

An Interpretation of Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* from the Perspective of Polyphonic Theory

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The Grass Is Singing, the famous British female writer Doris Lessing's maiden work, has drawn much critical attention since its publication in 1950. This novel has been studied from many perspectives at home and abroad, including feminism, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, spatial criticism, etc. In recent years, more and more scholars have paid attention to the complicated and diverse narration of this novel, but few scholars have studied its polyphonic features. This paper tries to explore the polyphonic features of this novel from its diverse narration and the subjectivity of the female protagonist Mary Turner by applying Bakhtin's polyphonic theory.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, polyphonic theory, dialogism, subjectivity

Introduction

The Grass Is Singing, the famous British female writer Doris Lessing's maiden work, has drawn much critical attention and brought a wide range of comments from scholars abroad and at home since its publication in 1950. Although it's Lessing's first literary work, it shows multiple complex themes as well as diverse narrative strategies, which imbues the novel with a profound connotation and a unique artistic charm. Its dialogism, multi-voiced narration and the subjectivity of the protagonist much parallels to the polyphonic novels.

"Polyphony", originally a musical term, is a major form of multi-voice music, as opposed to "homophony". The characteristic of "homophony" is that it often has a dominant high-pitched part with the strongest melody, and most of the other parts are harmony, which plays a foil role. "Polyphony" consists of more than two groups of simultaneous voices that are independent but harmoniously unified to form a single piece of music. Mikhail Bakhtin first borrowed the concept of polyphony from music to novel writing in literature and proposed "the polyphonic theory". He used polyphony theory to describe the characteristics of multi-voices, counterpoints, and dialogue in Dostoevsky's novels in *Dostoevsky's Creation* (1929), and further developed and systematized the theory of polyphony in *Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963), thus providing literary critics with a new critical perspective on the novel writing.

Multi-voiced Dialogues in Diverse Narration

Polyphonic novels are permeated with dialogism as a whole, and there is a dialogic relationship between all the components of the novel structure, just like the counterpoint melodies that are opposite to each other.

Therefore, polyphonic novels emphasize the dialogue, not the monologue. The discourse of polyphonic novels can be divided into two forms by Bakhtin: "great dialogue" and "micro-dialogue" and the two forms of dialogue run through Dostoevsky's novels, shaping the independent and free images of the protagonists. "Great dialogue" actually refers to the whole novel, its texture, and the dialogue relationship between the characters. "Micro-dialogue" mainly happens between the characters or within their innermost world. It means the internal dialogue within the protagonists' speeches or their self-consciousness.

Multi-voiced dialogues serve as the core of polyphonic novels, this "dialogism" feature of polyphonic novels is manifested in the whole structure of the novel as "great dialogue" and in speeches of the text as "micro-dialogue". In *The Grass Is Singing*, such multi-voiced dialogues lie in its diverse narration.

The structure of the whole novel is a "great dialogue". The novel consists of eleven chapters in total, in which the ending of the protagonists is told in the first chapter and a flashback about the protagonists is given in chronological order in the following chapters. Lessing adopts a non-linear narrative structure to develop this story instead of using the traditional narration in chronological order. In addition, the narrator's perspective and the character's perspective are flexibly shifted in the novel. At first sight, the novel seems loosely and disorderly structured on the surface but this deliberate design of the structure makes the novel exciting. The first chapter begins with a news report on a murder case of a white woman Mary Turner and describes the local whites' response to Mary's death from the omniscient perspective in an objective mood. Meanwhile, the narrator's point of view shifts to the third-person internal perspectives between Tony Marston and Charlie Slatter to present their inner world activities respectively when they get involved in this murder case and the status of Dick Turner and Moses. The disparate performances of the protagonists in the opening chapter can easily lead readers to think it's a detective story and then wonder who is the real murderer and what are the causes behind this tragedy, for love, money, dignity or politics? However, when the novel comes to the second chapter, the author puts the murder case aside and gives a flashback to review Mary's life from her unhappy childhood, carefree youth, disastrous marriage, and death from Mary's third-person limited perspective. In the tenth chapter, the narrators shift for the second time to the third-person perspectives of Slatter and Marston respectively to reveal their observations and feelings towards Mary when she is alive at the last moment, which connects to the chapter one to form a closed loop. In the last chapter, the narrator dwells on Mary's psychological activities at her last moment of her life from Mary's third-person internal perspective and also describes the process of Moses's murder from the omniscient perspective. On the one hand, the narrator tells the story and relationship between characters from the omniscient perspective, which observes the external environment and characters objectively, without the author's comments. On the other hand, the narrator employs a mixture of characters' third-person limited perspectives of Mary, and third-person internal perspectives of Mary, Marston, and Slatter to present the contradictions and biases from different biased points of view, which not only complicates the narrative voice but also invites readers to understand the characters more deeply from different perspectives. In the novel, the coexistence of the different perspectives means the multiplicity of narrative voices, which conforms to the polyphonic novels.

