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Ecology, Gender and Cultural Ideology in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

Abstract I: L'articolo offre una lettura ecocritica del primo romanzo di Doris Lessing *The Grass is Singing* (1950). La natura è un elemento imprescindibile che incontra e sostiene la necessità dell'autrice di affrontare concomitanti questioni migratorie, etniche, sessuali e di genere nonché, contestualmente, di richiamare a una presa di consapevolezza ambientale e politica. Oltre allo sfruttamento delle risorse naturali, i rapporti fra uomo e natura nel romanzo generano casi di crudeltà verso gli animali ed ecoansia. L'articolo analizza, inoltre, limiti e potenzialità dell'approccio ecofemminista in riferimento alla protagonista e ad altre categorie emarginate.

Abstract II: The article reads Doris Lessing's debut novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950) through an ecocritical lens. Nature is a fundamental feature of the book, serving Lessing's agenda to address interconnected issues of migration, race, gender, and sexuality while raising environmental and political awareness. Besides the exploitation of natural resources, human-nature relationships lead to instances of animal cruelty and eco-anxiety. The article further discusses the limits and potentialities of the ecofeminist approach in the case of the female protagonist and other marginalised categories.

Keywords: Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Race, Gender, Ecophobia.

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is an empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one
(T. S. Eliot 1998: 41, vv. 385-390).

The article integrates ecocriticism, gender studies, and postcolonial studies to foreground the interconnectedness of themes such as environmental degradation, gender discrepancy, and racial issues in the novel. Drawing on ecocriticism, the article explores ecological violence and land use in Southern Rhodesia, as well as the legacy of colonial agriculture in terms of bankruptcy and farming failure. The interplay of gender and postcolonial ap-

proaches articulates how, by operating through gender norms, environmental policies position Indigenous and European women as victims and forced co-creators of oppressive human, domestic and social conditions in colonial contexts. An intercategorical theoretical framework is thus required to comprehend the complex, interlocking systems of oppression (and resistance) that Doris Lessing outlines in her first, controversial novel.

In 2008, when interviewed by the BBC on the influence of Africa on Nobel laureate Doris Lessing, Julian Mitchell introduced her as a rather underestimated nature writer[1] who wonderfully captured the dangerous beauty of the African continent, something that might escape those who deem her mainly political. But a largely extended oeuvre of a prolific writer like Lessing cannot be compartmentalised; her vivid memories of her Rhodesian upbringing inform every page set in the hot, dry veld. "Do you sort of get nostalgic still for Africa?" – asks her presenter Alan Yentob for the same TV special. "I get nostalgic for the bush. Most of that is gone anyway. What I was brought up with is gone completely"[2]. Despite this harsh reality, what is left of the land she grew up in lives on in her short stories and novels. From the first post-war period to our contemporary age, Lessing's literary and autobiographical activity is a precious testament to the racial divide and the environmental changes afflicting South Africa.

Born in Kermanshah into a family of British settlers, at the age of five she moved with her parents to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where she grew up on a failing farm. Her father was a war amputee with farming ambitions; her mother was a nurse with whom she had a rocky relationship. The African woodlands, her childhood playground, served as a backdrop to her life's vicissitudes and her literary imagination. Her experience influenced her brilliant storytelling in works such as *The Grass is Singing*, the later *Children of Violence* series, and *The Golden Notebook*. Before moving to England for good as a single woman, Lessing walked out on her former husband and children to join the Left Book Club and begin her writing career. A second failed marriage to the radical activist Gottfried Lessing was the last chapter of a colonial life she found intolerable. Her geographical relocations and political commitment significantly shaped her identity, and her first novel, published in London, was a product of such cross-cultural influences.

