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Deconstructing the Power Relations: A Study of *The Grass is Singing*

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Doris Lessing is a writer whose writings are full of surprises, contradictions, ambivalences and also deconstruction of dominant and repressive voices. Her works offer a strong resistance to patriarchy. The paper will highlight the issue of deconstruction of the power relations. The female protagonist (Mary) deconstructs the power relation with her male black servant by making a power shift from coloniser (Mary) to colonized (Moses) where one loses its authority while another gains and this shift of power, makes Lessing different from her other contemporary writers.

The novel, *The Grass is Singing* is Lessing's debut novel, published in 1950. The novel clearly reveals Lessing's disgust and disapproval of political as well as sexual prejudices and the different aspects of colonial culture, existing in the society of then times. It is an account of both historical and psychological events where repression and oppression are intermingled with each other. The novel begins with an article published in a daily newspaper confirming the news of the death of Mary Turner, a white woman. The article says that a white woman is murdered by her black servant (Moses) mainly for money. This sensational news acts as an omen for other white people of the society in South Africa. Immediately, the story moves to the past through flash back and gives the detailed description of its female protagonist's (Mary) life. Her overall personality is entirely dominated by her childhood experiences of poverty of her family and unhappy marriage of her parents. Although, she maintains a rigid gesture due to her sense of coloniser's pride but at the same time she considers herself as a suffering woman, that is something that she has inherited from her mother. However, her biggest flaw is her intense obsession with the people of black race.

Mary lives happily and independently as a single white woman in Rhodesia. She earns handsomely from her job and has a good friend circle for her support and entertainment. After sometime she decides to go for a marital alliance with a white farmer Dick Turner, only after overhearing a conversation between two women. Immediately, after her marriage she moves with him to his farm and leaves her job. Dick and Mary experience a number of hardships together, mainly because of poverty and incompatibility but in spite of all this they remain committed to their marriage. Dick prefers to remain childless because of his poverty, much against the wishes of Mary. No doubt, they continue to live together but both are absorbed and lonely in their private lives, mostly because of the sense of incompatibility that both of them experience for each other. The only thing that is interesting for Mary is the nature around. Mary, like other Rhodesian women, is a staunch believer of racism and believes in the supremacy of whites to blacks and therefore, former must be the masters. Both Dick and Mary show signs of inherent racism, but Dick is more humane than Mary. She not only considers herself as superior but also finds them even worse than animals. When she is at farm, in Dick's absence, she always treats her workers quite brutally. Dick and Mary continue to live together, but their relationship as well as condition is gradually deteriorating. Mary's all hopes are shattered due to the failure of their only hope, in the form of tobacco plantation. She once again experiences a kind of emptiness and ennui. With such a situation at home and in her psychological turmoil, she runs away from her house, leaving her husband

behind. Her escape from this hostile environment is mainly because; she wants to get back her individuality that she has lost due to her marital knot. Once again, she applies for the same job and successfully joins the office but her experiences there, make her realize that now she is a misfit and is made so by her poverty and hardships. Again she fails to connect herself. Thus, in all this process she goes through a phase of perpetual disintegration. But, after sometime, Dick is once again successful in winning her and brings her back to the place that she has consciously left, only to rediscover her lost ‘self’.

All of a sudden, Mary’s life undergoes an irresistible shift in the form of a native servant at home, namely Moses, who was once known to her as a labourer whom she had whipped in the farm. She experiences strange ambivalent or rather paradoxical feelings of both attraction and repulsion. Now her perpetual disintegration further matures into complete breakdown or neurosis. As she feels weaker, she finds herself more drawn towards Moses. He appears to her slowly and gradually as some kind of a refuge because of his strength and dominating behaviour which she always found missing in her husband. The novel finally ends with Mary’s death at the hands of Moses who does not run away from the scene but patiently waits for the arrival of the police, only to accept his punishment.

The Grass is Singing, is famous for its treatment of altering themes both of political and psychological. Other than this, human alienation, disintegration, fragmentation, feminine growth, marital discord, sense of boredom, are all core issues highlighted in the novel. The novel shows the psychological trauma of human beings especially Mary who is thrown to the limits of her ability, with absolutely no one to share her problems.

Doris Lessing is a writer whose writings are full of paradoxes and contradictions and the novel, *The Grass is Singing* is a proof of this fact. The two major characters Mary and Dick in the novel reveals a kind of dichotomy in their respective selves. Dick embodies a strange contradiction in him as there is a co-existence of a deep love of African land and a callous indifference towards its native inhabitants. He loves African landscape and farm and is not ready to leave his farm but is totally indifferent to his workers; however, he rarely treats them brutally and is a bit humane. On the other hand, Mary is almost obsessed with the concept of racial superiority and treats the natives on the farm quite ruthlessly, in Dick’s absence. She exhibits a split personality i.e. one ‘self’ is a conforming while the ‘other’ is completely rebellious, however both are actually a product of societal strictures. This attitude is seen in her ambivalent treatment of Moses. At first she is unable to deal with him, even his smell seems too nauseating for her but later she becomes totally dependent on him, both physically and emotionally and finally she rebels against the patriarchal standards of her society.

Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*, is a record of troubled relationships. Lessing instead of focussing on the turbulent psyche of natives has focussed her attention on the tortured psyche of her domineering white female protagonist. The deconstruction of the power relations is seen in the form of Mary-Moses relationship. As she took the charge of the farm, in her husband’s absence, different conflicting episodes took place between her and her workers. However, these native workers protest strongly against her atrocities. After this, she minimises any possible confrontation with them. They are merely savages or animals and she always tries to tame them. These native workers stop their work both due to her atrocities and probably they do not want to work under a female supervisor as it is something against their social conventions. But to Mary this sense of supervision gives her new confidence and satisfaction. It is a beautiful experience and proves beneficial to her domineering nature. It also enables her to be more close to the farm which then becomes real to her. Through all these activities she becomes more active and lively and also gets connected to the outer

world. However, she is not able to change anything because she does not stay in the similar condition for long and all her attempts prove futile. She alienates herself from the rest of the world and lives in complete solitude.

The arrival of a black servant (Moses) at home aggravates her problems. For her, everything seems complicated and adjustment becomes almost impossible. But interestingly, their relationship enters into a new phase gradually, where although she hates him yet she does not afford to lose or leave him. Now she becomes obsessed with him. For Mary he is, “a terrible dark fear. It is like a nightmare where one is powerless against horror. The touch of this black man’s hand on her shoulder filled her with nausea; she had never touched the flesh of a native” (Lessing 1950: 151). These lines clearly reveal this relationship as a kind of love-hate or ambivalent relationship. For Mary, Moses radiates a sexual power that she unconsciously seeks; but as a black man he must be controlled and tamed. The more intensely she realizes that she is losing power over him, the more she asserts power by making unreasonable demands on him. Mary feels an intense emotional ambivalence towards Moses and by this her psychic energy is progressively consumed. Her dreams further illuminate the ambivalent feelings that she has for Moses. All this results in the deterioration of her personality and then Mary begins to lapse into silence, in the middle of her sentences. Despite all this, her relationship with Moses shows a growing, though negative vitality. By this, Moses is attaining more power while Mary is slowly becoming fully dependent on him. One possible reason of her surrender is that he appears to her powerful, protective and dominating which she always wants in her husband. Lessing calls this attitude of Mary in the novel as, “resignation of authority” (Lessing 1950: 154). Now Moses forces her to treat him as a human being. In this relationship, the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’ always fluctuate in such a way that the patriarchal standards of a colonial society get endangered. But at the same time, Mary is successful in deconstructing the harsh colonial doctrine of the society and her as well. She becomes a matter of “a bitter contemptuous anger” from her society about which the narrator comments, “the white civilization will never, never admit that a white woman can have a human relationship, whether for good or evil, with a black man” (Lessing 1950: 26). About this existing status quo in the colonial society, Katherine Fishburn writes:

Rewards those who conform to party line (Slatter) and punishes the one poor soul (Mary) whose own psychological failings make it impossible for her to conform to the dedicated thoroughness that her repressive society requires for its members. (Fishburn 1994: 1-15)

In this whole process Mary is continually losing her individuality, only to embrace universal. She breaks the limits of microcosm to be a part of macrocosm. By this ambivalent relation, Mary betrays the myths of white homogeneity and supremacy of South Africa by giving the control of her body to a black man. However, her death at the end of the novel by Moses seems the only possible solution for her conflicting and traumatic ‘self’.

In this novel, Mary is psychologically ruined by her behaviour and hatred towards powerful characters and also by the implementation of various miserable actions against her native workers. In return this behaviour leads her to insanity and finally to her death. Her tortured and troubled condition in the text is described in Tony’s words as, “Complete Nervous Breakdown, this phrase was an apology for Mary: it absolved her from criticism” (Lessing 1950: 184). Her main aim is to give trouble to blacks, as she is obsessed with this, from the very childhood. In this obsession she actually loses the touch with reality or real world and remains all the time engrossed in her own world, which survives in her mind as is seen in the following lines in the novel, “Mary moved about her work like a woman in a dream, taking hours to accomplish what would formerly have taken her a few minutes” (Lessing 1950:

148). Through this novel, Lessing successfully deconstructs the existing tradition, by demonstrating a shift in the power at the end, from coloniser to colonised, where one loses its artificial authority while another gains it. This concept of the transfer of power, from oppressor to oppressed makes Lessing different from her other contemporary writers.

Conclusion

Like other female protagonists of Lessing's novels, Mary's disintegration starts with her marriage and reaches its zenith with her ambivalent attitude towards Moses. No doubt, in the process she becomes neurotic but at the same time she continually resigns her authority to Moses, who appears to her as a saviour and in this way she emerges successful in shedding off her innate racist attitude by developing close intimacy with Moses. At the end of the novel, there is an awakening of Mary's conscience. She experiences a sense of guilt for Moses. She becomes fully aware of the fact that Moses is a human and not an animal or a thing. She understands that she has to pay for what she has done and therefore, like a visionary accepts the destruction in the form of her death. She becomes fully aware of her condition and self-identity and therefore accepts her approaching death as the only form of refuge.

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