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Introduction

- 1 *The Grass is Singing* (1950) is Doris Lessing's first novel which carries over some of the experiences based on her upbringing, childhood and youth as a white settler in the Rhodesian veld. The novel reflects its author's indictment of sexual and political prejudices in the Southern African setting through the life of Mary Turner, a white landowner's wife, and her fatal relationship with her black servant. It exposes the practices of censorship imposed by the coercive colonial system on English settlers as well as black people. Pondering upon the notion of censorship in her essay "Being Prohibited", Lessing wonders whether "the sword was mightier than the pen". Such a question leads to others: if censorship has the function of muting potentially destabilizing voices, how did Lessing push back the boundaries to free expression in her writings, and particularly in *The Grass Is Singing*? In other words, how does she oppose the hegemonic discourse? Ultimately, does the writer become more intellectually fertile when he/she is oppressed in some way?

Institutionalized censorship in *The Grass is Singing*

- 2 Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* depicts the racial and cultural intersections that can provide insights into the mechanisms of censorship in South Rhodesia in the 1940s –a colonial context where the color bar was the first rule in the British colony. If according to Michel Foucault, censorship is a disciplinary power that shapes society through specialized discourse then Lessing, in this novel, lays bare a vast network of

political, social and media discourses that forged the social subconscious which led the female protagonist to her tragic end.¹ The story is first mediated through journalistic discourse. The opening pages are reported by a journalist, Tony Marston, a white male character who perfectly embodies the psychology of the Apartheid regime, reporting that Mary Turner had been found dead in the bush and that her black servant Moses, the prime suspect in her murder, would therefore be punished, stressing that :

White civilization [...] will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. For once it admits that, it crashes, and nothing can save it. So, above all, it cannot afford failures.²

- 3 His friend Charlie Slatter, a successful farmer in the veld confirms his view, even though no investigation was conducted on the murder and its circumstances: as part of the ideology of colonialism, he should uphold "the dictate of the first law of white South Africa:" "Thou shalt not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point; because if you do, the nigger will see he is as good as you are".³
- 4 But the journalistic discourse is to be perceived as part of the social and political discursive network, proving that censorship was institutional in so far as it was enforced by the colonial regime in Southern Rhodesia, which promulgated a hegemonic discourse that would only create fear and frustration. Its bases were rooted in the compelling myth of the "black peril", that is to say the fear of sexual crimes against white women by black men. The underlying belief behind it was the stereotype of the "bestial sexual license of the African that needed no proof."⁴ Here both politics and myth and the frustration they create coalesce to enforce censorship. The myth of the "black peril" served to censor the human body: first, it proclaimed the bodies of white women as the protected possessions of white men; secondly, it constructed the black 'other' as a primal, sexual "animal," incapable of controlling his physical impulses. Women and Africans were advertised as objects. Thus, the peril imposed the roles of both victim and villain respectively to white women and black men and channeled their bodies in line with the social and racial order. In such an atmosphere, Mary Turner

had never come into contact with natives before [...]. Her mother's servants she had been forbidden to talk to, in the club she had been kind to the waiters, but the native problem meant for her other women's complaints of their servants at tea parties. She was afraid of them, of course. Every woman in South Africa is brought up to be.⁵

- 5 Mary, who has grown up and been educated under continuous fear of a possible sexual assault by black men, has been obliged to walk alone as, "they [black men] were nasty and might do horrible things to her."⁶ She is "white," "English" and a "settler" and therefore belongs to the hegemonic racial group. She is also "female" and must consequently observe the barrier between white women and black men as sexual relationships between blacks and whites were seen as a taboo in the Southern Africa of the 1950s. In this context, censorship is to be thought of in Lessing's novel as a process dealing with the "obscene", the "unacceptable," the "taboo" or to borrow anthropologist Mary Douglas's word the "pollutant". The notion of pollution as related to the body develops remarkably and solely in the paranoid structures of a racist system. Pollution involves the transgression of such rigid lines of structure. Anyone who might want to defy the limits of society via the limits of the body is thus censored and condemned: "A polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some

wrong condition or simply crossed over some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone.”⁷ In this sense, the physical body becomes the locus of censorship for it becomes necessarily representative of social limits:

Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose a system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, [black and white,] that a semblance of order is created.⁸

