

Representing the “Unknowable” Other: Ethics and Resistance in *The Grass Is Singing*

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Abstract: In Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing*, the narrator grants sustained access to Mary Turner’s psychological world while persistently withholding the inner life of Moses, her Black servant. Rather than a mere limitation of characterization, this asymmetry functions as a formal site through which the novel registers the epistemic violence of settler colonialism and the exclusion of Black subjectivity from authorized forms of knowledge. Lessing’s refusal to “speak for” Moses transforms his opacity into resistance to the colonial gaze, unsettling the assumption that the racialized Other must be made fully intelligible. At the novel’s end, Moses’s symbolic association with the African bush extends this opacity beyond individual psychology, exposing the limits of colonial systems of knowledge, possession, and interpretation. The novel therefore advances a postcolonial ethics of representation, in which opacity is a formal limit that resists totalizing colonial intelligibility.

Keywords: *The Grass Is Singing*, postcolonial ethics, epistemic violence, narrative opacity, representation of the Other

1. Introduction

Within the broader terrain of twentieth-century postcolonial literature, Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) occupies a persistent yet contested position. Early criticism of the novel primarily focused on the psychic distortions produced by colonial structures, particularly Mary Turner’s psychological disintegration within the repressive environment of a settler farm in Southern Rhodesia [1]. With increasing critical attention informed by postcolonial approaches, Moses, the Black house servant long relegated to the margins of narrative attention, has increasingly become a focal point of analysis, re-situated within debates on the representation of the colonial “Other”. Critics have either emphasized the anticolonial and symbolic force of his presence [2] [3] or questioned whether the novel’s white narrative frame reduces him to an object of colonial fantasy [4] [5]. Schwarz, by contrast, identifies a “principled unknowability” that complicates this opposition [6]. These debates converge on a central problem in the novel’s narrative form: Moses becomes increasingly important to the structure of meaning, yet his inner life remains persistently withheld. The novel’s refusal to enter Moses’s consciousness raises a different question: does his opacity mark a technical limitation, or a resistance to the epistemic authority through which white narration would otherwise define Black subjectivity?

Spivak argues that Western intellectual discourse often disavows its own implication in power while claiming the authority to represent the subaltern, producing a misleading sense of representational “transparency” [7]. Since the subaltern is structurally excluded from legible speech, any attempt to represent this subject transparently risks repeating the violence it seeks to undo. Moses occupies precisely such a colonial structure: as a Black laborer in Southern Rhodesia’s settler economy, his interiority is mediated through white perceptual and discursive frameworks. Lessing’s refusal to grant access to his consciousness therefore stages an ethics of narrative restraint. Moses remains irreducible to colonial intelligibility, and this refusal of full legibility unsettles the colonial gaze while preserving Black subjectivity as an inassimilable site of alterity.

2. Epistemic Violence and the Making of “Unknowability”

Doris Lessing is widely recognized for the precision and psychological density of her narrative technique. *The Grass Is Singing* unfolds primarily through the interior disintegration of Mary Turner, whose psychic deterioration is shaped by the intersecting pressures of settler colonial order, social coercion, and repressed desire. Against this sustained focus on interiority, however, the novel maintains a persistent narrative refusal: it never fully enters the consciousness of Moses, the Black house servant.

Although Lessing constructs Moses with considerable external detail—through gesture, speech patterns, and bodily comportment, at times even registering traces of dignity, rationality, and resistance—the narrative systematically withholds access to his mental life and interior motivations. He is repeatedly described as “expressionless” and “indifferent,” or as “impassive” and “blank,” a figure of silence whose legibility is continually deferred [8].

For the reader, Moses's consciousness remains structurally out of reach, suspended in a distance that produces persistent interpretive unease, as though he were reduced to "all body, no mind, always object, never subject" [4]. Some critics therefore argue that Lessing is caught in an unresolved tension: either to "white him out" [9], making Moses fully available to white readers, or to leave him as a blank cipher without interiority. This tension points to the limits of narrative access to Black interiority and to the assumptions behind the demand for transparent representation. It also raises a further question: is Moses's "unknowability" simply a weakness in characterization, or is it part of the very condition under which he can be represented?

Seen in relation to the novel's social and historical world, Moses's position as a subjugated subject suggests an experience that cannot be fully entered from within the outlook of white settler society. This inaccessibility is not accidental; it is produced by the racial order the novel depicts. By sustaining white focalization, the narrative shows how settler colonialism claims knowledge of indigenous Black subjects while also distorting and containing them. Moses thus appears as a racialized figure shaped through the colonial gaze, registering both the racial discrimination and the perceptual limits of white settler society in Southern Rhodesia.

