



Mary's identity crisis and construction of "Lacanian Self" in *The Grass Is Singing*

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Abstract

Throughout her life, Mary struggles with her identity, but she still cannot escape the unlucky fate. This paper analyzes Mary's identity crisis and identity construction with Lacan's Subject theory, showing the relationship between Self and the other and revealing the reasons for Mary's failure in identity construction.

Keywords: identity crisis; self-construction; the imaginary order; the symbolic order

Introduction

Lacan's Theory of Subject

Lacan offers a different perspective on Freud's psychoanalytic theories concerning ego, id and superego. Realizing the nothingness of subject, he not only fundamentally denies Freud's id or the primitive desire but also makes a denial of ego. Through Lacan's Mirror theory, every human being lacks subjectivity at the beginning of his or her birth. Lacan's Mirror Stage theory declares a direct opposition to Cartesianism, leading one to reject any experience directly derived from the philosophy of "Je pense, donc je suis", thus distinguishing Lacan's theory from the philosophical tradition established in the West since the 17th century, which attempts to ground human knowledge in unquestionable certainty. (Liu, 2006: 27) ^[6] Here, Freud's prescription of narcissism-ideal self, i.e., "the kind of person that the individual subject expects himself to be", is identified in the opposite relation of negativity, and Freud's narcissism becomes the love of false illusions in the water. The beginning of Freud's self must then be nothingness. This is not the subjugation of one self-consciousness to another, not the master of one entity to the slave of another, but the slavery of the "I" by the relation between illusion and nothingness, which is the essence of Lacan's mirror image. (Zhang, 2011: 92) ^[14] However, Lacan believes that subject's self is always missing, and everyone is born with no distinction between subject and object, Self and the Other. In order to gain the approval of those around them, self can be alienated, and therefore the final result is complete alienation, catering to others and disguising oneself. The subject is controlled by the external environment, and it is futile for a person to change the environment in order to acquire self. One must adapt to the social rules and order, otherwise one can only remain in a state of self-alienation from which one cannot withdraw.

Lacan divides human subjectivity into three levels, the Imaginary Order, the Symbolic Order, and the Real Order. The Imaginary Order arises in the Mirror Stage, where infants from 6 to 18 months of age see their images in the mirror and find that their previously fragmented senses are integrated into a complete image. The infant identifies the image in the mirror as "self" and becomes obsessed with the ideal self. (Li, 2013: 103) From then on, the infant is able to gradually distinguish the subject from the object, the outside

from the world. The other at this time is little other, such as the image in the mirror, the face of the parents, etc. In this period self here is an illusory self and an imaginary self. The real subject is not born. It is only after the next stage, when there is always a social Symbolic Order, that the real subject comes into being. Lacan calls this stage the "Oedipus complex," the period from about three to six years of age when the child begins to accept and submit to the "law" brought about by the "father". In this process, the child begins to accept and submit to the influence of the "law" brought by the "father", entering the "symbolic world" of linguistic symbols. Lacan introduces the metaphor of the "father", which in his case represents a law, a family and social order. The recognition and acceptance of the "father" by young children is also a recognition of social regulations. (Si, 2012: 57) ^[11] Therefore, patriarchy is the Other imposed on women.

Doris Lessing has shown the loss and construction of women's identity in the world of the Other in several works. The most representative book is *The Grass Is Singing*, in which Mary experiences a series of hardships. The white woman continues to alienate herself in the world of the Other, which eventually leads to the destruction of self.

The Plight of White Woman in South Africa in the 20th Century

Women in the early 20th century face double oppression from the patriarchal society and colonialism. On the one hand, they lose themselves when obeying the men. On the other hand, they struggle in the contradiction between the release of the emotion and the restraint of their behaviors.

1. The Binary Opposition between the White and the Black

In the 20th century, the white slaved and slaughtered the black with the slogan of bringing civilization and education. According to Said, "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony." (Said, 1979: 5) ^[9] Colonization is an output of a developed country in politics, economics and culture to a poor country. Before the white's invasion, the black are self-sufficient and have a happy life in their land. After that, their land is deprived, and their freedom is taken away. Instead, they work for the white

with a little of money for basic existence. In the white's views, they are foolish and ignorant, and have bad qualities and are not reliable. In a long term, the idea of white supremacy has rooted in every white man's mind. Their language, customs, ideas and culture occupy the black's lives. So the opposition between the white and the black exists.