The Grass is Singing is a story of inadequacy, failure, and meltdown. Mary and Dick Turner lead a life of hardship and austerity on unprofitable land in Southern Rhodesia, both struggling to live up to the expectations of the affluent white community that seems to prosper all around them. The initial portrayal of the female protagonist as a single and cheerful woman content with her urban lifestyle is gradually clouded by the social and gendered coercion inflicted on her by patriarchal structures. Notwithstanding her own explicit ambivalence towards matters of sex and relationships[3], she seeks a husband in an attempt to comply with social customs. Her conformist response to the social environment leads her to relinquish her self-sufficiency and conform to the wider, constraining colonial context.

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[1] BBC (2008). Doris Lessing, the Reluctant Heroine.

[2] BBC (2008).

[3] The author frequently alludes to the character's sexophobia in the text (Cf. Lessing 2007: 37-39), sustaining her original intention to depict a "woman who loathed the bush and the natives and hated all natural processes, hated sex, liked to be neat and clean" (Lessing 1998: 14).

If she feels safe inside city clubs and tall buildings made of reassuring concrete, unable to acclimate to the veld, her husband belongs there. He acts as an experimental farmer, seeking sustainable and non-hazardous solutions to benefit from his piece of land without damaging it. Despite his perseverance, he harvests nothing but disappointment and defeat, which gradually worsens the protagonist's progressive neurosis. Stemming primarily from the frustrating experience of adjusting to the prevailing standard, her debility reflects the wrenching conditions of European women within colonial systems and the underlying expectations placed upon them both as 'conniving' promoters of imperial ideology and active participants in the domestic and public spheres.

Mary is not even entitled to recuperation, as on the eve of her departure for an unspecified seaside resort, she is murdered by her black houseboy on the front verandah of her decaying homestead. A newspaper clipping reporting her assassination in the opening is a double red herring; this is not a detective novel, and the case is soon dismissed as what a community of uninformed white farmers would expect, namely a native breaking into a house in search of valuables. The circular structure of the novel is rather a means to convey a sense of inescapability from impending doom, sustained by the prescience the woman develops that her death is approaching.

Lessing wades into the psychological implications of colour prejudice and environmental conflict through Mary's contempt for the natives and the African bush: "Her mind was filled with green, wet branches, thick wet grass, and thrusting bushes" (Lessing 2007: 196). Natives are hypersexualised in her eyes: both women with their saggy, naked breasts and men with their bulging muscles and pungent odour. The bush and the bushmen are crucial to essentialising white prejudice, while the sexual tension-repulsion between Mary and her houseboy Moses subtly exposes white hypocrisy in a book that was originally intended to be a lengthy satire[4]. Not only does their relationship disrupt a racialised and gendered code of behaviour; Mary's unsuitability for defending Western, male-coded restrictions determines her psychophysical decline, followed by a fear of social judgement and her struggle with the climate, which notoriously "gave rise to a specific set of psychotic disorders" (Stoler 1989: 646) in colonial areas.

Instances of ecophobia permeate the novel, as the protagonist loathes the harsh South African landscape and its sweltering temperatures. The revulsion Mary feels when being around natives is symptomatic of a more generalised fear of the African nature, reflecting the view that "the role and function of ecophobia works in similar ways to homophobia, racism, and sexism" (Estok 2018: 55). Moreover, her self-entrapment within the house and her refusal to venture into the bush and the vlei and kopjes beyond it echo colonial tenets of racial distance[5], when in the colonies enforcing and "guarding the social boundaries often fell to women, as it did in Britain" (Strobel 1991: 9).

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[4] Lessing declared the original manuscript was two-thirds longer than it is. BBC. 2018. https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p06fc4nh, 00:16:37 (consulted on 01/09/2025). She addresses the theme of interracial encounters in *Martha Quest* and *The Grass is Singing* through Tony Marston's reflections on "the sexual aspect of the colour bar" (Lessing 2007: 186).

[5] Chapter nine is pivotal in this regard. As Moses watches over Dick, who is delirious with fever, the sound of his breathing through the thin mud wall and his physical proximity upset Mary.

