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Orientalism and the Awakening of the “Other” in Dorris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract:

Edward Said makes use of the term, ‘Other’ in his work *Orientalism* to represent the East. This terminology was adopted from Jacques Laccan’s ‘Mirror Image’ concept. According to this concept the child begins to understand his or her identity by contrasting the image that is perceived in the mirror when he or she faces the mirror. This image was termed as the ‘Other’ by Laccan. Edward Said says that the Occident learnt about their own identity only when they contrasted themselves with the image of the Orient. This way the Occident made themselves believe that they are superior and civilized and enjoyed being making themselves the messengers of God to civilize the rest of the world which they termed as ‘White man’s Burden’. Through his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said makes it clear why this “idea which has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary... [was created]” (*Orientalism*: 5). The various aspects of creation of the idea of Orient according to the west which is totally a fantasy is being discussed here. Thus his work was actually an awakening of the ‘Other’. This paper explores the various facts where the East or ‘Other’, recognize itself in Doris Lissing’s *The Grass in Singing*, where we can find Mary and Moses, the two characters who recognizes and identify themselves by contrasting themselves with the each other.

Keywords: Other, Contrast, Identity, Image.

Doris Lessing is a British novelist and short story writer. She began her career as a professional writer published her first novel, *The Grass is Singing* in 1950. The novel had its setting in Rhodesia that is present day, Zimbabwe which was, Lessing’s childhood home and it take place in the 1940s and depicts the racial tensions and the shattered dreams of a woman by name Mary Turner.

The Grass is Singing

Doris Lessing’s novel, *The Grass is Singing* begins with an article in the newspaper about the murder of a white woman. The author of the article is anonymous. Mary Turner, the white woman had a luxurious and a happy life in her youth. But the ridicule of her friends forced her to marry a poor Rhodesian farmer Dick, where she experiences life with the natives. Then the novel depicts the failure of intimacy between a white woman and her African male servant Moses. Later we will see that Mary is murdered by Moses. The rest of the novel tries to answer this question of Mary’s murder.

Orientalism

Edward said is most famous for the description and the critique of Orientalism as the source of the culturally inaccurate representations that are the foundation of western thoughts towards the Middle East of how the west perceives and represents the East. The

book, *Orientalism* (1978) proposed the existence of a “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arab Islamic peoples and their culture (15)” which derives from western cultures long tradition of false and romanticized images of Asia in general and the Middle East in particular.

In *Orientalism*, Said uses the phrase the ‘Other’ to describe the fascination of the West with the Orient. This is a reference to Jacques Lacan’s terminology which describes the mirror stage in the psycho-sexual development of an infant. Lacan believed that children begin to recognise their own reflections at infancy thus developing their sense of self and identity from the mirror image they see. According to Lacan, the mirror stage gives birth to the ego. It is during this stage when a child realises through its own reflection, that it is a whole person. Unable to master full control over limbs and action, the child begins to experience separation from self, leading to internal aggression and depression. The emotions contribute to the development of Ego.

The mirror stage also involves a state of misunderstanding for the child resulting in a process of alienation, which leads the child into an imaginary state. The child begins upon observing its reflection mistakes it to be itself, failing to realise that it is just an image, creating within the child its ego or self. Thus children supposedly learn their own identity by contrasting their image in the mirror. It means that someone only finds an idea about themselves through a contrast with an ‘Other.’

Said borrowing Lacan’s terminology of the big ‘Other’ goes on to say that the concept of the orient fits logically into the equation, when the European countries are seen as a child in mirror stage learning about her own identity by contrasting with an ‘Other’. This makes sense as Orient was always present in Europe’s earliest civilization and in the cultural exchange that was always existed. Said also adds the the concept of the orient does not does not mean the same to American as it does to the European countries.

As Said says further, “Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine build over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the west which eluded the Orient’s difference with its weakness” (*Orientalism*: 204). In other words it is the western misconception of the East that has been portrayed by Said. The west created a false image of the Orient both subconsciously and consciously in order to assert their own power over them. With the help of Edward Said’s, *Orientalism* and Jacques Lacan’s Mirror stage of development we will be discussing the image of the ‘Other’ as seen in Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*:

The Jew is one whom the other man considers a Jew that is the simple truth from which we must start [...] it is the anti-semantic who makes a Jew. (*Jew and Anti- Semite*, 69)

This quote explains that the Jews are Jews only because they are not considered as human beings. In a similar way, the ‘Other’ is created because they are not considered as human beings. Mary Turner and the ‘Kafers’ (natives of Rhodesia) are major characters bringing out the ‘Other’ image in the novel. This is the image of the Orient (East) created by the Occident (West) to suppress them. Thus here we can equate the ‘Other’ as seen in Lacan’s the ‘Other’ image and in Said’s *Orientalism*. In *The Grass is Singing* we meet the young Mary Turner who has never been ‘exposed’ to the natives and spent the first thirty years of her life ignoring them. Later on, she faces humiliation at the hands of her friends due to her unmarried status; causing her to jump into a hastily arranged marriage with a poor Rhodesian farmer, Dick Turner. It was only on Dick’s

farm that she is truly 'exposed' to the natives. Here we find her being driven by the 'Misconceptions' which were injected into her by her own parents and her society. As Lessing discusses Mary's life:

She had never come into contact with natives before, as an employer on her own account 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. In her childhood she had been forbidden to walk out alone, and when she had asked why, she had been told in the furtive, lowered, but a matter of fact voice that she associated with her mother, that they were nasty and might do horrible things to her. (*The Grass is Singing*: 58)

Initially Mary enjoys her 'master's' role. It is a change from her 'Other' self to a 'the self'. She contrasts the half naked condition of the native women to herself, which brings out the 'self' within her. Mary Turner, even though, a white woman was a 'woman' and was suppressed in her childhood by her father. This fear of her father was made her into an 'Other' in her own society. Later on, after her marriage when she comes in contact with the natives, she becomes aware that she is 'superior'. This superiority complex is the factor that leads her to the identification of herself not as an 'Other', but as a 'Self'. Thus a transfer from the 'Other' to the 'Self' - that is in terms of Lacan; a child identifying itself as a separate entity from the mother, from its own mirror image is working out here.