Lessing's early African fiction is known for its realist attention to colonial African society, and *The Grass Is Singing* follows this impulse in its portrayal of the racial, economic, and psychological pressures of Southern Rhodesia. Moses's unknowability should therefore be understood within that social world. The narrative's restriction to white perception shows how colonial relations narrow the possibility of mutual understanding from the outset. His inner life cannot be reached through an easy act of sympathy, since the historical world of the novel has already placed strict limits on what white characters can know, imagine, or acknowledge.

Moses's unknowability is also shaped by his double marginality. He is seen through the colonial gaze as a racial Other, while also occupying the position of the subaltern, cut off from the political, economic, and discursive conditions that would allow his speech to be recognized. He is therefore both a racialized figure within colonial representation and a subaltern subject within colonial political economy. His interiority remains inaccessible because the conditions under which it could be heard or understood have been denied.

Within settler discourse, Moses is further marked by an aura of latent threat, a perception that reflects the deep anxiety surrounding the so-called "Black Peril." In order to sustain the ideological fiction of white supremacy, colonial society repeatedly produces Black bodies through a vocabulary of danger, sexual threat, and primitive excess. The "Black Peril," however, is not so much a description of a phenomenon as "fear of sexual crime" [10] regarding interracial proximity and sexual contact. It is within this framework that Charlie Slatter encounters Moses, whose imposing, powerful Black physique appears inherently threatening to white characters [8].

Black people are subjected to a process of dehumanization within white perception. When Mary observes Black laborers working under the sun, she perceives not human presence but "a hot, sour animal smell" [8]. Colonial domination here operates through what Fanon characterizes as "a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity" [11]. Lessing thus exposes the epistemic violence embedded in colonial perception, which is "the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity" [12]. As the narrative progresses, Mary's surveillance moves between fear and fascination, recalling Hall's account of the colonial gaze as a double movement of attraction and repulsion rather than a stable form of mastery [13].

Moses is also placed within a structure that keeps him largely silent. From the opening pages, the narrative gives him little biographical depth and first presents him as a decontextualized laboring figure. When Mary observes Black workers carrying sacks of maize in disciplined formation, she describes them as "a human conveyor belt" [8]. The metaphor reveals the colonial logic of abstraction: under conditions of severe labor alienation, the Black worker's body is treated as an instrument of labor, deprived of history, voice, and subjectivity.

In the novel's closing section, Moses's killing of Mary is quickly taken over by colonial explanation. Charlie Slatter immediately describes the murder as robbery, reducing the violence to a familiar racial script and obscuring the domination that has shaped it. The white settler community receives the news with grim confirmation, as if the murder merely proves what it already believes: "when natives steal, murder or rape, that is the feeling white people have" [8]. Moses's act is thus folded into the language of colonial law and racial common sense, leaving him without interpretive openness or any meaningful juridical voice.

Therefore, Moses's "unknowability" is a structural effect of realist representation itself. By refusing access to his interior consciousness, Lessing does not merely reproduce colonial epistemic limits but renders them visible as limits. Moses remains simultaneously the object of white colonial gaze and the subaltern subject of systemic oppression, suspended within a double marginality that forecloses his entry into legitimate discourse. It is precisely this structural positioning that renders

his interiority persistently inaccessible. To the settler gaze, he must remain, by necessity, unknowable.

3. Ethical Consciousness and the Narrative Agency of “Unknowability”

In literary practice, the authority to speak for the Other invariably carries the risk of appropriating or exploiting the experiential reality of marginalized subjects. Toni Morrison has famously observed that the construction of Black characters in American literature is inherently reflexive, functioning as “a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” [14]. Black figures in the white literary imagination act as narrative screens for projecting and negotiating deep-seated colonial anxieties.

Against this backdrop, Doris Lessing’s position as a white writer marked by sustained ethical self-scrutiny becomes particularly significant. Born and raised within the settler community of Southern Rhodesia, she nonetheless recognizes herself as belonging to the white minority historically set against a Black population long “abominably treated” [15]. By withholding Moses’s interiority, the narrative marks a form of ethical restraint: full access to the Black subject’s inner life would risk repeating the colonial desire to know, possess, and define the Other.

Lessing admits that Moses appears schematic because this was “the only way” [15] she could approach him at the time. She also suggests that giving him fuller psychological depth would have disturbed the novel’s balance, making some degree of unknowability “right” [15]. What first appears as a weakness in characterization can then be understood as a form of narrative restraint, one that keeps the Black subject’s inner life from being fully occupied by white ways of seeing and knowing.