- 6 By the end of the novel, Mary transgresses the social law by her “openness” to infiltration by the racial “Other”. Her body is “polluted” by the black man. Paradoxically she becomes as perilous a threat as Moses is for the white community of Southern Rhodesia. Yet, Lessing’s “polluted” and polluting characters are punished: Mary with death, and Moses with the fulfillment of the colonial stereotype of the black man as criminal.
- 7 Does the end of the novel adhere to the dictates of the Apartheid system as it seemingly confirms the myth of the black peril and Marston’s declaration at the beginning of the novel? Is the death of Mary Turner to be interpreted as a silencing of the transgressor? Is she the sacrificial victim upon whom colonialism avenged itself? But why has the novelist intentionally kept the details of the crime enigmatic?
- 8 My answer to such questions lies in two arguments: first, Lessing’s choice of the theme of black-white sexuality in Rhodesian society of the 1950s is in itself a revolutionary act as this issue was considered a taboo, a censored theme, in the period and was not accepted by her fellow white readers. Secondly, the character of Mary Turner is presented with psychological insight and sensitivity and Lessing’s indictment of the hegemonic colonial regime rests on this point in particular. It is associated with the presence of “white peril” in the character of Mary as a misfit, hysterically mad and divided individual. Her psychological diagnosis reflects the inherent problem in the body politic which itself is deeply divided.

Mary: “the white peril”

- 9 Mary’s socially perilous nature stems from her incapacity to be subservient to the dynamics of her community. Within this social and colonial context, she was expected to play her role in the construction of the racial, gendered hierarchies of the empire. But after a traumatic childhood ending up with the death of her parents, she became unable to fit into her social environment. She marries, at age thirty-five, Dick Turner, a failed farmer. She hastened into this ill-matched marriage which she was forced to accept in order to meet the expectations of colonialism, marrying a white man she does not love: “All women become conscious, sooner or later, of that impalpable but steel-strong pressure to get married, and Mary, [...] [is] brought face to face with it suddenly, and most unpleasantly”.⁹ It was hard to reconcile “what she wanted for herself and what she was offered” and the marriage intensified her desire to repress her corporeality.¹⁰ Hence, she is torn between the demands of marriage and her refusal of carnality.
- 10 As the novel progresses, she grows obsessed with the idea of gaining control over the natives. When she takes over the management of the farm for the short time of Dick’s

sickness, she does not only rage at the incompetence of her husband's farming practice, but she also shows contempt for the workers, finding them disgusting and animal-like. She responds with horror to the "reeking bodies of the working natives", considering black women as "strange, [...] alien and primitive creatures with ugly desires she could not bear to think about".¹¹

11 But Mary's behavior is to be seen as a kind of compensation for her sense of being a feminine and weak "other" for the masculine "self" of the white man and the empire, which makes her unable to wield power over her own destiny.

12 The culmination of Mary's despair and vulnerability is when Moses, the new servant, enters her life. He is the same worker whom Mary struck with a whip two years before. The fear of the servant taking his revenge has haunted Mary from that time on, and she is:

unable to treat this boy as she had treated all the others, for always, at the back of her mind, was that moment of fear she had known just after she had hit him and thought he would attack her. She felt uneasy in his presence.¹²

13 Yet most notably, there is an element of sexual attraction in her towards Moses. His powerful, broad-built body fascinates her. The culminating moment is the accidental sight of her black houseboy Moses as he is washing, arousing her sexual desire: "She was arrested by the sight of the native under the trees a few yards off. He was rubbing his thick neck with soap, and the white lather was startlingly white against the black skin".¹³ This moment of voyeurism is the first instance of her transgressing the rigid line between blacks and whites. It is the moment when she becomes aware of his humanity:

What had happened was that the formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant, had been broken by the personal relation; and when a white man in Africa by accident looks into the eyes of a native and sees the human being (which it is his chief occupation to avoid), his sense of guilt, which he denies, fumes up in resentment, and he brings down the whip.¹⁴

14 Mary is sexually attracted to Moses, a fact which is culturally unspeakable and even unthinkable, a taboo. She, who has always avoided emotional attachment, is now suffering the pains and desire for an intimate relationship with Moses. She is both afraid of, and fascinated by, him. Her fear of Moses is both the fear of a black man, the "unknown Africa" in Conradian terms, and the "terrible dark fear" of the "shadow self", in Jungian terms: it is "one of a strong and irrational fear, a deep uneasiness, and even— though she did not know, would have died rather than acknowledged—of some dark attraction".¹⁵ While at some point in the novel, she responds to his physical touch "with loathing [...] as though she had been touched by excrement", she gradually comes to realize the black man's humanity. By resigning her power to Moses, it is him who takes the role of powerful person dominating over her and respectfully forces her "now to treat him as a human being".¹⁶ In other words, Mary is racially dominant but is psychologically and sexually dominated by Moses, and this attraction implies that she breaks two taboos: sexual and colonial.

