

## Liminal Crises: Gendered Space, Culture, and Colonial Dystopia in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1950)

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### Abstract

Cultural intertextuality is often viewed from the perspective of the oppressed, rather than the other way round. This is evident in the analysis of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* (1950). Interpretations of the text have rarely considered space. Therefore, this article investigates the intersections of gendered, racialised, and colonial spaces in Southern Rhodesia. Drawing from Lessing's own experiences as a white settler in colonial Africa, we critique the oppressive structures of colonialism while examining the gendered dynamics of space as they affect the subaltern, particularly women. Lessing's portrayal of Rhodesia as a melting pot of tensions reveals the contradictions of cultural intertextuality. Through textual analysis, the article highlights the challenges faced by Western feminist readings. It suggests that women's crises stem from spatial and cultural displacement rather than mere patriarchal oppression. We argue that the interpretation of *The Grass is Singing* aligns more closely with African cultural perspectives, emphasising intercultural influences of survival and communal resilience in gender struggles. Analysing the novel through a geocritical lens shows how space is created, contested, and re-territorialised under colonialism. The Rhodesian landscape, marked by racial and gendered divisions, becomes a microcosm of broader imperial anxieties.

**Keywords:** colonial, cultural intertextuality, geocriticism, gendered space, Western feminism

### Introduction

This article analyses how Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) interfaces with the real and fictional Zimbabwe. Geocriticism (Westphal 2011) is utilised to interrogate the interconnections of gender, race, and colonialism. It examines how Southern Rhodesia, a space ostensibly meant to signify white dominion, becomes a site of entrapment and failure for both the black and white inhabitants owing to clashing cultural backgrounds. The white settlers struggle with the ability to adapt to the African terrain. At the same time, their black counterparts, though marginalised and presumed to be subdued, exert an unsettling presence that cannot be condoned entirely. The novel's engagement with space – both physical, social, and cultural – reveals how colonial environments were constructed through displacement, labour exploitation, and racial segregation. Using geocritical and textual analysis frameworks, this

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article examines *The Grass is Singing* as a representation of the diverse cultural intertextuality in which gendered and racialised spaces collide. The study analyses how Lessing's depiction of Rhodesia challenges traditional feminist readings, hence providing alternative readings. Lessing's narrative techniques that reveal spatial readings include character references to space and place, and author descriptors. Her own biography contributes to the spatial reading of the Rhodesian landscape. This article thus underscores the construction of a Rhodesian subculture that can be expounded through the study of space.

### **Background**

Much of Doris Lessing's writing draws on childhood memories and her sympathies for the politics of inequality and oppression. She has written on culture clashes and the gross racial and economic injustices. In *The Grass is Singing*, spatial distinctions are apparent in the text between male and female, public and private spaces. For both the white and black Rhodesians, work in the public realm constituted working on farms, mines and other colonial establishments. For others, it meant migrating from neighbouring countries, such as Afrikaners from South Africa. For the African, Lessing (1950) states that this involved "the long walks from his home in Nyasaland" (p. 80). From the latent references to colonising England and intra-continental mobilities of indigenous peoples, it is also easy to notice that mobilities are a province of the male gender. The women are largely immobile and hence invisible. They are largely confined to the home space.

*The Grass is Singing* is based on the farming community of Ngesi in the colonial Southern Rhodesian (now the Mhondoro-Ngezi district in Mashonaland West province in Zimbabwe). Of significance are landmarks that occupy this countryside, such as the district or town centre, which constitute other workspaces, including Denham police station. Thus, the story in *The Grass is Singing* is partly autobiographical, as there are quite significant matches between the story and Lessing's real life. Since she is of European descent, women's spaces were supposed to be in the domestic arena of the home. The naming practices in colonial Rhodesia represent the history of the displacement of the indigenous people from their space and the disruption of their cultural practices. Although key named spaces in the novel are few, with Lessing deciding to concentrate on the micro-spaces of the farm and home, the larger named spaces include countries such as Southern Rhodesia, South Africa, and England. Ngesi, as if to underscore its insignificance, is mentioned once. There are numerous references to places and words associated with farming, such as "lands," "country," "bush", and "district." This is a true reflection of the rural countryside from the white man's perspective, hence an exhibition of the erasure of any lucid interaction between the black man and the now-private, white-owned farmland. In a similar way, the white man has more access to this

space than the white woman, hence a gendered presentation of the black man and the farming space, underlining the colonial, racialised and gender hierarchies at play. Ironically, this space is labelled African and naturally should be dominated by the natives. On the contrary, it is “owned” by a white minority, thereby underlining the paradox of land ownership in colonial Rhodesia. The black woman is almost invisible.

