearance, he is a profit-driven colonial exploiter who owns vast farms and ruthlessly squeezes fertile land without any maintenance until it becomes barren and exhausted, then he would search for the next target. Yet, Dick grew up in the outskirts of Johannesburg, South Africa, and was a latecomer to Southern Rhodesia. He privately couldn't stand Charlie's style of work and paid more attention to the development and care of the farm, working hard like a black man, so that he appeared to be "a spare, sunburnt, slow-voiced, deep-eyed young man." [7] Therefore, although Dick was a farmer, he was more in line with the image of the white working class. Due to his low income, he was seen by the local white community as one of the poor whites who was out of their league. Kakanaeini believes that "Dick, on the other hand, has many of the traits that are associated, with the black man and thus should never be traits of a British colonizer."[8]

Dick was acutely aware that he was at the bottom of the white power chains and had been pressured by Charlie. "Sudden strain and anxiety always went to the nerves of his stomach, and he wanted to vomit." [7] He has tried to reverse the situation, but all his efforts have ended in failure. The reason for his failure lies in his incomplete internalization of the colonial logic, which led to his hidden resistance against the colonial system. "A legitimizing element of colonialism is the claim of superiority."[9] The settlers of the suzerain state generally recognized that they are superior to the primitiveness of the indigenous people in the colony on their race, religion, and culture, and therefore believed that the indigenous people in the colony were inherently inferior, thus maintaining the privileged social status and confidence of the settlers. Although Dick hired black servants in the family and managed nearly eighty black employees in the field, and showed contempt towards them, yet this contempt was contradictory while it was mixed with a certain degree of kindness and courtesy. Dick did not approve of Charlie's violent behavior towards the

black people, so even though he kept sjambok as Charlie suggested, he hanged it high on the wall at home and never used it. He did not approve of Mary's harsh attitude towards the black people, either, and had incessant arguments with her about it. This secretive resistance not only prevented him from integrating into the local domineering white community, but also made him miss out on various business opportunities that could only be seized through catering to desires and colonial exploitation. When the surrounding farmers were growing tobacco and making a fortune, Dick, however, out of conscience, refused to transform and enslave the land. The rebellion against the trend dealt him a head-on blow in life. When he finally succumbed to his livelihood and went with the flow, he missed the best time to cultivate tobacco, and the farm was on the brink of bankruptcy.

Judging from the body of Dick, when he started running the farm, he was physically strong and able to supervise black employees under the scorching sun for long periods of time. However, with repeated defeats in challenging colonial authority, Dick's health deteriorated, from "his lean hands...shook perpetually" [7], to "his sleeves flapped over spare burnt arms" [7], to "worn out, a shell of a man, liable to get any disease going" [7], to eventually his "big trembling hands as thin as spines, thin hunched shoulders set in a steady shiver." [7] Obviously, Dick's physical changes are related to the economic situation of the farm. Li Zhengshuan and Sun Yan believe that Dick is "weak in will, narrow and fickle in mind, aimless and stubborn in character,"[10] which leads to the poor management and the failure of the farm; Shi Yi believes that "Dick is honest and kind, wholeheartedly working hard on the farm, but due to a lack of shrewd management skills, the land was eventually embezzled by the nouveau riche like Charlie who is good at seizing and plundering."[11] However, regardless of any perspective of interpretation, it is not difficult to find that behind Dick's ever-changing behaviors is his unwavering love for the land, and this underlying logic continues to grow his dissatisfaction with the white racism and colonial order. Therefore, he constantly works hard to resist in a way that badly consumes himself, and ultimately ends himself up with physical illness and mental madness. Lessing's body writing on Dick confirms that the seemingly colonial settlers, who are literally on the margins of power, are also oppressed by the white colonial authority, and if they resist, they will face physical and mental punishment until they become completely powerless, docile, and dominated.

2.2 The Resistance of White Female Bodies

The white female groups in the colonies may seem to enjoy the superiority of their colonial identity, but in reality, they are subject to dual manipulation and oppression from both patriarchy and the colonial power. The female protagonist of the novel, Mary, grew up in a family with endless arguments and began to work and rely on herself in her youth. When she lost her parents, she had already established herself in the big city and became the private secretary of her boss, earning a considerable income and living a decent life. However, her so-called friends mocked her for being unmarried at thirty, thus only being worthy of an old man when it comes to marriage. These married women's criticism towards unmarried women constitutes repeated confirmation of their personal economic value among heterosexual relations and their biological value of reproduction. Because women will "realize that their bodies have become the object of men's gaze for valuation"[12], and this recognition will silently run through their entire lives. The fundamental reason behind this phenomenon is that the patriarchal society has long belittled women, leading them to rely on men and take men as a means of self-identity, competing for men's favor, and surprisingly, gazing back at women themselves from the perspective of men. As a result, Mary developed self-loathing and self-denial, hastily selling herself out and voluntarily becoming a colonized subject by her husband Dick, one of the spokespersons of patriarchy.