Spivak’s distinction between the two senses of “representation” helps explain this narrative strategy [7]. *Vertretung*, or speaking for, differs from *Darstellung*, or cultural representation; when the two are conflated, colonial discourse can present its own act of speaking for the subaltern as if it were a neutral representation. For Spivak, the subaltern occupies a position in which speech is denied full recognition within dominant forms of knowledge. From this perspective, Lessing’s refusal to enter Moses’s consciousness marks a deliberate limit to narrative authority. The text withholds full psychological access and preserves Moses’s opacity as a form of resistance to appropriation.

Moses’s “unknowability” in *The Grass Is Singing* can be understood as a narrative opacity that challenges the colonial desire for complete knowledge of the Other. This recalls Glissant’s “right to opacity” [16]: Moses’s withheld interiority is best read as a refusal, rather than a deficiency, since it denies the colonial fantasy that the Other can be made fully transparent. What emerges is an ethics of alterity in which the Other is neither closed off by interpretation nor completed by the reader’s imagination, but allowed to remain irreducibly different.

The tension between silence and resistance is especially clear in Spivak’s reading of J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*, where Friday is described as “the unemphatic agent of withholding” [12]. Friday’s drawings on the slate, including eyes growing on feet, remain unavailable to Susan’s interpretation; when she asks him to hand over the slate, he responds through silence and erasure. His refusal to give up meaning turns silence into a resistance to colonial interpretation. By withholding readable signs, Friday prevents his body and experience from being translated into the categories that seek to contain them. Silence here becomes a form of agency, grounded in the refusal to provide information. Moses’s unknowability in *The Grass Is Singing* operates in a similar register: his silence and withheld interiority mark the limits of a colonial discourse that seeks to make the Black subject fully legible.

Moses’s inner life, kept beyond narrative access, also unsettles the colonial gaze at the point where it seeks control. Before both Slatter and Mary, his unreadability disturbs white perception: his expressionless face provokes fear in Slatter, while his “obsequious surface” conceals an “invulnerable hinterland” [8] from Mary. Looking at Moses yields no stable knowledge; it returns instead as anxiety, exposing the fragility of colonial command before heterogeneous forms of enunciation [17].

As the narrative progresses, Moses’s opacity begins to disturb the hierarchy between master and servant. Mary’s psychological collapse is increasingly shaped by her dependence on Moses and her fear of him, while his calm detachment in moments of confrontation intensifies her sense of diminished agency. Although Moses remains socially subordinate, he acquires a form of affective and psychological power that exceeds the formal structure of colonial authority. Mary’s authority erodes less through physical rebellion than through the gradual collapse of interpretive certainty.

Significantly, the novel never fixes Moses’s interiority into a stable meaning. His expression may suggest judgment, indifference, or latent hostility, but none of these readings is finally confirmed. This uncertainty produces one of the novel’s most important effects: unable to enter Moses’s inner life, Mary fills the gap with her own projections. Fear, desire, and dependence gather around his silence, gradually weakening her authority as the dominant subject. What first appears as an absence in representation becomes a force within the narrative, altering the relations of perception and unsettling colonial subjectivity from within.

The collapse of this assumed transparency also unsettles the colonizer's own position, since Mary's authority depends on the belief that Moses can be read and known. For the reader, the narrator's refusal to enter Moses's mind removes the comfort of detached observation and places us closer to Mary's uncertainty. In this way, the novel shows how the pleasure of omniscient reading can depend on a form of domination: the power to enter, explain, and possess another consciousness. By keeping Moses's inner life beyond narrative access, Lessing turns opacity into both an ethical limit and a critique of Western habits of knowledge.

4. Moses and Africa: "Unknowability" as a Symbolic Subversion

The elusive interiority of Moses can also be read through his deeper entanglement with the African continent itself. Within the novel, he is intermittently configured as a symbolic condensation of African land, primordial nature, and an existential force that lies outside the epistemic and administrative reach of colonial order. At the same time, the narrator persistently aligns Moses with the African landscape—its heat, its vegetation, its enveloping bush—so that he appears less as an isolated individual than as something indistinguishable from the continent itself. In this way, his "unknowability" exceeds the psychological opacity of a single subject; it expands into a colonial condition of perception in which Africa itself is rendered irreducible to mastery.

The convergence between Moses and the dark African bush reaches its most intensified articulation in Mary's final hallucinations. In the extremity of psychological collapse, her last thought is "the bush avenged itself" [8]. At the same time, Moses no longer appears as a discrete laboring subject but is absorbed into an assemblage of vegetal, atmospheric, and elemental forces. In the final chapter, the boundaries between body and landscape become blurred: darkness, rain, skin, and bush seem to belong to the same field of perception. Moses moves freely through the night, while Mary remains motionless inside the colonial house. This contrast shifts the balance of power between them. No longer confined to his earlier domestic role, Moses comes to occupy the center of the closing scene, appearing as a presence that the colonial household can no longer contain.