### **Geocritical perspectives on the Southern Rhodesian space**

In this article, we use Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1990) idea of the chronotope –how space and time tend to shape human behaviour –and vice versa. Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope argues that in literature, time and space are not separate dimensions but an interconnected system that shapes narrative meaning. As Lefebvre (1992) notes, specific contexts determine or allow individuals to behave in certain ways, and the same individuals’ interaction with space reproduces this in a new entity through the production of space. Similarly, concerning the Rhodesian chronotope, Primorac (2006) claims that when writers write, they create other possible worlds that can interrogate the historical fissures that had never been thought of or read about before. These include the gendered, racialised and cultural spaces of the Rhodesian landscape.

In line with geocriticism, which includes the author’s direct interaction with his/her text and other texts (intertextuality), authorial ideology and the author’s biography were utilised to provide a complete spatial analysis of *The Grass is Singing*. Furthermore, by intersecting gender and geocriticism, Lessing, like other writers, employs geographic strategies to tell a story from the physical space and location. Using geographic space alone is not enough. Wells (2017) argues that intersecting the reading of gender with geocriticism breeds interpretive multiplicity. However, Wells’ intersection of geocriticism with gender and a specific ideology (Western feminism) has its challenges, as it excludes African cultures and other cultures from the Global South. In other words, diversity is stultified, yet with geocriticism, plural interpretations are supposed to be almost unlimited. Westphal (2011) refers to this as multifocalisation, consistent with Wrede’s observation that engaging in spatial readings assists by offering “alternative gender configurations” (2015: 10). Through the colonial patriarchal system, the constriction of space almost demobilises the subalterns in the text, that is, the white woman, the black woman and the emasculated black man.

The space under scrutiny is that taken over by the colonial settler, displacing the indigenous inhabitants. While most actions appear stagnant in the two locations (the farm’s public and private spaces), implied movement is quite significant and evident. For instance, the movement of the previously English inhabitant, whose presence in colonial Rhodesia marks the

transgression of physical borders, thousands of kilometres travelled from England to the colonial community. This is generational, as the current cohort of settlers is no longer part of the original pioneer column but a second generation. Accordingly, the reading of space is apt as the 'settlers', consistent with the eponymous term that describes them, come to the Rhodesian territory as part of their mandate to create a territory for themselves. Deleuze and Guattari (cited by Adkins, 2015) refer to this as deterritorialization (when they left their mother country, England) and reterritorialization (settling in Rhodesia). This process affects not only the physical spatio-temporal relations but the socio-cultural relations too, and the gender relations that emanate from the general production of space (Lefebvre 1992) by both colonial white and black indigenous populations. In other words, the geography of colonial Rhodesia tells the story of the production of lived space by the two races.

### **The colonised, racialised and gendered terrain**

Admittedly, interactions between humans and their space are highly gendered. The farm in *The Grass is Singing* is a gendered space, largely "manned" by men, with women such as Mary making "rare shopping trips" into the sleeping town (1950: 92). Men's mobilities are largely visible as they are directly involved in farming activities, connecting them to the town as well. Although the novel focuses on the female character, Mary Turner, she is conspicuous by her invisibility in such significant spaces as a white woman in the farming community. The farm is associated with Dick, her husband, who considers it home. His visibility while working the land reflects the masculine, racialised patterns of ownership in colonial Rhodesia. Conversely, Mary's space is the home, although paradoxically, she feels alienated. Lessing shows this when she says, "For Mary, the word 'Home,' spoken nostalgically, meant England, although both her parents were South Africans and had never been to England" (1950: 37). This displays a gap between Mary and the farm, confirming Mlambo's observation that Rhodesia was a country of white "immigrants and transients" who lacked a sense of permanence (1998: 123). This accentuates the liminality of Rhodesian space for most white colonialists. The same can be said of the indigenous populations with intra-continental mobilities of the black labour force from as far afield as Nyasaland and the Zambian Copperbelt. These were dominated by men. Both races have treated Rhodesia as a temporary space for opportunity, with many hoping to return to their homes of origin up North or in England.

In addition, home for the black person refers to assigned and racialised spaces in the "kraals" or the reserved area for blacks (Tribal Trust Land-TTLs). They also adopt the European model of the male gender that works while the female stays at home. Darian-Smith et al. (2005) confirm this, having observed similar qualities of racialised and gendered territories in their study of the

British colonies of South Africa and Australia. The farming compound is not just racialised but highly gendered, a place where the male farm labourers retreat to after a day of work. The geographic space in *The Grass is Singing* is, therefore, a microcosm of the larger environment of Rhodesia, a representation of the racial and gender relations and the culture of the sub-Saharan region.