In this regard it is quite telling that the murder site is on a verandah, which is the part of the house most exposed to interracial proximity; concurrently, a looming green threat is introduced as the narrative unfolds: the bush in fact "should be cut back for another hundred yards about the house" (Lessing 2007: 107) because it is infested with bugs, while Mary visualises it slowly "conquering the farm, sending its outriders to cover the good red soil with plants and grass" (198). Visions of swarms of beetles, rats, and floods ensue, resembling plagues inflicted upon this corner of defiled earth[6]. There exists a quasi-apocalyptic possibility that nature will reclaim everything once the settlers give up on their ambitions and once capitalised agriculture fails. The Turners' house is situated among the bush and will eventually fall to pieces, like the Ushers'. Industrial failure signals nature's triumph, and as soon as Dick sells his car to contain his financial struggles, the grass regrows over the roads.

Mary perceives nature as literally plotting against her ("the bush knew she was going to die!" Lessing 2007: 198), while the source of her demise is almost transcendental. The native Moses and the surrounding landscape are inseparable; he is a metonymical part of the bush. She envisions him hiding in the dark, blending in with the African night, and waiting among the trees. All the while, an old resentment, an 'ancient grudge,' underlies the text. The blazing, angry sun with its thick, cruel rays and the hostile bush tell a story of mutual hatred, which is sublimated in two distinct stances: Mary hates the sun, and the trees hate her. She snags her clothes on the thrusting bushes as she walks through them, ripping civilisation to shreds. The cicadas, chirping incessantly and giving her headaches, add to the narrative's extreme sensoriality but worsen the protagonist's feverish fatigue. Her inability to live in communion with nature prevents her from distinguishing sound from noise, hence from enjoying the grass singing:

> Such little beetles to make such an intolerable noise! And she had never seen one before. She realized, suddenly, standing there, that all those years she had lived in that house, with the acres of bush all around her, and she had never penetrated into the trees, had never gone off the paths. And for all those years she had listened wearily, through the hot dry months, with her nerves prickling, to that terrible shrilling, and had never seen the beetles who made it (Lessing 2007: 197).

Eliot's *What The Thunder Said* anticipates the protagonist's thoughts, representing the dryness and sterility that connote what will become of her existence in nature as well as the nature of her existence: "If there were the sound of water only / Not the cicada / And dry grass singing / But sound of water over a rock […] But there is no water"[7] (Eliot 1998: 40, vv. 353-6; 359).

Bill Schwartz coined an ethics of "principled unknowability" (Schwartz 2016: 130) in

[6] Some characters' names (Solomon, Moses, Mary, Jonah) suggest a biblical interpretation.

[7] Water scarcity, supply, and waste are recurring themes, and so is the excruciating wait for the rainy seasons. Water is also the element that informs Mary and Moses's interactions. If she turns against him when he stops working to take a small sip, the native shows her indulgence and fetches her a glass when she is sick. Again, Moses taking a bath outdoors creates a sense of anticipation and erotic tension.

which the unconscious informs the entire novel. The dark bush and, by implication, Moses's skin are manifestations of a Conradian *Unheimlich*, shaping the fanatical cult of colonialism, haunting white culture, and fuelling racial hysteria. Such is the legacy of centuries of subjugating colonial history in the country that has stigmatised Indigenous people as remote and alien, as well as dark and threatening[8]. "The bush," writes Lessing,

> is full of secrets. No one can live in Africa, or at least on the veld, without learning very soon that there is an ancient wisdom of leaf and soil and season – and, too, perhaps most important of all, of the darker tracts of the human mind – which is the black man's heritage[9] (Lessing 2007: 70).