Facon, in his work *Racism and Culture*, points out that "the culture once living and open to the future, becomes closed, fixed in the colonial status, caught in the yoke of oppression." (Facon, 1952: 44) ^[2] There are many illustrations of unequal treating to the black. For example, English is regarded as the superior language so it is not allowed to be spoken by the black. When they speak with the white, they are forbidden to watch faces of the white. Once the robbery, steal or rape happens, the white believe that the black must have done that. All of these bring out physical and spiritual damage to the black man. "Courbash is usually used to whip the blacks. It shows the segregation between the whites and the blacks, symbolizing the oppression against the blacks." (Yang, 2012: 39) ^[13] The white have power and right to crucify the black. If necessary, it is not a pity to crucify them to death. Besides, landlords usually restrain the black in the way of marriage. This way can prevent effectively the black from running away from the farm. In the racial society, his status and political right are not comparable with the white. If a black man has sex with a white woman, he won't have a place to put his feet on society. If someone challenges the taboo, he will be separated with all people. Starter states in his paper that "violence in the colonies does not have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm's length; it seeks to dehumanize them." (Sartre, 1967: 13) ^[10]

2. The Binary Opposition between Males and Females

Gender discrimination is a Symbolic Order in South Africa in the 20th century. In the colonized social system, the dual opposition between males and females exists, and the perception of the male-supremacy is rooted in everyone's mind. Patriarchy, according to the explanation of Kate Millett, is "granted total ownership over wife and children, including the powers of physical abuse and even those of sale and murder". (Millett, 1971: 34). Almost everything in the colony is controlled by man, and man is the central figure in society. Most women are forced to accept the ideas imposed on them. They behave according to unequal rules and lose their subjectivity and the right of speech. As a result, they become appendages of man. They are subjected to the control of males as a dumb person. That is what the patriarchal society hopes for women.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out that "in the context of colonial production, the Subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the Subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." (Spivak, 1999: 287) ^[12] Thus females' identities of the other in the colonial background are highlighted. This kind of environment of the other pushes women to submit themselves. Naturally, the dual opposition takes place.

Mary's Identity Crisis

Mary's identity crisis is caused by multiple causes, and her family and work are both subjected to a variety of restrictions in the world of the other.

1. The Little Other in the Imaginary Order

Mary suffers much misfortune in her childhood. She was born into a family full of scolding and complaint with her father drinking heavily and her mother spending days in tears. She complains about her husband's incompetence and the poverty of the family to Mary. Under the influence of her mother, Mary also begins to develop a distaste for her father. Lacan's Mirror theory believes that people are searching for a shadow at the beginning of their consciousness, and through this mirror image they complete their self-pursuit. However, in *The Grass Is Singing*, Mary mistakenly believes that her mother is her own shadow. Mary does not want to repeat her mother's mistakes, so Mary realizes the importance of independence from an early age. But the escape from the primitive family does not mean Mary's real independence and self-recognition. During her working period, she has her own unique style of dressing and way of thinking. Especially when it comes to marriage, she feels the unreliability of men. After she turns 30, everyone around her is already married, while she is left alone on her days off and feels empty and lonely. Besides, she gets all kinds of ridicule and contempt from her friends around her who think she is an alien. Unable to bear the pressure and abuse, she begins to drift into love, and eventually she marries a man who woos her in her haste. However, what she gains is the endless bickering in the marriage which is a repeat of her mother's mistake. In the Imaginary Order, her parents as the Other hinder Mary's self-development and construction of her identity.

2. The Big Other in the Symbolic Order

In the Symbolic Order, Mary is not fit for all aspects of her life. In a patriarchal society, Mary submits to the social order and social tradition of male supremacy. As Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not be with reference to man and not he with reverence to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other." (Beauvoir, 1974: xix) ^[1] The status of men is very different from that of women. Women do not have a voice in managing external affairs, and all they can do are to run the household. All external affairs are under the control of men. In Mary's opinion, her husband Dick should be a white male with a dominant position in the patriarchal society, and he should be one to keep his farm in order. However, it is not to be, and Dick does not show his strong side as a male. He is weak and incompetent when it comes to farm management, so Mary is unable to have a harmonious relationship with her husband, Dick. Mary does not complete her search for self in this world of the Other. As a result, she became frustrated and indifferent to all the people and things around her. In the struggle between self and the Other, she gradually goes against her original intention and forgets her dreams. Self-identity is gradually lost under the suppression of reality.

The Construction of Mary's Self-identity

The construction of Mary's identity exists at different stages. In the Imaginary Order, the construction of her own for the ideal self is initially shown in the face of the little Other. When entering the Symbolic Order after marriage, she attempts to manage the farm, struggles to maintain a harmonious conjugal relationship and has a relationship with the black slave, Moses. All of these deeds confirm Mary's efforts for self-identity construction.