Interestingly, reference is made to South Africa, although it is evident that this is Rhodesia or a part of Southern Rhodesia, as it was then known. This can be explained by the common historical and cultural characteristics of both colonies as they are presided over by the same coloniser (Darian-Smith et al., 2005), making them almost inseparable. A culture of apartheid or separateness is an adopted trait from the Afrikaner community in South Africa. This reflects the shared imperial statutes that governed the whole region (Southern Africa). The historical attributes of the colonising power(s) (British and European) and the colonised (Bechuanaland, Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia, South Africa, and Nyasaland) were almost identical.

The reference to the African bush indicates the separateness between the colonising white system and the indigenous populations. "Bush," a derogatory word frequently used to refer to the Rhodesian topography, is steeped in colonial typecasts of the untamable and fear-inspiring. It aligns with the Africa of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2007) and Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (2004). Unfortunately, as Westphal (2011) confirms, that monolithic portrayal of space is usually a breeding ground for stereotypes. As far as Mary Turner is concerned, the bush is savage, ready to consume her. Its inhabitants are considered uncivilised. Mary's failure to conquer the environment is indicated by other failed projects associated with her, such as the store and chicken run. Mary's return to the store after its abandonment and collapse indicates this stagnation that is linked to her own death, "There it was, the ugly store...at her death, as it had been all her life" (Lessing, 1950: 247). Mary's vision and the premonition of impending demise reflect the adverse effect of the African landscape on her, resulting in her mental instability and eventual death.

The seemingly underpopulated Southern Rhodesian region, with a glimpse of the crowded black compounds, represents a severe contradiction of the freedom supposedly enjoyed in vast, empty, uninhabited expanses. Darian-Smith et al. (2005: 12) draw similar descriptors of the colonial landscape when they designate the colonial Australian space as "uninhabited, empty of people". This shows a total disregard for the indigenous populations. The black man in Rhodesia is reduced to a labourer on the farmland, outside of which he is deemed an intruder or trespasser. Ironically, that space is also not freely enjoyed by the white woman and her black woman counterpart. The colonial establishment, thus, creates an ambivalent landscape of seeming free movement. Yet, it is marked by inhibitions and limited mobilities largely

permissible through institutionalised policies of racial segregation and discrimination for the maintenance of white supremacy (Darian-Smith et al. 2005). Rieker and Ali (2008: 4) confirm this when they state that the colonial project constituted seizing the geographical areas, creating new spatial relations based on hierarchies and racial boundaries. Part of the colonial project meant whites' obsession with their presumed territory. For instance, Dick holds onto "my farm" (Lessing 1950: 170) even when it is no longer serving its purpose. Consequently, the farm becomes part of the liminal space he grapples with.

Within the Rhodesian space, for whites who fail to transgress beyond their liminality, they envision themselves, like Mary, as "a trap, cornered and helpless" (Lessing 1950: 252). This results in the psychological shock of their dislocation and failure to adapt. For them, the hostility of the physical terrain is traumatising and terrifying. It is menacing. Associated negative descriptors, such as "hated" (Lessing 1950: 96, 130), "encroaching" (29), and "hostile" (63, 198), are deployed to depict the daunting landscape. Owing to this, Mary prefers the city, as the farm immobilises her. This is a negative attribute that mainly affects the home-bound colonial woman. It confirms what van Leeuwen has opined on the state of being immobilised, that it is "a line separating the visible surroundings from an unknown invisible beyond...a differentiation of spaces according to distance, functions, ownership and social relationships" (2007: 15). This behaviour is consistent with that of Mary, which translates into an imaginative departure from the farm, underlining her failure to belong. For her, the heat is punishing, the birds are shrilly and noisy, the cicada, "that sound she could never bear" with the black people labelled in nearly the same animalistic signifiers, recognised only with their "shrill voices" (Lessing, 1950: 235). From a positive perspective, however, the voices are markers of space associated with people who are at peace with their place, the indigenous farmworker populations and their families. Sadly, though, for Mary, there appears to be a mutual rejection of this space. The landscape appears to reject her and, owing most likely to her fragility and privileged femininity, she rejects the place. The same cannot be said of the African woman who has a harmonious co-existence with her surroundings, despite being immobilised by colonialism.