Mary's repulsion for nature is an extension of her fear of childbirth, breastfeeding, and sexual acts. She has nightmarish visions and memories of her abusive father, of the "unwashed masculine smell she always associated with him"[10] (163), the same smell Moses gives off that she cannot bear. Inside and outside the house, exotic smells stir in the air. The uncanny is also expressed through Mary's unfamiliarity with those black natives she abhors and abuses. Her impatience soon "grows into intolerance [while] her initial annoyed indifference turns to hatred" (Roberts 2003: 131); this stems from her lack of knowledge of Indigenous customs as well as from her being unempathetic and unable to read any signs of emotions on *kaffirs*' faces, as they are often seen as laconic, inexpressive, and unresponsive[11]. This principle of impersonality is consistent throughout the novel, exemplifying even "the unspoken, devious codes of behaviour of the whites" (Lessing 1998: 7), a set of "certain unwritten rules" (Lessing 2007: 65) imposed in *kaffir/baas* relationships, which Mary is expected to observe and live by.

Overall, as Charlie Slatter claims, natives "don't understand women giving them orders", (23) and white women do not know how to treat them. Thus, the sjambok that Mary lifts against Moses in the crop field can be read as a phallic surrogate, representing white male domination over a feminised (sometimes infantilised) minority of labourers, and particularly "the super-sadomasochism of […] white supremacist patriarchal colonialism" (Rabaka 2010: 248). In this case, the appropriation of "a phallic-shaped weapon, picked up in the bush" (Clayton 1989: 154) is an expression of reallocation of agency and responsibility. The portrayal of Dick as a vulnerable individual who is also generally more tolerant toward Indigenous people than his wife implies that the latter is assigned the role of reaffirming white supremacy during his absence. On the one hand, this subversion of gender roles expands on the protagonist's resentment towards her father and her emotional rigidity; on the other hand, it recapitulates the complex set of conjugal duties and colonial diktats involving European women as settlers. As such, the whip in Mary's hands becomes a symbol of her rejection of patriarchal control expressed in terms of appropriation.

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[8] See Maylam (2001).

[9] From "No Magic for Sale" (Lessing 2014).

[10] Lessing recalls the unwashed smell of her own father in her first autobiography. Cf. Lessing (1994).

[11] The natives' emotional numbness is a recurring element in Lessing, from *Martha Quest* to *A Proper Marriage* and *African Stories*.

Even Slatter[12] believes in "farming with the sjambok", convinced that "one should buy a sjambok before a plough or a harrow" (Lessing 2007: 14). This condenses the phallocentric and coercive protocol of colonial agriculture in general and the character's ideas on farming in particular. His keeping a sjambok on his front door is a statement of intent: this is how he conceives of farmwork and exerts control over nature and the natives. The fact that he and Mary are the only characters who brandish the whip reflects their shared tendency to antagonise nature, thus perpetrating an "act of geographical violence" (Said 2021: 299).

On the other hand, Dick is a biophilic character who forms a passionate, poignant attachment to his land. Unlike Slatter, who primarily uses his arable land to cultivate tobacco (thus causing environmental degradation), he tries to rehabilitate his property from previous damage caused by a mining company that "had cut out every tree on the place, leaving nothing but coarse scrub and wastes of grass" (Lessing 2007: 86). His insistence on growing crops and planting short, stunted gum trees creates further contention between him and his wife, who gradually refrains from interfering with his work and looks up to Slatter and his methods. Lessing provides the most reliable testimony to contemporary land exploitation in Southern Rhodesia, as Slatter's "inattention to his farm's health […] shows the impact of unchecked capitalism on environmental sustainability" (Iheka 2018: 670).

Dick knows every tree; he knows the veld "as the natives know it" (Lessing 2007: 125) and holds old-fashioned, rudimentary (though ethical) views on farming. All his attempts to conform and experiment with modern techniques fail due to the African soil's lack of predisposition; his study of a pamphlet on bees, which turns into an obsession, reflects his poor business skills, as it was written for English conditions and African bees do not like hives "made after an English pattern" (87). At least up to the second half of the 19th century, beekeeping had little status in South Africa and did not become a fundamental practice even later. Dick's virtuous, yet unconventional farming "marks him out as one who does not conform to the tenets of white domination and is therefore a weak link in the chain of white hegemony over the blacks" (Mutewka & Musanga 2013: 248). As it turns out, the only way to get the most out of the African land is by exploiting it and its inhabitants. Consequently, settlers "either rape the land or are ruined by it. No harmonious relationship between whites and veld seems possible under colonialism" (Sprague 1987: 30). Dick's cultivation practices transgress the 'Western canon' and almost resemble those of the natives: disorderly, scattered, and makeshift. His failure is inevitable, and his land becomes Slatter's object of interest as he has destroyed acres of grazing and needs extra pasture for his cattle.