Some critics argue that Lessing's association of Moses with a primitive or savage African force risks repeating the essentialist assumptions that the novel otherwise challenges. Bertelsen, for instance, reads *The Grass Is Singing* alongside Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, drawing a parallel between Mary Turner's psychological collapse in the Rhodesian bush and Kurtz's descent into horror, and suggesting that Lessing remains tied to a colonial mode of representation [18]. Other scholars have likewise read Mary's death as marked by sacrificial overdetermination, functioning less as a sustained political rupture than as a release of white guilt [19]. Moses, despite moments of individuality and relational complexity, is also said to be drawn back into the colonial binary of the "native," unable to escape the fatalism imposed by the novel's racial structure [5].

Yet the political valence of representation cannot be reduced to the surface content of imagery; it must instead be located in the functional logic of those images within the narrative economy. What appears as essentialization in *The Grass Is Singing* is repeatedly destabilized through its structural positioning. The conflation of Moses with the bush is never authorized by an omniscient narrative voice but emerges through Mary's fractured perceptual field in the moment of psychic disintegration. What is staged here is not the affirmation of an essential African ontology but the disintegration of a settler framework that can no longer distinguish between subject, environment, and fear.

Besides, the novel immediately reintroduces Moses into a mode of ordinary corporeal ambiguity after the killing, thereby undoing the mythic condensation that Mary's perception momentarily constructs. He hesitates, drops and retrieves the knife, considers washing away traces of blood in the rain before changing his mind and waiting in stillness. These mundane gestures reintroduce contingency, hesitation, and moral indeterminacy into a figure momentarily elevated into symbolic excess. The narrative thus performs a double movement: it generates an essentializing image only to dismantle it through the reassertion of everyday human opacity, exposing the bush-like figure as a product of perceptual breakdown rather than ontological truth. Symbolic excess, therefore, is not the endpoint of the text but its critical instrument, turned against the epistemic certainties of colonial reading.

From the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism, the fusion between Moses and the African landscape further acquires a deeper structural resonance. In African cosmology, land is the dwelling place of ancestral presence rather than a commodity. Colonial dispossession thus entails ontological rupture. Therefore, colonial land dispossession involves more than economic appropriation since it produces an ontological rupture that severs the relational fabric through which subjectivity is formed. Moses's convergence with the bush at the novel's conclusion can thus be read as a literary reactivation of this indigenous epistemology. The resistance attributed to him becomes inseparable from the land itself, since within this cosmological framework the two have never been ontologically distinct.

Yet the narrative does not culminate in pure symbolic closure. In its final movement, Moses is once again withdrawn from the mythic register into an irreducible opacity. Returning slowly through the rain toward the bush, he appears to experience a paradoxical sense of satisfaction, though what mixture of regret, pity, and even pain lies behind that satisfaction is described as “impossible to say” [8]. The narrative once more suspends access to interiority, refusing to translate his actions into stable psychological or moral categories. Moses remains in place, awaiting the arrival of the colonial police, entering the juridical order without explanation, justification, or narrative self-legitimation. It is precisely in this refusal of articulation that his final presence is constituted: an existence that resists incorporation into interpretive closure, remaining irreducible to both colonial explanation and narrative containment.

5. Conclusion

Grounded in Spivak’s postcolonial critical framework, this study has examined the narrative function of Moses’s “unknowability” in *The Grass Is Singing* across three interrelated dimensions. Moses’s opacity should not be understood as an incomplete character construction; rather, it emerges as a structural manifestation of epistemic violence within colonial regimes of knowledge. Positioned simultaneously as both the Other and the Subaltern, Moses is systematically excluded from the sphere of legitimate articulation, and Lessing’s sustained reliance on a restricted white focalization becomes a critical reenactment of the very epistemological constraints it exposes. This narrative restraint signals an acute ethical hesitation toward the representational impulse to “speak for” the Other. Moses’s silence thus exceeds psychological interiority; it becomes the formal site at which colonial epistemology confronts its own limits.

In the novel’s ending, the convergence of Moses with the African bush, darkness, and wilderness extends this logic of unknowability from individual psychology to a broader symbolic register—one that can be read, through the lens of indigenous African ecological thought, as a critical reworking rather than a simple replication of colonial fantasies of “dark Africa.” After the killing, Moses’s composed, interpretively closed waiting becomes the formal locus of Lessing’s ethical restraint—preserving opacity rather than penetrating interiority. Lessing’s answer lies not in penetrating Moses’s interiority, but in exposing the mechanisms through which colonial power disciplines Black subjectivity while preserving, at the level of narrative form, its irreducible opacity. It is precisely within this ethical restraint that Moses’s silence and complexity are transformed into a form of resistance that exceeds representation.

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