1. The Search for the Ideal Self in the Imaginary Order

According to Lacan's theory, the Imaginary Order originates from mirror experiences in early childhood, yet can deeply influence one's adult experiences about others and the external world. The family environment and personal experiences during childhood can profoundly affect the formation of the self-subject later on. Therefore, because of her childhood misfortune, Mary is eager to break the restrictions imposed on her by her family, hoping that she will have her own freedom in her future work and will no longer be limited by others. Luckily, she manages to escape from her primitive family far away from the confinement imposed on her by her family and finds a job to support herself. After the death of her parents, she surprisingly feels a twinge of relief that she can finally stop putting up with the bickering and the disharmony between her parents. Mary's ideal self does not want to be a woman like her mother who spends all days around her husband and children. Instead, she is eager to support herself independently without relying on men. She is able to insist on her individuality with her childish dress and a decent job. This is Mary's way of fighting against the world of the Other, but it is clear that she is living in her own imagination. The process of construction of her own identity is very limited, and she only keeps her ideal self in her illusion in many cases.

2. The Construction of Identified Self in the Symbolic Order

Mary's compromise with marriage marks the beginning of her attempt to move out of the Imaginary Order and into the Symbolic Order. She begins to care about the ideas of others, seeks approval around her, and has to alienate herself. She gives up her previous way of dressing and the way of living and focuses on being a good wife. After realizing Dick's incompetence, Mary tries to take over the farm. During the time Dick is sick, Mary who never gets involved in the farm business steps out from her own narrow world and takes care of the farm well. She feels that she will make a difference in this patriarchal society, just as the men do as well, but with Dick's health recovery she carries these thoughts in the back of her head. She begins to feel ridiculous about her earlier ideas, arguing that managing the farm is supposed to be a man's job. Markow (1974)^[7] analyses that men are active, creative, immersed in and energized by their value-giving works, while women are reduced to seek definition through their husbands' works, thus they are slowly deteriorated into silent adjustment or madness.

At the same time, when looking after the frail Dick, Mary gives sympathy to him and wants to compensate her husband for emotional absence. Their relationship gradually returns to its former state, even more harmonious and friendly at one point. What is more, Mary even wishes to have a child to bring some hope and vitality to the family. Filled with anticipation and longing, Mary shows her energy. Yet all these signs towards a seemingly better condition are caused by Mary's compromise to the Other. She does not complete the construction of self. The nature of things is not changed. It is simply Dick's vulnerability that awakens Mary's compassion. Dick still does not become stronger to carry his responsibilities like a real man. To have a child is just a remedy to get rid of Mary's loneliness, which is not the crystal of love. Such a

construction of self is made in the constant alienation, and the final result gained can only be a more complete alienation, farther and farther away from the real self.

With the growing poverty in her life, Mary moves to leave her family's ties once and for all. At this time, she is determined to leave and has no intention of returning. She returns to the place where she worked before she got married, which can be considered as another attempt by Mary to fight for her self-identity. But the social order is brutally strict, and Mary has been fired from the rules. She no longer fits into the working pace in the city. In the eyes of others, she has no value and should have been a submissive housewife. Therefore, the construction of Mary's self-identity fails again. In the face of the powerful social environment and social order, Mary is still not free from the shackles.

Mary's self-identity is also reflected in her intimate relationship with Moses, a black man, where the libido quantum has been overpowering Mary. Especially when Mary sees "the pressure of the sun against the back of his bare neck, the sharp hot stones pressing up under his soles", (Lessing, 2008: 34) she is fascinated by Moses' body. Because of Moses' tender care, Mary is impressed by his bravery, fortitude and strength. She accepts Moses and has a sexual relationship with him, which makes Mary energetic. Adultery between the white and the black is despised and scorned according to the social order of that time. While the scandal is revealed, the deep-seated racism in Mary's mind makes her abandon Moses. So Moses becomes vindictive and kills Mary. Joy (2009)^[3] points out the abnormal interracial relationship is a cathartic and redemptive tool to extenuate the crimes of white colonists' ruthless colonial ruling. In addition, he stresses that the internalized guilt is the main cause of Mary's tragic destiny. This challenge to tradition is caused by Mary's lack of happiness and her desperate search for temporary satisfaction. In the end, Mary loses herself in the Symbolic Order and she does not achieve the fully healthy development of the subject. On the one hand, Mary wants to gain self-identity. On the other hand, she has to follow the rules in South Africa, struggling between self and the Other and getting into confusion, which ultimately leads to tragedy. But still, Mary's continuous attempts in her personal life have a positive effect on the construction of her own identity.

Conclusion

Throughout her life, Mary is bound by the Other. In the Imaginary Order, Mary treats her mother image as her imaginary self in the mirror, a false image that leads to the failure of her ideal self-construction in the early stage. In the Symbolic Order, Mary keeps trying to identify herself in the world of the Other, which only results in the constant alienation of herself. Both the little Other of the Imaginary Order and the big Other of the Symbolic Order have produced a tremendous negative impact on Mary. Even though Mary actively seeks to find herself during her formative years, her tragic fate is not changed. This tragedy is not personal, but for all women living in the 20th century in South Africa. They are subjected to all kinds of discrimination and unfair treatment in a male-dominated society. In the face of the great power of the social environment, there is little possibility for woman to fight for their rights successfully, so death becomes the only outcome.

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