Nevertheless, Dick's "treatment of animals in the novel […] raises doubts about his ecological proclivity" (Iheka 2018: 667), making him an ecoambiguous character. Each misstep he takes results in the jeopardization of various species. The pigs he buys from Slatter die from the heat, followed by chickens, turkeys, and rabbits. Although the commodification of animals is a key aspect of the colonial enterprise, a focus on the question is imperative. The novel does not explicitly champion such a perspective, but animal treatment gains depth if ascribed to an ecofeminist view of Mary's existence on the farm. The fenced areas

[12] The character is based on a real acquaintance of Lessing's. He also appears in "Getting Off the Altitude" from the American edition of *African Stories* (1965).

and the cages Dick builds prove inadequate for the animals he keeps, failing to shield them from the harshness of the environment. Mary herself is a caged animal and shows signs of oikophobia[13]. She lives inside a stifling, mud-walled house[14] with no thatched roof, exhausted, debilitated by a lack of fresh air, and in thrall to a system of white, capitalistic interests. Symbolically, "the money spent on the store, the turkey-runs, the pigstyes, the beehives, would have put ceilings into the house, would have taken the terror out of the thought of the approaching hot season" (Lessing 2007: 93). In this regard, the treatment of Dick's two starved mongrels is worth considering. After the killing, as Mary lies dead on the verandah, the dogs crouch at Moses's feet, growling but wagging their tails as "this man had fed them and looked after them; Mary had disliked them" (205). The fact that he can easily tame them proves again the author's will to overturn colonial stereotypes, considering the phenomenon of "racialization of dogs during the colonial period" (Doble 2020: 70). Hounds were trained to accompany their white owners, while American colonial history is rife with cases of agitated dogs attacking black individuals. Mary's dread of such animals shows in how she treats them, paralleling her interactions with black day labourers[15].

In a state of delusion, Mary forgets to fill the chickens' drinking troughs causing them to die. As always, human actions and conditions affect the environment and viceversa; the unattended animals are a victimised part of a chain of regression that imperils the Turners' respectability and livelihood. In her first autobiography, Lessing recalls overseeing an incubator of eggs during a hatch in the Highveld winter. She writes: "I brooded over those eggs as if the future depended on seventy-two chicks […] which would be my private and personal drama" (Lessing 1994: 196-197).

Besides, the introduction of an unmotherly and, when it comes to black women, misogynistic[16] character such as Mary raises critical questions about the potential for an ecofeminist interpretation of the novel. The author has publicly declared herself a lapsed communist but has never embraced her feminist identity[17]. *The Golden Notebook*, her most acclaimed, controversial, and influential work, is still treated as feminist literature despite her claims. Likewise, she firmly denied any feminist approach or intent in *The Grass is Singing*. It is safe to say that the book presents a series of issues that current critical frameworks further problematise. In this regard, the publishing history of the novel proves enlightening: the Alfred Knopf Inc. initially proposed some changes to the submitted manuscript, suggesting "Moses must rape the unfulfilled and half-willing Mary, and then murder her out of a mixture of disgust and fear"[18] as it would be "in accordance with the mores of the country" (Lessing 1998: 7).

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[13] Paradoxically, Dick finds the town claustrophobic in chapter two.

[14] Cf. *The Waste Land*: "But red sullen faces sneer and snarl / From doors of mudcracked houses" (Eliot 1998: 40, vv. 44-5).