In *The Grass Is Singing*, apart from the great dialogues, there are also micro-dialogues. Bakhtin defines the micro-dialogue as "dialogue penetrates within, into every word of the novel, making it double-voiced, into every gesture, every mimic movement on the hero's face, making it convulsive and anguished" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 40). Micro-dialogue mainly happens between the characters or within their innermost world. It means the internal

dialogue within the protagonists' speeches or their self-consciousness. In the novel, Lessing abandons the traditional character's first-person narrator to express the protagonist's inner world activities, normally known as the stream-of-consciousness or monologue, but instead, she chooses the character's third-person narrative point to show the psychological status of the protagonist. In *Hybridity as a Rhetorical Strategy in Doris Lessing's Narration*, the author Huang Chunyan analyzes such kind of narration can be defined as free indirect discourse or narrated monologue according to the scholar Dorrit Cohn and thinks the free indirect speech is conducive to polyphony, and quotes Dagid Lodge to help clarify the differences between free indirect speech, stream-of-consciousness, and interior monologue. Some basic features can be found in free indirect speech: protagonists' inner thoughts are described in the third-person omniscient perspective with the past tense and no indirect grammatical tags like "she thought", "she wondered", "she asked herself" etc. appearing at the beginning. But these indirect grammatical tags include "she thought", "she said" and "she knew" which will gradually appear as the plot develops from a third-person internal perspective. In *The Grass Is Singing*, many free indirect speeches can be found. The story from chapter two begins to use a third-person omniscient perspective to narrate Mary's life and gradually transitions to the third-person limited and internal perspectives of great length to present Mary's psychological activities. The process of undergoing change on an internal level of Mary is fully displayed in her indirect speeches, for example, her inner emotional change to marriage. Born in a white working family in Southern Rhodesia, Mary spends an unhappy and extremely poor childhood. She and her "fuddled" father, and her "bitter" mother live in a "fly-away little house that was like a small wooden box on stilts" (Lessing, 2008, p. 31). Desperate to run away from her parents, she tries hard and succeeds in getting a "white collar" job and lives a decent life independently by herself. And she is satisfied with her status living alone, away from her parents. "She was extremely happy, so happy that she dreaded going home at holiday times" and "Mary was pleased to be rid of him. Being alone in the world had no terrors for her at all, she liked it" (Lessing, 2008, p. 32). She wants to live a single life by herself. These free indirect speeches show Mary's relief from the riding of her parents. At first, She doesn't want to get married subconsciously and even has unrealistic ideas about marriage. "Still, she would be her own mistress: that was marriage, what her friends had married for – to have homes of their own and no one to tell them what to do" (Lessing, 2008, p. 52). But after she is married to Dick, she finds her marriage is a duplicate of her parents', which brought her painful memories of her childhood. "She was speaking in a new voice for her, a voice she had never used before in her life. It was taken directly from her mother when she had had those scenes over money with her father" (Lessing, 2008, p. 85). And she gradually understands her mother in her long-lasting marriage. "She saw herself, that barelegged, bareheaded, silent child, wandering in and out of the chicken-coop house—close to her mother, wrung simultaneously by love and pity for her, and by hatred for her father, and she imagined her own child, a small daughter, comforting her as she had comforted her mother" (Lessing, 2008, p. 153). In the long-lasting and tortured marriage, Mary gradually feels disappointed and despair about her marriage. "she felt sick; but it was not for some days that the buoyant hope she had been living on died" (Lessing, 2008, p. 149). "she looked at everything straight, without illusions, seeing herself and Dick and their relationship to each other and to the farm, and their future, without a shadow of false hope, as honest and stark as the truth itself...It was useless" (Lessing, 2008, pp. 154-155). Mary's inner world changes towards marriage are fully presented in the free indirect speeches and readers can immerse themselves in Mary's character.

The polyphonic structure of this novel is achieved by the mixture of the non-linear narrative structure, diverse and shifting narrative perspectives, as well as the free indirect speech in great dialogue and micro-dialogue.

Protagonist' Subjectivity: Mary's Inner Conflicts

Another basic feature of polyphonic novels is the subjectivity, which is aimed at the protagonist. In Dostoevsky's novels, the protagonists are presented as equals to the author. Protagonists are not merely objects observed and described by the author but also subjects with self-consciousness and a proclivity for reflection. They maintain a relative freedom and independence from the author and the author's commentary. Besides, they are individuals who engage in continuous reflection on their own lives, struggling in the contradictions that emerge through their psychological activities when they are confronted with disparate voices. In *The Grass Is Singing*, the subjectivity can be found in Mary's constant inner conflicts in the dialogues within herself. She experiences difficulties in establishing her identity and is compelled to assume the responsibilities associated with her status as a white woman in a white colonial patriarchal society, both in her interactions with the black natives and in her role as a wife within the context of her marriage to a white man.

The female protagonist Mary is endowed with double identity in the white colonial patriarchal society: the white—the colonial and superior compared to the black; the woman—the oppressed and inferior to the man.

