

Women as Other: A Comparative Study of A Room of One's Own and The Grass is Singing

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ABSTRACT

The contention of this research is to prove the hypothesis that considering woman as other, man has enslaved her in the panoptic power of patriarchy because of the interpellations of culture and society. The reason of becoming a woman as other is the interpellation of different ideological state apparatuses which teach that man is always dominant, governing, commanding and supreme and woman is always inferior, subservient and a menial being. My research adopts a qualitative approach and it uses comparative method of research. This research will be the comparison of a prose *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf which is a shrewd, sophisticated and influential text against the intellectual subjugation of women writers and a novel *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing which is a story of an independent, self-assured and a friendly woman who became a victim of marriage and her husband who was following traditional gender roles set by society to act as powerful, dominant and oppressive to his wife. Both the texts will be explicating the concept of other, the former describing how does a woman become other in the light of Michael Foucault's concept of panopticism and the later delineating why does a woman become other in the light of Louis Althusser's theory of ideology.

1-INTRODUCTION

Man considers himself as the paragon of self-autonomy and self-superiority as compared to woman. He considers a woman as a passive being with no freedom and desires of her own. He considers woman as the other. This term was used by Simon de Beauvoir in his book *The Second Sex*. He says that "He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (De Beauvoir 6). It means that the man considers woman opposite of what he thinks of himself. If he is subject, culture and active then woman according to him is object, nature and passive, respectively. De Beauvoir says, "The subject posits itself only in opposition; it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object" (7). Woman is not expected to have independence and choices as she likes to have in her life.

This paper is a comparative study of a prose *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf and a novel *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing to highlight imprisonment of women as other in a patriarchal society. The women in a male-dominated society found themselves surrounded by inescapable emotional and intellectual contradictions. *A Room of One's Own* is a shrewd, sophisticated and influential text against the intellectual subjugation of women

writers and *The Grass is Singing* is a story of an independent, self-assured and a friendly woman who became a victim of marriage and her husband who was following traditional gender roles set by society to act as powerful, dominant and oppressive to his wife. Both the texts are feminist in their criticism of men and their efforts to control women. This paper intends to look at how these women are considered other by compartmentalizing in a specific gender role by curbing their intellectual and emotional growth.

2-THESIS STATEMENT

Considering woman as other, man has enslaved woman in the panoptic power of patriarchy because of the interpellations of culture and society.

3-RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) How does a woman become other?
- 2) Why does a woman become other?

4- OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

There are two objectives of this research to prove that

- 1) A woman becomes other “when” (answering how) man enslaves her in the panoptic power of patriarchy.
- 2) A woman becomes other “because” (answering why) both man and woman are interpellated by different ideological state apparatuses which teach that man is always dominant and woman is always inferior.

5-METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

This research is based on qualitative methodology. The method of this research is comparative research method which is intended to describe the analysis factually, accurately and systematically.

6-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research contains three theoretical frameworks. For the answering of first research question, the researcher has applied Michael Foucault’s concept of panopticism on *A Room of One’s Own* and for answering second research question, the researcher has applied Louis Althusser’s concept of ideology on *The Grass is Singing*. Simon de Beauvoir’s concept of other discussed in *The Second Sex* is prevailing in both the texts.

7-DISCUSSION

Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* is considered “first modern text of feminist criticism, the model in both theory and practically socialist feminist of a specifically socialist feminist criticism” (Marcus 216). This landmark prose work of feminist criticism contains historical events, fictional stories, philosophical advices and sociological analysis to describe the position of woman as other as compared to man in case of financial and intellectual freedom. It is said about *A Room of One’s Own* that, “Woolf’s *A Room* has become a project that houses us. In her power, failure and perplexities, she is a major architect and designer of feminist criticism” (Bowlby 62). *A Room of One’s Own* is a shrewd, sophisticated and influential argument against the intellectual subjection of women writers. She states her thesis statement in the start of her prose that in order to gain intellectual freedom, a woman should have financial freedom. Woolf says, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (2). This statement is actually investigation of material and social conditions required for writing literature and financial freedom and intellectual freedom are the pre-requisites. It reflects that women at that time did not have a space of their own or even money to control their lives or display their potentials and abilities because she was other to men. Simon de Beauvoir while defining women as other says in *The Second Sex* that “The fact is that men encounter more complicity

in their woman companions than the oppressor usually finds in the oppressed; and in bad faith they use it as a pretext to declare that woman wanted the destiny they imposed on her” (773). Historically women have been deprived of financial and intellectual prerequisites. If a woman does not have privacy, money, freedom and she is always busy in her household duties and caring for her children and husband, she cannot express her views in proper way. In living the life as other being, she cannot produce a good piece of literature. Women as other can be described as the inmate living being in the panopticon of patriarchy- stripping her from intellectual freedom, financial freedom and intellectual growth which leads her to lose her own identity.