[15] "A white person may look at a native, who is no better than a dog" (Lessing 2007: 143).

[16] "If she disliked native men, she loathed the women. […] Above all, she hated the way they suckled their babies […] they were alien and primitive creatures with ugly desires she could not bear to think about" (Lessing 2007: 94-95).

[17] "I have nothing in common with feminists. They never seem to think that one might enjoy men", Barbara Ellen for *The Guardian* (2001).

[18] Mrs Robert Shaplen to Naomi Burton at Curtis Brown, Ltd. (January 3, 1950). Ransom Center Magazine (2015).

Lessing was indignant and determined to expunge such ideological pretensions from her book, as its centre was the unthinkable and deliberately ambiguous bond between Mary and her houseboy, which represents an attempt at self-determination *per se*. Mary consents to marry Dick, albeit under social pressure. Her only attempt to escape the farm and return to her city life in a bid to reclaim her independence fails miserably, leading her to opt for reconciliation with her husband. Her situation eludes the defining ecofeminist "links between the domination of women and the domination of the environment" (Bell & Ashwood 2015: 213). At the same time, she refuses to be "relegated to the realm of nature and its reproductive requirements" (213). The ecofeminist discourse safely applies to background black female characters from the compound who are simultaneously subjected to gendered racial discrimination, the colonial system, and their husbands who "keep their own women in the right place" (Lessing 2007: 23). These women, all mothers, coexist in tenuous harmony with nature (as impoverished as they are) and are visually and culturally associated with it, "making a bright-coloured group against the green trees and grass" (95). Lessing seems to be hinting at "African cosmology [where] female fecundity and productivity, as well as participation in sustaining livelihoods are celebrated, making them co-players in issues of survival and eco-preservation" (Magosvongwe 2017: 269).

Mary's apprehension regarding the alternation of wet and dry seasons (and, by extension, of women's cyclicality)[19] is beyond her husband's understanding. The slow movement of the seasons gradually becomes Dick's only means of tracking time as he endures the challenges posed by droughts, rainfalls, and floods. Dick-'Jonah' strives to find sustainable solutions to atone for anthropocentric/anthropogenic policies and prevent the depletion of natural resources. Meanwhile, his disenchanted wife turns green leaves into cheques with her twisted imagination. Dick's cultural background affects his ambiguous stance on issues of land monetisation and liberalism; he cultivates a rare, emotional attachment to his 'ungrateful' soil until, bankrupt, childless and widowered, he is seen wandering frenziedly "in and out of the bush with his hands full of leaves and earth" (Lessing 2007: 12).

Notwithstanding, the Turners remain complicit in the apartheid system, supporting it even though they are looked at with suspicion by the community of settlers. Because the whole society is racialised, they risk falling into the category of poor whites who are "Afrikaners, never British" (11). A code of silence among the whites persuades Slatter to do his bidding on the abject farm and help the Turners out regardless of his interests; he perceives their failure as the failure of the collective, which the natives should never witness. In line with a Foucauldian understanding of power/knowledge whereby the former generates the latter, the blacks are compelled to live in ignorance; power and knowledge are inseparable, as they "directly imply one another" (Foucault 1977: 27). Tony Marston, the Englishman who comes to the country in search of opportunities, carries with him a suitcase filled with books on the mining economy, Rhodes and Kruger, which will end up symbolically eaten up by white ants. Lessing seems to suggest that Western cultural heritage and colonial history are involved in a process of autophagy and exclusion; as such, they are made inaccessible to Indigenous people. Inevitably,

[19] "Her [Mary's] problem was, she just couldn't stand any natural process", BBC (2018).

> Like most South Africans, Dick did not like mission boys, they 'knew too much'. And in any case they should not be taught to read and write: they should be taught the dignity of labour and general usefulness to the white man (Lessing 2007: 155).

Being a mission boy himself, Moses is unlike the house servants who came before him; he is vocal about his expectations and thoughts and speaks gibberish-sounding English to Mary, which irritates her. According to what seems to be a retaliation principle, the catatonic woman almost loses her ability to communicate towards the end.