Her body also showed astonishing changes. Before entering into marriage, although she was already thirty years old, she was "a woman...without love troubles, headaches, backaches, sleeplessness or neurosis", and "still wore her hair little-girl fashion on her shoulders, and wore little-girl frocks in pastel colours, and kept her shy, naive manner."[7] However, after getting married, "her formerly pleasant but formless face was setting into lines of endurance." "Sometimes she would present the worn visage of an indomitable old woman who has learnt to expect the worst

from life, and sometimes the face of defenceless hysteria." [7] Mary gained some socially recognized gender values by becoming a "wife", but also lost her subjectivity in the labor market. When she tried to return to the original workplace, her former boss was surprised by her change in appearance and directly rejected her. Some scholar believes that "Mary's working class status and poverty are aspects of her identity that potentially placed her, within the stratified society of apartheid, much closer to the black man than to an upper-class white women."[13] This means that although she is a white woman, she does not possess the privileged status that the upper class colonizers are supposed to possess, and her hastiness of getting married under the social and public pressure is a foolish act of inappropriate initiative to enter the colonies of patriarchy.

Mary does try to resist. Under her husband's patriarchal oppression, she has always released her dissatisfaction by being picky about the servants while managing the household duties. Behind her seemingly irritability and willfulness is her secretive struggle for power. After six years of marriage, this contention for power went more public, and the opportunity came when Dick fell ill for the first time. At first, Mary reluctantly took over the supervision of the farm work on behalf of Dick. However, as a powerless white woman who had long been in a low position in marriage, after tasting the pleasure of holding on to colonial power, Mary began to have "a feeling of authority" [7], and embarked on a completely different path of management from Dick, who still maintained kindness. She walked proudly in the fields, waving her long thong of leather with great force and sternly scolding a group of black bodies, leaving no time for them to breathe. At this time, Mary had unconsciously transformed into the role of a colonizer, beginning her invasion and enslavement of the black slaves. Georgescu and others hold that, "She thus becomes a more successful embodiment than Dick of the white settler myth, of white supremacy."[14] However, after Dick's health improved, Mary was forced to relinquish her role as a manager. She had provided suggestions for the economic planning of the family, but none of them were accepted by Dick, and "it seemed that something had finally snapped inside of her, and she would gradually fade and sink into darkness."[7]

At this moment, Mary seemed to have calmed down and given up, but in fact, she still longed for power and maintained a commanding attitude towards the servants. But this resistance was spiritual. it was not until Moses has worked as a servant at home that, Mary, driven by a twisted psychological struggle, began to experience physical resistance. Before Moses came, Mary and Dick had long been indifferent and cold to each other. Mary "all day... sat numbly on the sofa with her eyes shut." "Her legs felt, as she walked, that they were too heavy for her. To make a sentence was an overwhelming effort."[7] She was completely exhausted and numb. But after Moses came, "the powerful, broad built body fascinated her."[7] So her dormant desire was awakened by a black body full of sexual attraction, and a storm that could tear her mind was swirling fiercely in her body. She clearly understood the incompatibility and confrontation between people of different colors, but she vaguely found herself unable to resist Moses' male charisma. She felt "herself like a taut-drawn thread, stretched between two immovable weights: that was how she felt, as if she were poised, a battleground for two contending forces."[7] In Mary there began a war, behind which her unconscious rebellion was clearly still hidden. Therefore, when facing Moses, she allowed her desires to override a great number of practical constraints in reality and even released her long suppressed female instincts. When the farmer Charlie visited, Mary, in front of Dick and the Charlie's, "made abrupt, unrelated remarks about the weather with that appalling coyness, shaking her ear-rings, writhing her thin shoulders, ogling Charlie with a conventional flirtatiousness."[7] Eventually, with a newcome, the farm assistant Tony, at home, Mary brazenly allowed Moses to help her dress up. The changes in Mary's body reflect the changes and transition of power. It can be seen that she captures the power to resist patriarchy and colonial authority from her taboo interaction with Moses.

There is no clear and solid description in the text regarding whether Mary had sexual relations with Moses. But Mary's bold "indiscretion" seriously challenged the racial norms recognized by the majority of white colonizers and communities, and Mary's resistance was destined to a devastating punishment. The weak power she briefly gained dissipated with her tragic death, and all members

of the local white community remained silent about and chose to bury the truth of the case. Grogan has the opinion that "Mary's body, as the supposed 'polluted' receptacle of 'polluting' black semen, throws white hegemony into doubt, producing the hysteria of hatred and terror necessary for the maintenance of a body politic subscribing to the rigid law of compulsory whiteness."[15] Patriarchy and colonial authority produce obedient bodies by judging and correcting individual behaviors, achieving collective control and maintaining the cohesion of racial communities.

2.3 The Resistance of Black Male Bodies

The Southern Rhodesia colony has long implemented a policy of racial segregation, and the black people were brutally oppressed by the white colonizers in terms of educational opportunities, economic opportunities, political rights, housing problems, and individual freedom, etc. However, the white colonizers also needed cheap labor to gain economic benefits, so they had a strong dependence on the black groups. As Homi Baba pointed out, "the colonial presence is always ambivalent."[16] Ginsburg stated that, "Reliance on indigenous labor characterized settler states whose inhabitants remained acutely aware that their high living standards were only enabled through the super-exploitation and oppression of the indigenous majority."[17] Black slaves working in the fields of southern Rhodesia can be seen everywhere, and white households in the area also generally keep black servants. It is as a black servant that the black male protagonist, Moses, entered Mary and Dick's life.

Among black slaves, he is ordinary and yet at the same time, special. He used to work in a church and has a certain accumulation of knowledge and insight. When he first appeared in the novel, Mary was cruelly and ruthlessly pushing them to work nonstop. Under the scorching sun, only Moses dared to stand up and humbly requested water; Even after being harshly whipped by Mary, he remained an attitude that is so calm and composed that could even be described as imposing. Moses was "a great hulk of a man, taller than any of the others, magnificently built."[7] He looked down at Mary with a terrifying gaze that almost scared her out of her wits. From this, it can tell that the colonizers and the colonized do have hybridity. Mary was not mighty at all time. And although Moses was a black slave, he was not inherently a timid coward who would naturally submit to the superior, which explains why he dared to maintain long-term illegal relationships with his white mistress.

After becoming a servant in the Turners' household, Moses' rebellious consciousness was further highlighted. He, like a mature adult, while indulging Mary to act recklessly and give random orders to him, began to actively approach and show his care towards Mary, taking care of her daily life. Moreover, his body naturally displays a strong sexual attraction. While he was doing household chores, "his muscles bulged and filled out the thin material of the sleeves until it seemed they would split."[7] While Moses was taking a shower and spotted by Mary, Mary felt dizzy and flustered at the sight of such exciting scene because she kept "remembering that thick black neck with the lather frothing whitely on it, the powerful back stooping over the bucket."[7] The strict relationship between the mistress and the servant as well as the rigid racial boundaries between the white and the black gradually became blurred under such strong physiological attraction. Moses, as the time proceeded, replaced the weak and powerless Dick, playing the role of Mary's white husband. Even in Mary's dreams, he was domineering, as if he and her deceased father have become a stressful whole. At this moment, Moses rose to be the colonizer of this white family, controlling the mistress and surpassing the male master.

Moses' power reached its peak when he murdered the white mistress. "The body is both a passive object controlled by power and also an active intermediary for the continued exercise of power."[18] Besides, women's bodies have been endowed with a special meaning of nationalism to a certain extent, becoming a battleground for political power struggles. Mary's body not only represents herself, but also symbolizes a powerful colonial empire. The deprivation of Mary's life demonstrates Moses' challenge, provocation, and conquest on the white empire. At the same time, Mary, who felt guilty and fearful, wanted to beg for mercy instead of resisting at the very sight of the long curving weapon in Moses' angry hand. "The warped interracial relationship between the

novel's white female protagonist, Mary Turner, and her black servant Moses becomes the vehicle for a cathartic and redemptive alleviation of white postcolonial guilt."[13] This indicates that the once dominant white female body has surrendered to the black male colonized body, willingly relinquishing power and sacrificing herself to the racial segregation system created by the white empire behind her.

Moses' confession of crime does not represent his loss of power. On the contrary, his calm and indifferent attitude in front of the white crowds and black police officers demonstrates his national identity that has transformed from weakness to dominance. Moses always had a strong consciousness of rebellion and never truly succumbed to the tyranny of the colonizers. He disrespected the incompetent Tony, disdained the crazy Dick, and despised the vain Charlie. Consistent with his spirituality, his body even casts shadow over "the policemen, picked for their physique, ...a fine body of men", since Moses "was a great powerful man, black as polished linoleum."[7] During the same era coincided with the historical background of the novel, the independence movement of African colonies was surging, and Lessing's body narrative inclined towards the black servant Moses, intentionally or unintentionally, reflected the gradual disintegration of the white imperial order and colonial logic.

3. Conclusion

"The human body is not regarded as a natural and thus immutable entity that exists outside the language in which it is described or the historical context in which it resides."[19] There is no distinction between superiority and inferiority among races of different skin colors. However, in the 1930s and 1940s in Southern Rhodesia, colonialism was rampant, and the concept of white supremacy permeated among white colonizers. Black people's bodies were seen as ugly, dirty, and inferior by them. White people, in order to submit to colonial rule, must try to deny individual subjectivity and avoid direct or indirect contact with black people to maintain their group identity. Therefore, "The silenced, wounded body of the colonized is a pervasive figure in colonial and postcolonial discourses."[20] In *The Grass Is Singing*, Lessing presented in detail the body changes of the white Turners and the black male servant Moses, demonstrating a powerful critique of colonial ideology through body narrative. Overall, the bodies of white people gradually weaken, while those of black people remain strong. Eventually, the bodies of white women even fell under the absolute control of black men, thus implying a potential crisis of the colonial empire losing its power in the era of independence movements of African colonies. This further responded to the general development of colonial authority in Southern Rhodesia in the first half of the 20th century, revealing the resistance consciousness and power transition process of the colonized people.

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