15 The female protagonist grows neurotic; her madness is due to her inability to express herself by the existing discourses. Her silence is a symptom as well as an effect of the cultural neurosis; her vulnerability is that of the colonial regime. She begins to behave "simply as if she lives in a world of her own, where other people's standards don't count. She has forgotten what her own people are like. But then, what is madness, but a refuge, a retreating from the world?"¹⁷ Moses assumes greater importance in her life

while she “faded, tousled, her lips narrowed in anger, her eyes hot, her face puffed and blotched with red” can hardly “recognize herself”.¹⁸

- 16 The realization of her sterile situation comes too late and she has no other remedy but death. On the last day before their journey from the farm, she walks off the paths into the bush for the first time since she has been living in the district. Suddenly she becomes aware of the beauty of nature that morning, “with a mind as clear as the sky”, she stands there “watching the sunrise”.¹⁹ She knows that somewhere among the trees, Moses is waiting for her. She sees herself as “an angular, ugly, pitiful woman, with nothing left of the life” who can do nothing faced with the “fatal night”.²⁰ She sees herself as “that foolish girl travelling unknowingly to this end” who is waiting “for the night to come that would finish her”, then she walks straight into the bush “thinking: ‘I will come across him’ and it will all be over.”²¹
- 17 Does Mary seek epiphanic knowledge and release from her dilemma after her death? Or does her death announce the triumph of the white colonialists’ myth of the black peril?
- 18 It seems that Mary Turner’s death is the only possible resolution of her conflicting impulses. She finds ease in self-annihilation rather than self-affirmation. She is “unable to protect herself against pain and punishment because she has been taught that resistance is useless – to be a woman is to be powerless, at least in relation to a man”.²² Even though by her death the white colonialists manage to fulfill their missions, the narrator divulges important truths that belie the opening of the novel: under the influence of Charlie Slatter and the Sergeant from the police station, the whites hide the truth by accusing Moses of theft and rape. Charlie has this power to distort or even falsify the truth. Mary is lost in the gap between what other people read in the newspaper about her murder and the truth about this tragedy. Thus, the reader becomes aware of the falsity of the news which reveals the conflicting ideology that underlies British imperialism which uses its worst excesses to justify itself.
- 19 Mary does not succeed in her process of self-affirmation but unconsciously, she deconstructs the colonial doctrine of her culture and she becomes the target of “a bitter contemptuous anger” from her white fellows. As in Katherine Fishburn’s words, she is like an “accidental rebel” who at last dissolves the dichotomous orders and consequently reveals for the reader the fear and falsity of the white civilization whose indictment is the division between privileged white and dispossessed black.²³ By her death, Mary paves the way for the native (Africa/Moses) to take subjective action. She cannot guarantee her own identity since she does not have any remedy for loneliness, poverty and gender limitations, but she foreshadows a change in Imperial attitudes. *The Grass is Singing*, through its circular narration from a collective perspective on Mary’s murder to an individual account of her personal life, completes an indictment of its central character’s life in a closed white colonial society in southern Africa in which Mary Turner was excluded, isolated and finally killed.
- 20 It is precisely the mystery of Mary’s death that gives the novel its subversive power. Indeed, looking at the extensive Doris Lessing archive, letters relating to the editorial process for her novel *The Grass is Singing* enlightens about to the process of censorship imposed on the novelist because of her authorial choice of the ending.

The battle against publishers

- 21 Lessing was refused to be published by Alfred Knopf and she recounts the reason behind it in the second volume of her autobiography, *Walking in the Shade* (1997):

Alfred Knopf in New York said they would take the book, if I would change it so that there was an explicit rape, “in accordance with the mores of the country”. This was Blanche Knopf, Alfred’s wife, and the Knopfs were the stars of the publishing firmament then. I was furious. What did she know about the “mores” of Southern Africa? Besides, it was crass. The whole point of *The Grass is Singing* was the unspoken, devious codes of behaviour of the whites, nothing ever said, everything understood, and the relationship between Mary Turner, the white woman, and Moses, the black man, was described so nothing was explicit.²⁴

- 22 In a letter dated January 3, 1950, Mrs. Robert Shaplen (“for Alfred Knopf Inc.”) wrote to the literary agent Naomi Burton at Curtis Brown, Ltd. She said that Knopf was “tremendously impressed” with the novel and “would like to make an offer” subject to some changes, including to the ending:

It seems to us that the curious, well-developed relationship between Mary Turner and Moses is not carried through to its logical and emotionally necessary conclusion, but ends inconclusively, so that his murder of her is not the satisfactory resolution of a dissonance, but a mere full stop. Moses must rape the unfulfilled and half-willing Mary, and then murder her out of a mixture of disgust and fear. We are not asking this for any reasons of sensationalism, but simply because it seems to us the logical, and indeed, inevitable, climax to the story.

