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Review

A Study of New Historicism in Doris Lessing's Novel, *The Grass is Singing*

Doris Lessing is one of the pioneers in the history of British literature. She is mainly known for her novels and short stories. Her fictional world deals with society, discrimination and individual expression. The discourse of history is the most fascinating part of her novels. As a writer, Doris Lessing contributes significantly to projecting history as one of the most dominating paradigms. Her *The Grass is Singing* also deserves special mention in this respect. History in the novel sometimes appears as a factual reality and, at other times, as a cognitive identity. As an accredited writer, she writes mainly on identity, society and the individual. The story was set in the 1940s in the Southern Rhodesia in Southern Africa. It chronicles a family saga of the female protagonist, Mary Turner. The story revolves around her life, aspirations, living, and expressions. The novel chronicles the saga of her parents and family with an abstract note on transmission and change. This shows that her existence was no less than a problem for society and the community. The then society in South Rhodesia gets foregrounded with the belief that: “‘white civilization’ which 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” (Lessing 27). This statement elucidates the social reality of her time. The character of Mary symbolizes a binary between loneliness and alienation, poverty and grievance and confusion and complexity.

This paper takes Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing* as a point of reference to analyze and examine the different events and episodes

of abuse that a young woman encounters throughout her life. This study emphasizes the psychological harm that a female passes through because of social prejudice and injustice. It also aims to showcase the horrific personal experiences of a girl and her dilemma and distress. Further, it insists on highlighting the varied connotations of the usage of the term history, particularly about imbalance, discrimination and assault.

New Historicism as a literary theory certifies the commodification of history and the altered one. It manifests its synthetic power to show the dialectic notion of creation and sustainability. Greenblatt coined the term “new historicism” for the first time. Further, he and Gallagher write: “The notion of authenticity seemed and continues to seem misplaced for new Historicism is not a coherent, close-knit school in which one might be enrolled or from which one might be expelled. The term has been applied to an extraordinary assortment of critical practices” (Introduction 2). Moreover, Greenblatt and John Brannigan explain that new Historicism serves as a momentum for the present political construction concerning the past.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term ‘new historicism’ as: “a form of cultural analysis which examines how a cultural product (especially a literary text) interacts with and participates in its historical context, especially concerning the power relations operating within the society of its time” (OED 2011). Further, Walter Scott emphasizes a different alternative where he talks about the ways and habits of the characters that also embody history. Lessing emphasizes time and refers to the absolute necessity of the past to frame the present. Lessing's historicization of the text and its contextual idea shows her as a psychologically advanced and accorded figure. Lessing rightly says: “For Mary, the word ‘home’, spoken nostalgically, meant England, although both her parents were South Africans and had never been to England” (Lessing 33). From this store, her father “squandered his salary in drink” (Lessing 34). She finally becomes a “wandering native” (35) who is sent to “boarding school, and her life changed” (Lessing 36). Later, she becomes a pleasant and comfortable woman in South Africa. She seems to hate her childhood. Lessing writes: “She had the undistinguished, dead-level appearance of South African white democracy” (Lessing 38). Her English identity gets saturated with her South African association. At times she is found to be detrimental with the workers of her husband Dick, and at other times, she seems to be virtuous with them. This transience within her locates her as a laudable and decent woman. Without caring about the political and social enclosure, she sets to distinguish herself as a changed and modified self.

M. H. Abrams writes: “New historicists conceive of a literary text as situated within the institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the overall culture of a particular time and place, and with which the literary text interacts as both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes” (Abrams 183). The social practices of her time make Mary shy, immune,

muscular, impersonal and conscious of her mind and thoughts. The novel reads: “And so it had gone by, day after day, week after week, year after year. South Africa is a wonderful place for the unmarried white woman” (Lessing 39). The later part of her life shows her changed self. Here, she appears to be hollow and emptied. Even at the slightest provocation of kiss and sex, she was not capable of recreating herself. Her feverish and unsettled proclamation procures her to meet Dick Turner. Lessing’s description of Dick further mobilizes her feminine certitude. Mary tries to feel her very own Englishness within Dick, but it is to her utter dismay. The novel casts Dick’s antagonistic attitude towards the African soil and life. The hard brown African soil and the arching blue sky make him claustrophobic. In “At the Periphery of Time: Dorris Lessing and the Historical Novel”, Philip Tsang writes: “Southern Rhodesia prided itself on maintaining its rigorous Englishness ...” (Tsang 128). He further writes: “In her fictional rendition of Rhodesia, Lessing captures its peculiar brand of Englishness ...” ((Tsang 128). This is also evident in Mary’s concepts of ‘home’ and ‘store’, which signify her preoccupation with English legacy and African ideology.

Mary has a strange experience after she marries Dick. It was not out of love but of necessity to be secure in society and life. After some time, she felt “caged and went out into the dark outside the house” (Lessing 84). Her rage and anger against him was terrible. She becomes “viciously, revengefully angry against him, against the matron, against everyone” (Lessing 106). She sees her future as a “tired stoicism” (Lessing 107). She becomes self-exhausted, and that is the beginning of an inner disintegration within her.

Later, Mary shows her discontent with the working people. The novel reads: “They were sullen and angry listening to her ... with in-attention, simply waiting for her to finish” (Lessing 120). Moreover, “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 do as she wanted” (Lessing 118). Lessing here tries to decipher the different range of Mary’s character. She writes that Mary: “hated their sullenness, their averted eyes when they spoke to her, their veiled insolence; and she hated more than anything, with a violent physical repulsion, the heavy smell that came from them, a hot, sour animal smell” (Lessing 121). Her hatred later matures into attention and affection. As Reinhart Koselleck writes: “Historical time, if the concept has a meaning, is bound up with social and political actions, with concretely acting and suffering human beings and their institutions and organizations” (Koselleck 2). The native who is addressed as the ‘mission boy’ by Dick becomes a constant reality in her life. Lessing writes: “... she could not thrust him out of her mind like something unclean ...” (Lessing 164). His presence in her life seems to be robust and commanding. She watches him covertly and feels his presence overtly.