### **The paradox of subverting colonial supremacy**

Doris Lessing has been labelled as belonging to the feminist paradigm (Hossain, 2018; de Mul, 2009), despite her vehement refusal. Lessing, in turn, has blamed feminists of "fasten[ing] on to someone who they think is one of them. I am always being described as having views that I've never had in my life" (Ellen, 2001, n.p). *The Grass is Singing* has thus been broadly interpreted through Western lenses, with an emphasis on Western feminist ideology. As if

to counter Lessing's refusal, she has been alternatively referred to as a "male champion" (Ellen, 2001, n.p.) or accused of "unusual feminist" ideas, because of her refusal of female victimhood, which she views as a hindrance to women from exercising personal responsibility and agency, and taking control of their own lives. This suggests that gender relations in her works (that include *The Golden Notebook*, 1962, *The Good Terrorist*, 1985 and *The Fifth Child*, 1988) have been misinterpreted, owing to the framing of those relations using either Western epistemologies that are biased, or failure to align with the cultural indigenous ties from which her works are set. This is why this study departs from employing feminism to analyse novels that have an African cultural background. Western feminist interpretations of gendered space rigidly divide space into public and private dichotomies, yet this distinction is fluid on African soil (Hudson-Weems, 1997). This rigidity is personified in Mary and hinges on the Victorian or Anglo-Saxon values imported from the West, which underline the home as the confining, private and domestic space for the woman.

However, whenever two cultures meet, neither remains innocent of the other. Spaces for the woman in *The Grass is Singing* are restricted to the home: the kitchen, the bedroom, the sitting room, the verandah, and the literal home. At her most comfortable, Mary wants to be useful around the home. However, she must also conform to the dictates "*esprit de corps*" of "the district" (Lessing, 1950: 11), that is, not to live like a native or face condemnation. Unfortunately for her, the poverty in her household almost pushes her to the precipice, inadvertently making her interaction with her space synonymous with practices of the natives she abhors. Concurrently, Mary observes in Dick some traits he appears to have adopted from native mannerisms. Hence, their environment shapes them and vice versa. In a similar manner, the native women display a penchant for European adornments sold by Mary at the store. Bhabha (2004) has underscored the tensions and ambiguities that arise from encounters between different cultural, social, and political forces (those of the coloniser and the colonised), leading to a "third space" where meanings are negotiated and contested. This third space is characterised by ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction, with multiple perspectives and identities coexisting and clashing.

Yasin (2023) summarises this subversion of colonial supremacy, while the colonised on the other hand challenge their subordination. This underlines the shifting positions of the powerful and the less powerful in a melting pot of cultures. Mary's observation of Dick Turner is apt when she says,

Why, he seemed to be growing into a native himself.... He would blow his nose on his fingers into the bush, the way they did...even his colour not so different, for he was a burned rich brown.... (Lessing, 1950: 172)

Therefore, this multiplicity of readings is only possible through analysing how individuals interact with space, which challenges and fractures traditional dichotomies, binaries, and stereotypes. Othering is reversed and subverted in *The Grass is Singing*, and among fellow whites, the Turner household is cause for embarrassment and shame, from its physical appearance to the contents of the house. However, there are questions regarding Dick Turner's empathy for and association with natives, particularly his family-centredness, which can be attributed to his adoption of the natives' way of life.

Whereas geocriticism works best when there is mobility, allowing observations of space, limited mobilities can also yield multiple interpretations. For instance, although *The Grass is Singing* encapsulates limited movement from one place to another, one can read between the lines even in spaces of stagnation. Much as Mary openly loathes natives and their ways, she is unaware that their culture is rubbing off on her. For example, Mary's stance on the free-spiritedness of native women is telling. When the women visit the store, Lessing (1950) describes this saying, "If she disliked native men, she loathed the .... there was something in their calm, satisfied maternity that made her blood boil" (116) (our *emphasis*). From this statement, what Mary finds despicable is not just race, but a combination of her seeming servitude to them and their ostensive superiority reflected by their freedom to explore the space outside of their homes (going shopping) even without their men. While she appears to condemn the indigenous people for their primitive appearance and behaviour, she secretly harbours admiration for their level of freedom to navigate the terrain, an autonomy that she ironically does not have. Lessing's authorial voice also appears to exhibit itself here, where the admiration comes from the author herself while simultaneously and latently criticising Mary. The closed spatial arrangement of the cottage or farmhouse is suffocating, representing a similar system of colonialism on her gender. This does not seem to be the case with the native women. When Mary attempts to run away, she still finds herself back at the farm, underscoring her apparent entrapment.