- 23 Lessing had a counter-offer, from Crowell, another publisher, who was willing to publish the novel as it stood.²⁵

- 24 On February 15, Knopf wrote to say he found the manner in which Curtis Brown had handled the matter “offensive” and to confirm that they had been happy to publish the book without the proposed rape scene. Spencer Curtis Brown replied on February 23:

I think you are under the impression that [Lessing] only decided not to revise the book after she had the Crowell offer. That’s not the case. [S]he had decided she wasn’t going to alter the book for anyone. Her actual words were: “Damn all publishers – you can’t expect me not to have my tongue in my cheek after all these pontifical and contradictory pronouncements.” The attraction of the Crowell offer was not the terms they offered or their distribution or their prestige but merely the fact that they were the first publishers who liked the book as it stood [...] You may think she was foolish but I don’t think she has been dishonest.²⁶

- 25 Lessing disentangled herself from the battle of publishers and insisted on her authorial choice of the end of the novel. Her commitment to a postcolonial critique of the British Empire’s world order made her question received assumptions, all that complacency, all those comfortable ideas. The novelist was greatly interested in left-wing intellectual debates. Between 1942 and 1949, she became active in a Marxist group close to the Communist party because they were “the only people [she]’d ever met who fought the color bar.” In *Going Home* (1957), Lessing explains that her involvement in communist groups in Africa was motivated by her aspiration for racial equality. She therefore became an active member of the National Executive of the Southern Rhodesian Labor Party. She was against white supremacy in both the labor movement and the social and political life of the country. Her adherence to communism also confirmed her humanistic approach: “It is a fight for basic human rights.”²⁷

- 26 She would later realize however that the progressive “idealism” of the communist party was no more than a pragmatic white tactic to assuage the mounting anger of black activists. The communist group in which Lessing was involved unconsciously assumed that whites would maintain their standards of living and that black people would gradually be integrated into the larger white society and politics. Disillusioned with the rift between the idealistic claims of communism and its practical realities, Lessing left the Labor Party and communism in 1956. This disengagement was later reflected in her writings, mainly *Landlocked* and *The Four-Gated City*. In *Going Home*, she writes

I said as late as 1967 that I believed the communist countries were getting more democratic; [...] How could I have conceivably believed such nonsense? How does it come about that people who are quite insightful and sensible about some aspects of politics are so silly about others? For it remains true that on the whole socialists and communists were more far-sighted about the nature of white rule than other people, no matter how wrong they were about communism. [...] Looking back, I say to myself that ideally I would like to have been a communist for let's say two years, because of what I learned about the nature of power, power lovers, fanatics, the dynamics of groups and how they form and split, about one's capacity for self-delusion.²⁸

- 27 Lessing came to be convinced of the fallacy of political ideologies. She realized that being involved in a political group could engender exclusion or even persecution for one's disagreement with its ideas and decision-making policies.
- 28 In conclusion, Lessing's first novel *The Grass Is Singing* deals with a censored theme thus transcending the dogma that white writers should not write about a sexual relationship between a black servant and a white master in the Apartheid era. The authorial choice of ending and her battle against publishers prove that she refused reductive visions and restrictions, preferring to interrogate such problematic issues as race and ethnicity.

NOTES

1. This is particularly mentioned in his book *Discipline, Punish and the History of Sexuality*, VOL1.
2. Doris Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994, p. 26.
3. Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*, p. 178.
4. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 66.
5. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, pp. 58-59.
6. Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing*.
7. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966, p. 4.
8. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 6.
9. Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 40.
10. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 44.
11. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 69, p. 95.
12. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 142.
13. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 143.

14. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 144.
 15. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 152; p. 154.
 16. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 152; p. 156.
 17. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 156.
 18. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 146.
 19. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 192.
 20. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 194.
 21. Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 195.
 - Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 197.
 22. Eva Hunter, "Marriage as Death. A Reading of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*," in Cherry Clayton, Ed., *Women and Writing in South Africa*, Marshalltown: Heineman Southern Africa, 1989, p. 148.
 23. Katherine Fishburn, "The Manichean Allegories of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*," *Research in African Literature*, Vol.25, No.4, Winter 1994, p. 4.
 24. Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography, 1949 to 1962*. London: Harper Collins, 1997, p. 121.
 25. Doris Lessing, *Doris Lessing Papers [1943-2008]*, The University of Texas at Austin: the Harry Ransom Center, 2008, p. 96.
 26. Lessing, *Doris Lessing Papers [1943-2008]*, p. 97.
 27. Doris Lessing, *Going Home*, Great Britain: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1957, p. 103.
 28. Lessing, *Going Home*, pp. 253-254.
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ABSTRACTS