In the novel, Lessing reconfigures a series of doctrinal constructs, thereby challenging established racial, social, and gender codes and reshuffling formal ideologies. The overturning (or, rather, transgression) of interrelated standards thus highlights the complexities of a subversive narrative that interrogates traditional assumptions by dismantling them. For instance, the colonial simulacrum of the black man as a savage, sexually promiscuous, irrational being is provocatively subverted; if Mary flogs Moses in a split-second reaction, not knowing what she is doing, the native's acts show premeditation. He hides in the *kaffir* store and later in the bush. Then, he spends a whole day patiently "polishing and sharpening" (Lessing 2007: 205) his murder weapon, carrying out his deed in cold blood. Likewise, "we see a transformation in [Mary's] personality, from repulsive to voyeuristic" (Goswami 2011: 42) as she finds herself guiltily contemplating the native's body when he is not looking. The unvoiced sensual tension between the two revisits the Hegelian dialectic of master and bondsman, where the former has no choice but to rely on the latter. Mary, whose illness causes her to depend emotionally on Moses and even consent to physical contact, is ventriloquised by him. Like a doll in front of a mirror, she lets him dress and undress her, breaking a formal pattern and eliciting incredulity from the British outsider who stands by watching. In doing so, the woman fails in her sacred duty to "maintain the status of the family and preserve social boundaries between the Europeans and Indigenous peoples" (Strobel 1991: 13).

Husband and wife, whose "polar relationship to the land is another example of the fatal incompatibility between [them]" (Sprague 1987: 29), are involved in a further reversal of gender and authority. In the initial chapters, Mary wears trousers (looking nothing like a 'female' to Dick), and halfway through it she is seen victoriously wielding a sjambok. Her reluctance to start a family stands in stark contrast to her husband's desire for one. Moreover, up to a certain point, Mary tries to hold the reins of their marriage (as unfruitful as the land they fail to cultivate) by persuading Dick to reconsider his views on tobacco, which he deems "an inhuman crop" (Lessing 2007: 81). Despite their differing attitudes, the enraged veld rebels against them both with cataclysmic consequences: "And then the bush avenged itself: that was her last thought. The trees advanced in a rush, like beasts, and the thunder was the noise of their coming" (205).

Having witnessed the history of environmental and colonial violence surrounding South Africa, the author discusses ecological ethics with a keen awareness, affirming its significance within a broader colonial and gendered discourse. It is no surprise that Martha Quest, a character Lessing created in her image and likeness, reads Whitman and Thoreau while growing up in a colonial landscape shaped by human intervention. Like her passionate and progressive heroine, Lessing spent her youth driving through the Rhodesian fields,

educating herself in Marxism, and making a significant social contribution. To a certain degree, Mary Turner is herself a refractory character who, as her name suggests[20], overthrows a male-coded system and defies stigmatisation most unconventionally. A colonial anti-heroine in true definition, she fails in her responsibility to embody white settler ideals by undermining gendered expectations and by tragically exposing the false premises of colonial idolatry. Overall, she is "alone, and lonely – as so many farmers' wives were" (Lessing 1994: 130). Similarly, Dick epitomises the unsustainability of colonial farming, whilst his personal and social predicaments reflect the historical truth that "only a minority of the white farmers were successful; most failed" (Lessing 1998: 14).

In 1956, once *The Grass is Singing* had proven successful enough in spreading progressive ideas, Lessing was declared a prohibited alien by the governments of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia due to her anti-supremacist activism and outspokenness against the apartheid system. For her, it was "*emotionally* impossible […] to be excluded from the land [she] had been brought up in" (Lessing 1998: 197), from the land where the grass was singing a historical reality that institutions and federations were neglecting. Today, the bush she was so nostalgic for is still threatened by high rates of deforestation and woodland degradation.

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[20] Cf. Jiménez (2020: 168).

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