Lessing introduces Moses as a native whose unconditional care for her welfare made her think about their unnamed relationship. She inwardly asks herself: "... would they allow Moses to strengthen that new human relationship between them..." (Lessing 165). The presence of the black man encircles her with curiosity and strangeness. Her every sense seems to be alert. His 'horny feet' (169), 'broad muscular back' (170), 'dark resentful look' (152), and 'big hand with the lighter palm' (168) make her both cautious and withdrawn. Her first-ever interrogation with Moses presents her as an annoyed, furious, angry, violent and hysteric woman. Moreover, her further insinuations with him represent the new woman within her- one who is self-conscious, self-withdrawn and determined.

The historical narration advocates the correlation between love and hatred in the novel. It also fathoms the binary between belief and disbelief, fate and chance, option and abstraction, etc. Matt Hickling writes that new historicist scholars think they "champion women, children, people of colour, non-Christians, and other previously marginalized groups as essential components of the larger historical narrative" (Hickling 54). Lessing exclaims: "What had happened was that formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant, had been broken by the personal relation" (Lessing 152). There was hatred, irrationality and immobility between the two. Later, it develops into a more mature and soft attachment. Her attitude of dignity gets lost in the sense of gentle mortification. Lessing remarks: "He put out his hand reluctantly, loath to touch her, the sacrosanct white woman..." (Lessing 159). His abstract existence becomes a panorama of concrete sustenance. The usual anger of Mary at Moses' tone and her fascination with it marks the duality in her character. She becomes obsessed with the thought of the Africans. Lessing insists on showing Mary's intention to be free in her mind and thoughts. At first, it "was a nightmare, the powerful black man always in the house with her ..." (Lessing 176). Later, it turned to an element of satisfaction and approval. In this connection, the narrative refers to Frick, who says: "The Africans told stories, but we were not allowed to mix with them. ... The only contact I had with blacks was what I had with servants" (Frick 156-157).

Similarly, in her "Foreword", Lessing says: "And here I still am, trying to get out from the middle of the novel under that monstrous legacy, trying to get free" (Lessing viii). The character of Mary Turner contributes to the creation of a new history where the emphasis is on the assimilation of class and not disparity of any kind. She merges her mind with her thoughts to facilitate a reformative action that recreates a modified imagination.

Mary Turner's dislike of the country refers to the impact of the colonial setup. Her hatred for blacks and natives procured her colonial self. Her distinguished reformation of herself caters to her reversal of intention and recognition of truth. She tries to recreate a new history by composing to have a balanced psychological mindset. Kramer and Maza claim that New

Historicism seeks to “breathe new life into canonical texts” (Kramer and Maza, 2006). The novel mainly deals with the binary between love and hatred, good and evil, individual and social, economic and political aspects. It attempts to situate the diverse sequence of relationships and their sustainability. The narrative of the novel situates Mary’s childhood and adulthood experiences. She aims to explore the varied range of white colonialism in Southern Africa. Katherine Fishburn writes: “Thus at one time or another she has written about the dissatisfactions of the lower class, the stifled rebellious of middle-class women, the disenfranchisement of African blacks and the abuses of the mentally ill” (Fishburn 5). However, she tries to distance herself from the standardized customary beliefs of the colonial whites but magically gets associated with African natives like Moses. Her hatred towards the black natives represents “the total life of humanity as a great historical process”, as Lukacs remarks (Lukacs 29). Moreover, Herman Paul writes: “... always historicize, never allow any anachronisms, avoid reading your own opinions into the views of others, be attentive to the changes and continuities in human history” (Paul 1).

Further, Porter sees New Historicism as a movement that “has generated forms of critical practice that continue to exhibit the force of a formalist legacy whose subtle denials of history- as the scene of heterogeneity, difference, contradiction, at least – persist” (Porter, 253). The text opens with Mary, who desires to upgrade herself professionally and never thinks of making a family. She seems to have achieved success in her professional career. She seems unconventional and always inclines herself to listen to the echo of her mind. Her conjugal life was not a healthy one. The novel articulates Mary’s desire to become a mother and Dick’s eventual rejection of it. Her association with Moses discovers a new discourse in the novel. Mary tries to recognize different domains of personal and professional attitudes and social and racial revision and reformation. Lessing’s depiction of Mary’s growing up amid motherly love and fatherly insolence creates an overall space for a newer creation. Indeed, her murder at the end by Moses justifies Lessing’s belief in sustaining one’s dignity over surrender and sacrifice.

The structural physiology of the novel rests on the aspects of historical convention and congruence. The plot deals with issues like individuality, alienation, relationship goals, conjugality, dissatisfaction and grievance. Turner’s character unveils a particular liaison between home and identity, life and longings, affection and detachment, growth and maturity, marriage and discord, and many more. The novel underscores ideas on gender empowerment, social disparity and familial encounters. Further, history remains in its disruptive form throughout the novel. It dwells on truth, existence, acceptance and inclusiveness. This paper attempts to objectify the proposition of desire, decision and wisdom. Lessing categorizes the wholesome concept of identity and history. She also emphasizes destabilizing the element of home and its various connotations. The paper concentrates on

the character of Mary Turner, who appears to be a woman of consistency and cohesion. Her progression aids us in understanding the subversion of history that takes place in the novel. The paper asserts to situate the creation of a new history by focussing on self-annihilation and social proclamation.

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