The norms that were installed in her and the notorious stories about the natives which she had heard all through her life started to create a sense of deep hatred within her towards the natives. Thus the change within herself and her hatred for the natives, mould her into a cruel master. This is seen in her sadistic behaviour towards her servants, as well to the whole native society she comes across. This can be considered as symbol of freeing herself from the subjugation which she experienced in her life. This feeling of dominance continues to grow within her and it reaches its climax when she was forced to manage the farm when the Dick was unwell, "The sensation of being boss over perhaps eighty black workers gave her new confidence. It was a good feeling, keeping them under her will, making them to as she wanted". (112) This feeling of dominance and of no longer being the 'Other' is quickly destroyed when a native speaks to her in English. She asks him to stop but he just smiles. Scared and angered, she takes out her whip and hits him. This move of hers now begins to destroy the carefully built image of the 'self' within her for and she experiences an uncanny fear within herself:

He was a great bulk of a man, taller than any of the others, magnificently built with nothing on but an old sack tied round his waist. As she stood there frightened he seemed to tower over her. On his big chest another red drop fell and trickled down to his waist. Then she saw him make a sudden movement and recoiled terrified. She thought he was going to attack her. (*The Grass is Singing*: 112)

The same fear is again found in her when the same native, Moses, comes to work for her in the kitchen from the farm. The scars on his face which she had given him, shock her; but she was forced to take him in because of the fact that no one else was ready to work for her. Her encounter with him though, was different from that of others

because, “she was 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”(142). Thus we can say that the fear within her started acting to replace the concept of ‘Other’ that had been created in her mind. It begins to subjugate her and a sort of re-identification starts to take place within her. This re-identification causes her to declaim her ‘Self’ which leads to her complete subjugation in front of the native servant Moses when she weeps in front of him, when he tells her that he was leaving.

Moses now identifies himself through Mary’s weakness. That was a self-realisation for him, which forces him to rule the only one person whom he can rule, that is Mary. Moses forces Mary to treat him as a human, causing a collapse of her identity. She fails to maintain her own ‘Self’ by which she had identified herself earlier. She becomes a mere toy in his hands. She might have not become ‘The Other’ if she had a support or some sort of help to her overcome her fear. This we find when she is able to bring out her lost voice against Moses with the support of Tony. “No. She screamed ‘Go away’” (127). It was this sudden outburst of Mary that finally makes her the murder victim of Moses.

This change of Mary who was identifying herself as the ‘Other’ was from her own wish to get protection from someone who was stronger than herself where Dick is failed. Dick is a loving husband but he is not able to care for her or show concern for her which she expected. This concern she gets from Moses even though she is not able to accept it as a romantic one, but a caring one. This trauma finally fragments Mary. We can also say that the contrast between her ‘Self’ and Moses’s ‘Other’ finally fragments her, causing Moses to take charge.

As Mary’s unwilling involvement with Moses progresses, her mind wanders and she loses her sense of time. Moses first physical touch is so shocking to Mary that can be seen as skin to skin contact that breaches a fundamental social boundary. His touch threatens not only Mary’s identity but their identity of the entire colonial society in which she lives. As the novel comes back, full circle to its starting point, Mary is in a sense born into death. When Dick becomes ill, his stress results in a physical breakdown, his wife illness takes the form of a mental breakdown.

When Mary takes upon herself the role of the ‘Master’ her repressed self which identified with her father is brought about and at this point the interactions between sexual and racial ecology becomes clear. The repressed anger that Mary feels towards Dick is turned against the natives, and in this her anger has a real cause. When she hits Moses, the violence underlying the system is vividly brought into the open. She thus becomes a more successful embodiment than Dick of the white settler myth of white supremacy.

Conclusion

Lessing’s first novel is thus a complex exploration of multiple interrelated cultural and psychological boundaries, as these are anxiously enforced and progressively transgressed. Mary attempts to preserve a ‘self’ against the threatening psychological and physical forces, can be acknowledged as the “evil” of her own shadow and as a lack of concern for the exploration of “other” in her epiphany.

On her last day she understands that she must take the responsibility for the condition of her existence and finds that what is threatening “out there” is inside of her own self and the larger scope inside of her imperial self. In her progress towards self-definition she can overcome her psychological (personal) obstacles but not the stronger cultural ones. She cannot act because she is still prisoner of the cultural commitment as the false bases of the white civilization. Mary is a white woman who is dominated by Moses masculine and oppressed by her patriarchal culture and Moses is a black man with the superior masculinity but racial inferior and oppressed. In fact both of them are oppressed in the dominant white man culture. Her identification of herself with the help of Tom at the end brings out the consciousness of her conflict, but it is engulfed by gender and racial prejudices.

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