### **The poor and isolated white as marginalised other in *The Grass is Singing***

In this section, we examine the multiplicity of identities women possess. Rather than reviewing them through the known spatial dichotomies, women have transgressed these boundaries as their interactions with such spaces and cultures have mutated over time and yielded fresher readings and realities. Ceia (2023), from a study of cinema, observed that white women in Africa have tended to be analysed using a Western white feminist frame that "equates the subaltern position of the white female within white patriarchy with that of the racially different, colonised subject" (2023: 185). Nonetheless, the interpretation is that women should move beyond gender and racial dichotomies, presenting their experiences in their full complexity, as cited above. Westphal (2011)



demonstrates how newer readings are generated from a space that appears homogenous. De Hernandez, et al. (2010) concur:

One is not always one. In my case, one is at least five. For while I am a pure black woman, I can silence neither the white part within me, nor the yellow, nor the brown, nor the red. In other words, I cannot silence my community (De Hernandez et al. 2010: 6-7).

In the same vein, Mary, in *The Grass is Singing*, transgresses past social expectations and moves into a space that she creates from within her home, as the master-servant interaction with the home space transforms into a relationship between her and Moses. Westphal (2011), borrowing from Foucault (1984), calls this transgressed space heterotopia. This is the other space in which women retreat to as a way of surviving crises. These are women's own private spaces, away from the struggles brought by the gendered and racialised socioeconomic and political structures of the day. Westphal (2011) adds that an individual transforms and seeks refuge in the heterotopic space, which is done through hubris, that is, stepping "outside one's own space and entering into a foreign one" (2011: 42). Therefore, heterotopias assert the value of difference and embody an escape from oppression and tyranny. For Mary, this comes in the form of a relationship outside the racialised and restricted space and power.

Consistent with this, Mary transgresses the racially and morally forbidden space of cross-racial extra-marital affairs and unions. For Moses, relations with a white woman restore his previously emasculated self and present an opportunity to exert power over a woman who once humiliated him. From a feminist perspective, while Moses' humiliation gives Mary satisfaction and control, the reversal is complete when she has a relationship with Moses. It is through her isolation that she is propelled into a relationship with her servant. What Mary may not find attractive in the prescribed space of marriage (in Dick), she clandestinely finds in the proscribed relationship (with Moses) through constant interaction between them within the home space. In other words, the home for Mary opens a "third space" that shapes her interaction with it, which has been redefined through her relationship with the male servant, Moses. Thus, Wrede (2015: 10) talks of how the notion of Third Space "opens ...an option that destabilises the binaries that sustain an oppressive and exploitative social organisation, including the oppression of women." By having a relationship with her servant, Mary transgresses social boundaries that consider such relationships taboo. Representing the Rhodesian white woman in *The Grass is Singing*, Mary struggles against being subjugated by the domineering forces of patriarchy, the hegemonic power of the colonial government, or both. However, because she has to conform to the dictates of a

colonial society. Mary remains caught in a liminal trap that can only be resolved when she dies or leaves the farm.

Consequently, Mary's heterotopic space exhibits her agency and her way of surviving the stifling space of the Rhodesian chronotope. It challenges the established moral, cultural, racial and gender boundaries. The interaction of Mary and Moses with the domestic realm of the home subverts traditional indigenous/colonialised and racialised gender roles. Mary Turner may have claimed the home space, but this is disrupted by the male house servants she employs, represented by Moses. This accentuates the displacement from the domestic realm she had once claimed as her own. Previously, she had become engrossed in her domestic chores and found satisfaction in them early in her marriage. Scholarly works on *The Grass is Singing* have focused mainly on the subverted positions of the black male housekeepers, which directly conflict with their role as patriarchs in the kraal. The same, though, can be said of Mary and her previously female domain of the house. Failure to contain her liminality degenerates into mental instability, highlighting the crisis of the coloniser in a colonial territory. For Moses, it leads to murder.

### Conclusion

Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* exposes the inconsistencies of colonial Southern Rhodesia, revealing how the cultural, racial and gendered hierarchies disentangle under the weight of their own logic. Through a geocritical lens, the novel deconstructs the illusion of white supremacy, demonstrating how both the coloniser and colonised are trapped within a system that dehumanises them all. The Rhodesian landscape becomes a space of psychological disintegration, with characters such as Mary Turner, whose alienation emphasises the unsustainability of colonial rule. At the same time, the article has demonstrated that the marginalised black characters, although silenced, possess an unsettling presence that subtly disrupts colonial authority. Lessing's work exhibits how cultural contexts, through engagement with space, challenge rigid stereotypes and feminist interpretations of gender binaries. The analysis also revealed the deep entanglements of colonialism, gender, and race that affected both blacks and whites. Hence, geocriticism reveals aspects of gendered and racialised displacement and the attendant effects that previous feminist and postcolonial readings might have missed.

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