A Room of One’s Own, explicates the relation between gender and writing. Woolf thinks that the exclusion of women from educational institutions is directly proportional to unequal distribution of wealth. Her fictional narrator Mary Beton in Oxbridge was prevented from entering the library of all men’s college because she was other to them. “That famous library has been cursed by woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library” (Woolf 5). She was disheartened by this attitude and through this work she wanted to raise the feminist goal of changing society or the world to a place where the male and the female should be equally valued socially, economically, politically and culturally. This attitude of men seems like the penal officers of the eighteenth century psychiatric wards or penitentiaries whose credo Foucault describes: “project the subtle segmentations of discipline onto the confused space of internment combine it with the methods of analytical distribution proper to power and individualize the excluded” (199). As Judith Butler has elaborated how gender is a performativity and certain roles are imposed on women to be followed strictly, Woolf suggests that women should come out this panoptic power of patriarchy which strip them from any intellectual and creative activity. She believes that economic disparity, which is due to patriarchal exploitation of women by including them in the category of other, is responsible for depriving women from any intellectual growth. Women do not resist because of panoptic nature of patriarchal power.

Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, advocates about the female writer that she is always “an inheritor as well as an originator” (108). Michele Barrett, in this respect says about *A Room of One’s Own* that “the conditions under which men and women produce literature are materially different” (Barrett 103). At that time, women were under the panoptic power of their male counterparts. They were others and hence having no financial independence and enslaved in a “cruel ingenious cage” like a panopticon of patriarchy

(Foucault 205). As a result, they did not have the mental freedom. De Beauvoir says, "The subject posits itself only in opposition; it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object" (7). So men did to women. And if they tried to write, they lacked the courage to show their work to anyone or to get them published. They were not confident about their works also.

A Room of One's Own focuses basically on the financial and intellectual freedom of women so from that perspective it is an important piece of literature. Money and private room are the basic necessities that women have to gain to be able to write as men. Financial freedom is of supreme significance in forming the position of the female writers. Indeed, *A Room of One's Own* as manifested in the very title does stress privacy. It indicates that real freedom is to be independent and independence cannot be achieved if women do not resist breaking the shackles of other and striving to escape the panopticon of patriarchal power.

According to Woolf, money is a constructive and instrumental thing for a woman if she has to write literature. She has given money more importance than having a right to vote which is the key symbol of freedom. Woolf writes, "Of the two-the vote and the money-the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important" (35). Woolf was having a legacy from her aunt and it gave her a lot of comfort. She could pay her bills and buy her things easily. She says, "My aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman ... a view of the open sky." (36, 37) According to her money is very important to be a great writer. Women can access anything they want and remove any hurdle from their way in becoming a good writer without any help of men. Thus, having material autonomy is of the paramount importance. Again women needs to strive for economic equality if they want to ascend the ladder of intellectual growth. But woman to man is like a puppet "that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" according to his own desires because she is the other (Foucault 136). Unless the panoptic power of patriarchy prevails- inducing a sense of allegedly inferior nature of women as an other being, stereotypical image of women's creative inferiority cannot be dusted off.

Intelligent women were forced to live with a tragic fate as other in a male-dominated society and still this is prevalent in many places and circumstances. Woolf gives example of a fictional character i.e. Judith Shakespeare (imaginary sister of William Shakespeare) who as best example of intellectual other was as intelligent as her brother but her father did not allow her to get education.

According to Foucault "Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge" (217). Still she was able to write because of her own personal efforts. She wrote secretly but couldn't show that to anyone out of fear. She burnt her scripts which she wrote. She became engaged at a very young age. Despite the idea that she was "the apple of her father's eye", she was punished and beaten by her father when she beg to be allowed not to marry (Woolf 45). After that she ran away and is finally taken up by a theater manager, became pregnant by him, and committed suicide. Through the example of Judith Shakespeare, Woolf proves her thesis that without having healthy social and material conditions, one cannot show her intellectual capabilities even if he/she is extremely intelligent. Without setting stability between these two poles and eliminating the concept of women as other, the situation will always be in a state of chaos as seen in Judith's case. In this theme, Woolf's feminist thought appears again. Education is a very necessary thing to prove intellectual capabilities and it is essential for both men and women. One could argue that if women or Judith has a reasonable income, she will gain popularity as her brother William has. However, because of the lack of money and consequently the power of controlling her life, she loses her own life in addition to her creativity. Woolf writes "It would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare" (44). Circumstances at the age of Shakespeare were unequal for both men and women in terms of privacy, money and freedom so it was impossible for a woman to write literature impressive and profound like men. Lack of money and privacy had prevented women from writing with genius in the past as their subjectivity and surveillance "increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (138). If women are allowed to work in their natural disposition away from socially constructed role as other assigned by patriarchy, they have the potential to produce great literature. But it should be noted once again that it requires to escape the panoptic power of patriarchy if one wants to excel in her creative performance which is curbed due to unequal circumstances.

Woolf has also pointed out negative effects of writing literature if a woman has influence of men considering them other and inferior. Literature will then become subjective covering all pessimism and

grudge of woman instead of throwing light on other important affairs. Woolf gives example of Jane Austen who had written her masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice* under the constraint of distraction. Woolf quotes, "She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her a lot" (68). According to Woolf, Jane Austen could write a better novel if she had access to money and she would not have hidden her scripts from the intruders or visitors. She was not blessed with a piece of mind. Privacy and independence are essential to write good literature and to express views objectively and effectively. In order to create something constructive and effective one must be financially secure.

One of the very first female writers who have earned money from writing is Aphara Behan. In the nineteenth century, she created opportunities for the novelists, like Austin, who were able to continue their passion for writing even without the privacy of their own sitting rooms. According to Woolf, the modern female writers still function under the influence of anger and insecurity. However, the future of these women looks different because they will have freedom and abilities to shine even more. Woolf goes on to declare that "For genius like Shakespeare is not born among laboring, uneducated, servile people" (46). According to her, there are negative psychological aspects of writing because of material circumstances. *A Room of One's Own* is her struggle to explain the link between fiction and women. But, she ends up asking for women's rights eliminating the concept of describing women as other.

Woman is not as powerful and independent as man. Her image is socially constructed as other. Standpoint of men about women is to take care of home, children and husbands and be a good housewife. It was widespread standpoint in the past but is also prevalent now. That's why Woolf has repeatedly stressed about intellectual and financial freedom of woman during her time. These things are stimulus in writing good literature. Mind must be free of responsibilities and continuous dependency on men. Only then creative ideas come out of mind. She said, "Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time." (106). Women are confined mentally and poor financially in a panopticon unconsciously. They are enslaved by men. Foucault says, "Discipline' may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology" (169). They are

supposed to do other things relating to their household. Writing literature is not their task. It is their socially constructed image and firm standpoint thought by men. Their mind kept on thinking about their home, children and husband and their literature become subjective.

Women during Woolf's time considered writing novels more important than poetry because writing novels is comparatively easier than poetry. They were under male's dominance which created bad circumstances for them to suffer a lot. In Lady Winchilsen's poem, there are obvious signs of anger. Woolf suggests the same that "How we are fallen! Fallen by mistaken rules/And education's more the nature's fools" (Woolf 57). She believes that due to constant interruptions, women are unable to gather enough thought to write poetry. She believes that novel writing is easier because it can be done without frequent interruptions. That is why women tend to write novels more often than poetry. She is trying to create a notion that women should adapt themselves to these frequent changes in order to write. Therefore, money is essential for women to write without interruptions. Without money, they will always be considered as second best in the battle of creativity. Again, material influence plays an important role in Woolf's argument.

Woolf demands for the most essential features of feminist thought by equating between the lives of the opposite sexes try to eliminate the concept of other. For example, she tries in her work to answer these questions "why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?" (Woolf 23). Such questions have much to do with the social conventions and norms of conduct that promote and support such modes of thinking and behaving. In *A Room of One's Own*, she looks back a hundred years and goes on until the present moment of her discourse. Starting from the library at Oxbridge she discusses the necessity of owning female's own money clarifying that the theme of financial independence is the core of the whole essay. Indeed the other themes are simply manifestations of this underlying theme. To own a special room, the fate of highly intelligent woman, the historical circumstances, even the identity of woman could be changed if she gains her right of earning her own money. Patriarchal conditions produce homogeneous effects of power. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf counteracts these homogeneous effects to ensure women's identity, their own special room, and means to earn money for their bright future.

To sum up the whole argument, unless the panoptic power of patriarchy prevails declaring woman as other, constructing a specific gender role

and stereotypical narrative of women intellectual inferiority, it is impossible for women to prove them in the realm of creativity. Women need to be given equal opportunities, if someone wants to judge her creative and intellectual potential in comparison with men. Not giving same resources and not providing equal circumstances for both genders, and in turn judging one as inferior than other is nothing more than sheer injustice.

The Grass is Singing is Doris Lessing's first novel. It is set in South Rhodesia, the province which was dominated by whites prior to its independence in 1980 "a time period when racism and power relations were prevalent in society" (Kirton10). This novel is a psychological depiction of the characters of various races like whites and blacks. This novel also investigates the secretive methods of dominance of ideology of the patriarchy and male domination which is the main reason of including woman in the category of other as society has set such standards for woman. Henrik Lawrence Keeler states in his thesis "We! What Rubbish: An Exploration of the Haunting and the Rupture of White Colonial Identity in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*" that "Describing white colonial society in Anglo-Africa, the novel displays a society based on a hierarchical structure and oppression of non-whites and women. The novel suggests that in colonial society, the protagonist Mary Turner is presented with a limited set of discourses and ideologies, forcing her into a life of subjection to given conditions" (21). The subjugations imposed by ideologies on woman make her an other being, inferior to man.

Mary was a young white woman born in South Rhodesia, now known as Zimbabwe. She was the daughter of a corrupt and drunkard father. She was not a child with a good luck. She saw the death of her elder siblings with whom she had a cold relationship. Her parents had not a good matrimonial relationship with each other. When Mary thought of home she remembered a wooden box shaken by passing trains; "when she thought of marriage she remembered her father coming home red-eyed and fuddled; when she thought of children she saw her mother's face at her children's funeral-anguished, but as dry and as hard as rock" (Lessing 46). So, Mary's ideas about men, marriage, family, sexuality develops by her interpellation of the patriarchy manifested in family in which woman is always an other being. According to Althusser "Ideology working this way to 'hail' us as subjects, so that we think these ideas are individually addressed to us, and hence are true" (Klages 134). In the same way Mary developed the idea of marriage as a ruthless and cold-blooded relation because she was

taught this way by the society in which woman is always other or inferior being.

After a long time, a significant positive change came in her life. She was sent to boarding school for her education. She grew up there and spent a different optimistic life there. All the experiences of life made her independent and a confident girl. She was in love with her job. She enjoyed a lot with her friends and colleagues. She loved to make fun and attend parties and different ceremonies with friends. "She was friend to half the town. And in the evening she always went to sundowner parties that prolonged themselves till midnight, or danced, or went to the pictures. She was never in bed before twelve or later" (Lessing 44). She was so much involved and contented with her bachelor life that she didn't think of marrying someone. She reached the age of thirties but she always thought herself as a teenage girl. Lessing writes about her that "she still wore her hair little girl fashion on her shoulders, and wore little girl frocks in pastel colors, and kept her shy, naive manner" (Lessing 46). She seemed not to "care for men" (Lessing 45) and had "a profound distaste for sex" (Lessing 46) because of her experiences of matrimonial relation of her parents who were a society to her. However, she could never avoid men out of her life because society did not allow her to live independently as she being a woman was an other being. Therefore, Mary as an unaware child "freely accepts his sub-mission" and subjection to such material practices inscribed by ISAs in the illusion that she was freely making those choices "all by himself" (Althusser "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"). In fact, it seems "her life was entirely dependent upon men" (Lessing 45). De Beauvoir says that, "No subject posits itself spontaneously and at once as the inessential from the outset; it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One. But in order for the Other not to turn into the One, the Other has to submit to this foreign point of view" (7). So the woman becomes other and is compelled to obey man as this standpoint is inculcated in her by the society.

Mary perhaps forgot that the dominant ideological perception of society wants woman to get married at a specific age when she becomes adult. It doesn't tolerate woman to act like girls of teenagers even when they become mature enough to get married. It is not in favor of the unmarried freedom of woman. It wants her to be subjugated by men and marriage. Society is one who makes women an other being inferior to men and dependent of men. The colleagues and friends of Mary often blame her living like a teenage girl. They were greatly interpellated by the institution of patriarchy and culture. "She's not fifteen

any longer: it is ridiculous! Someone should tell her about her clothes” (Lessing 47). It is compulsory for woman according to the ideological institution of culture to get married and make her family up to the age of adulthood. Mary was a qualified woman and was having a very good job too. She was earning a handsome income. She wanted to live an independent life and didn't want to get married. Lois Tyson says, “Undesirable ideologies promote repressive political agendas and, in order to ensure their acceptance among the citizenry, pass themselves off as natural ways of seeing the world instead of acknowledging themselves as ideologies” (56). But Ideological State Apparatuses indulged in the way of her freedom. ISA turned her into a subject with the belief that a married woman with the support of a man can live a better life than an unmarried woman supporting herself independently.

In her desperation to prove herself otherwise, Mary married Dick Turner. As Sima Aghazadeh aptly remarks, “Mary bases her new identity as a white landowner's wife on collective expectations rather than on her own nature. Her marriage is what the patriarchal culture expects every woman to perform to preserve the patterns of male domination in family” (109). Dick married Mary to escape his loneliness, as he thinks it is “essential for him to love somebody” to set up a family and procreate (Lessing 56). Both Dick and Mary became interpellated by the culture of society which requires setting a proper family, living as husband and wife. Althusser says, “*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject” (Althusser “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus”). Mary and Dick also became subject of the institution of culture in which man is dominant and woman is other.

Dick after marriage started having a lot of expectations from Mary. He was thinking her to be “a practical, adaptable, serene person who would need only a few weeks on the farm to become what he wanted her to be” as she is an other beings having no feelings and priorities of her own (Lessing 58). But unfortunately all expectations went wrong. Marriage of Dick and Mary could not prove successful. The matrimonial relation of Mary resulted in insecurity, loneliness and miseries instead of giving her a happy and free life. Distance of Mary with her husband widened because of her incompatibility with him and his patriarchal nature. Dick was a private patriarch as “private patriarchy is based upon household production, with a patriarch controlling women individually and directly in the relatively private sphere of the home” (Walby 178). Dick's attitude with Mary was based on his selfishness and indifferent

nature, not giving her importance as she was a woman and therefore other. This behavior of Dick destined Mary to remain a housewife and trapped in her fabricated, hollow, pretentious, false and subservient existence. “These images of woman originate from a man's perspective not a woman's which results in woman viewing her possibilities in terms of man's protection and material provision” (De Beauvoir 6). It resulted in killing all the dreams and seeking of identity for Mary.

The moment a girl reaches adolescence, she is reminded of her femininity. The double standards and dichotomous attitude which continues to operate throughout a woman's life start right in her parent's home. She is prevented from developing her individuality. She is constantly reminded by her mother that a girl is destined for man and the one who gets the most masculine attention is the luckiest one. A woman in a male-dominated society is thus conditioned into the emotional and cognitive traits of subordination and dependence. (Arora 53)

They were both living a discomfort life. They were not happy with each other. Dick was interpellated by the patriarchy prevailing in the society. He wanted his wife to conform to his traditions and principles of life and obey him as he desired her to be.

Mary was not satisfied and happy with her marriage, but she could not take divorce from Dick because she was interpellated by the institution of marriage and culture. After her marriage she was turned into a subject. Institution of culture does not allow a woman to take divorce because it is considered a great sin. She has to live and tolerate with her husband whatever the circumstances may be. She wanted to live an independent life again. She wanted to go back to her normal life but she was under interpellation of the institution of marriage and culture. Roberta Rubenstein explains that *The Grass is Singing* “concerns about social, economic and political structures, with being female in a conventional man's world” (17). After her marriage, interpellated Mary was forced to follow the teachings of society.

The women who marry Dick learn sooner or later that there are two things they can do: they can drive themselves mad, tear themselves into pieces in storms of futile anger and rebellion; or they can hold themselves tight and go bitter. Mary with the memory of her own mother recurring more and more frequently, like an older, sardonic double of herself walking beside her, followed the course her upbringing made inevitable. (Lessing 110)

All these things added to her depression and schizophrenic feelings. She tried to escape to her previous life to be free again but all in vain. Fighting with the patriarchal and indifferent behavior of her husband, she temporarily got attached to her slave who murdered her at the end of the novel. Thus Mary an independent, self-assured and a friendly woman became a victim of marriage because of ideological state interpellations who cannot make a woman live a free independent life as she is always considered as other and obeying to patriarchy is the only justification of her existence.

8-CONCLUSION

In both the texts, women in their role of other are under the subjugation of men. They want freedom but they have to be obedient to patriarchy. This method of subjugation is disciplinary in nature and more subtle in its exercise; it involves women in the domain of other. Women have to obey in order to conform to the traditions of the society. Thus it is proved from both the texts that it is the interpellation of society that forces men to enslave women in the panoptic power of patriarchy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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