At the beginning, Mary is under the control of the author and dominated by the author's commentary. Mary is described like a heartless person because she lives a single carefree life independently with a well-paid job in the city and she doesn't consider about marriage. Her negative attitude towards marriage probably because of her unhappy childhood brought by parents' failed marriage. But being a woman in the patriarchal society, Mary is expected to get married at certain age like other women in the girl's club. Under social pressure, she hurriedly gets married to white farmer Dick Turner who she doesn't know very well after her thirty's birthday. "And she began looking around for someone to marry...but, after all, she was nothing if not a social being, though she had never thought of 'society', the abstraction" (Lessing, 2008, p. 40). It seems that Mary is like a puppet, whose marriage is arranged by the author. "Still, she would be her own mistress: that was marriage, what her friends had married for—to have homes of their own and no one to tell them what to do. She felt vaguely that she had been right to marry—everyone had been right" (Lessing, 2008, p. 52). But after marriage, Mary begins to wake up and win back her independent consciousness and voice from the author. Mary gradually realizes her situation as a woman in the patriarchal society, she loses her job, confined to the family, and completely relies on her husband. However, her husband Dick can go out without any limitation and deal with natives on his farm. At the beginning of their marriage, Mary once runs away returning to the city to find her former secretary job but refused by the manager because a married woman is not cost-effective than an unmarried woman according to the company and society. There is no second way for Mary to go, Mary is compelled to return to her husband. She has tried times and struggled in her marriage but failed. Mary suffers from poverty and spiritual loneliness for a long time and repeatedly goes back and forth in hope and disappointment, finally to despair in her torturing marriage till her adultery with Moses. Mary's dilemma as a woman and her psychological process in marriage with twists and turns are fully unfolded through her inner dialogues. Therefore, Mary's subjectivity is built in her awakening consciousness that struggles with her marriage.

In addition, being a white, Mary is educated from an early age to treat the native black as animals from generation to generation in the white colonial community, but Mary sometimes realize her guilt of maltreating to natives. "She had forgotten about his food. She never thought of natives as people who had to eat or sleep: they were either there, or they were not and what their lives were when they were out of her sight she had never paused to think. She nodded, feeling guilty. Then she smothered her guilt, thinking, 'It's his fault for not keeping it properly clean in the first place'" (Lessing, 2008, p. 79). Actually, Mary never bothers to know these black natives, so she makes excuses for her abusing them. However, Mary begins to directly face her inner world when Moses looks straight into her eyes without fear because she fears of Moses' retribution for her whipping a scar on his face. She is constantly tortured by the contradiction. On the one hand, she is desperate for Moses' love and care that she never wins from her father; while on the other hand, she insults Moses for his black color. For example, when Moses resigned from her, she suddenly burst into tears and begs Moses not to leave, which is unreasonable for her because it's she who wants Moses to leave rather her husband. Deep in her heart, she doesn't want Moses to leave and she can feel the care with the companion of Moses. So, she splits herself. She felt herself like "a taut-drawn thread, stretched between two immovable weights" (Lessing, 2008, p. 169). Mary is experiencing a conflict between her innermost feelings and the requirement of her social norms, and trapped in a state of emotional distress. There are two voices hidden in Mary's inner world, which is the double-voiced discourse. Sometimes, Mary follows her heart to keep close to Moses, but sometimes, Mary cannot stick herself and humiliates Moses with other whites. Finally, she stands on the white colonial side when their secret is found by the British young man Tony Marston, who betrays and irritates Moses. In the end, Mary is stabbed to death by Moses.

The ceaseless contradictory and conflicting consciousness are intertwined and entangled in Mary's life regardless of her identity as a white or as a woman. There are always two voices in her inner world: what life she wants to live and what life society requires her to live. She has an independent consciousness because she is always thinking and reflecting on her life. There are always dialogues with different voices in her inner world. Mary's conflicting consciousness as a protagonist's subjectivity shows the polyphonic feature of the novel.

Conclusion

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the polyphonic features of Dostoevsky's novels lie in multiple different voices and the protagonist's subjectivity in the dialogism. In *The Grass Is Singing*, the multiple voices are not only reflected in Lessing's diverse narrative strategies in the great dialogue but also in the free indirect speeches of the protagonists in the micro-dialogue. Lessing adopts a mixture of the omniscient perspective and the third-person perspectives of different characters in great dialogue and presents the free indirect speeches of the protagonist in micro-dialogue, offering multiple voices in the novel. And the subjectivity of the female protagonist Mary Turner can be embodied in her contradictory consciousness in her internal dialogues with herself. In Mary's internal dialogues, she is not the object observed and described by the author, but the subject to constantly explores and rebel in her world. She has independent consciousness and struggles in her life. She is tortured by two voices: one is following her own will; another is conforming with the norm of white colonial patriarchal society. Therefore, the polyphonic features can be found in the diverse narrative strategies, free indirect speeches as well as the subjectivity of the female protagonist Mary in *The Grass Is Singing*.

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