A ground-breaking and intellectually uncompromising essayist and novelist, Doris Lessing, who died in 2013 at age 94, was one of the most influential women writers of the second half of the twentieth century. A prolific writer of more than fifty novels, a pioneering individualist and a non-conformist thinker, she always refused allegiance to formal ideologies and vehemently objected to dogmas and rigid institutions. Even though she spent twenty-four years of her life in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) as the daughter of settlers who travelled to that colony through the British Empire scheme, she was one of the fiercest voices railing against injustice and, the apartheid system, and tried through her writings to resist an era tainted by colonialism. Subsequently, her books were banned in South Africa and she was barred from entering Southern Rhodesia in 1956, a ban that would last for almost thirty years. This article deals therefore with the aspects of censorship in Doris Lessing's first novel *The Grass Is Singing* and the way the writer was censored after writing it.

Essayiste et romancière révolutionnaire et sans compromis intellectuel, décédée en 2013 à l'âge de 94 ans, Doris Lessing était l'une des femmes écrivains les plus influentes de la seconde moitié du XXe siècle. Écrivaine prolifique, anticonformiste, rebelle et provocatrice, Doris Lessing est considérée par la critique comme ayant été à l'avant-garde du féminisme, du communisme, de l'anticolonialisme et de la lutte contre l'apartheid. Même si elle a passé vingt-quatre ans de sa vie en Rhodésie du Sud (maintenant Zimbabwe) en tant que fille de colons qui se sont rendus dans cette colonie dans le cadre du régime de l'Empire britannique, elle a été l'une des voix les plus féroces à dénoncer l'injustice et le système d'apartheid, et a essayé à travers ses écrits de résister

à une époque entachée de colonialisme. Par la suite, ses livres ont été interdits en Afrique du Sud et elle a été empêchée d'entrer en Rhodésie du Sud en 1956, une interdiction qui durerait près de trente ans. Cet article traite alors des aspects de la censure dans le premier roman de Doris Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* et de la façon dont l'écrivain a été censuré après l'avoir écrit.

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Hajer Elarem is a university teacher at the Higher Institute of Applied Languages of Moknine in Tunisia and a Doctor in English literature, interested in postcolonial issues, mystical writings, gender and feminist studies. Her teaching areas involve modern drama, Postcolonial Studies and the English novel. She is a member of CRIT, a research group devoted to the study of postcolonial literature. Her PhD dissertation is entitled «A Quest for selfhood: Deconstructing and Reconstructing Female Identity In Doris Lessing’s Early Fiction». She has written many articles, among them “The mystical Experience in Doris Lessing’s Early Fiction” (2020) published in “Les enjeux de l’écriture mystique” and “The Play with Genres and Gender in Doris Lessing’s Novel *The Golden Notebook*” published in “Le discours et la langue” (Stockholm University Press). She has also presented many papers at conferences both home and abroad, centered on the same issues, like “The Historiographic Metafiction of Doris Lessing’s Autobiography Under My Skin” (University of Monastir, April (2018) and “The Relational Self In Doris Lessing’s Autobiography: Knowing the Self through the (m)other” (October, 15th 2016, Paris Ouest Nanterre University).

Hajer Elarem est professeur d'université à l'Institut supérieur des langues appliquées de Moknine en Tunisie et docteure en littérature anglaise, intéressée par les questions postcoloniales, les écrits mystiques, le *gender* et les études féministes. Ses domaines d'enseignement concernent le théâtre moderne, les études postcoloniales et le roman anglais. Elle est membre du CRIT, un groupe de recherche consacré à l'étude de la littérature postcoloniale. Sa thèse de doctorat s'intitule «A Quest for selfhood: Deconstructing and Reconstructing Female Identity In Doris Lessing’s Early Fiction». Elle a écrit de nombreux articles, parmi lesquels «The mystical Experience in Doris Lessing's Early Fiction» (2020) publié dans «Les enjeux de l'écriture mystique» et «The Play with Genres and Gender in Doris Lessing's Novel *The Golden Notebook*» publié dans «Le discours et la langue» (Stockholm University Press). Elle a également présenté de nombreux articles lors des conférences à l'échelle nationale et internationale, centrés sur les mêmes problématiques, comme “The Historiographic Metafiction of Doris Lessing’s Autobiography Under My Skin” (Université de Monastir, avril (2018) et “The Relational Self In Doris Lessing’s Autobiography: Knowing the Self through the (m)other” (15 octobre 2016, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre).