

**PLSJ**

*Persian Literary Studies Journal (PLSJ)*

Vol. 8, No. 13, 2019

ISSN: 2322-2557, Online ISSN: 2717-2848

DOI: 10.22099/JPS.2021.28181.1076, pp. 1-16

## **Foucault's Theory of Power in *the Edrissis' House* and *the Grass Is Singing***

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### **Abstract**

Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, believes that power in its modern concept consists of structures that enclosed the entire human destiny; resistance against power is also determined by the power. The present study aims to conduct a comparative study of the novels *Edrissis' House* by Ghazaleh Alizadeh and *The Grass Is Singing* by Doris Lessing based on Foucault's theory of power in order to investigate the similarity of the powerful structures defined in the novels. It is argued that power structures in both novels are very similar. It is worth noting that the gender authority in the novel written by Alizadeh, who is an author belonging to an Eastern traditional society, has been imposed on a female's body more aggressively and the women's revolts have been enclosed in the circle of power in both novels.

**Keywords:** Ghazaleh Alizadeh; Doris Lessing; Michel Foucault; Power, Woman

### **Introduction**

Different types of story writing are reflections of the writer's society and indicate the writer's critical look at the events that are imposed on humans by the society. Considering the importance of literary and artistic works in the philosophical system of Michel Foucault and the effective use of these works to

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Received: 22/01/2018

Accepted: 17/07/2018

explain his thoughts, one can observe various fields of power in human societies through the novel and recognize the importance of literature in displaying the normal process of the power structures. Ghazaleh Alizadeh in *Edrissis' House* and Doris Lessing in *The Grass is Singing* have succeeded in representing these areas of power and their influence on the fate of heroes of the novels, who are somehow representative of the true human beings enclosed by the power; the similarities of these power structures can be understood due to the differences between the two authors' societies.

It is worth noting that Ghazaleh Alizadeh was born in 1947 and her first novel was published in 1975. She studied philosophy at Sorbonne University. While she was suffering from cancer, she attempted suicide twice; she finally committed suicide by hanging herself from a tree in Javaher Deh, in 1996. Doris May Lessing is a British feminist novelist who was born in Iran, in 1919. She was awarded the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature. Her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, was published in London, in 1950, which was critically acclaimed. Lessing died on 17 November 2013, aged 94 in London.

The purpose of this comparative study is to find similarities and differences in the power structure in the novels, which belong to different environments, as well as discover the answer to this question "how did the two writers look at these power structures?" Alizadeh and Lessing, as two educated women, have investigated the issues of their societies and have identified the different angles of power ruling human life. It is assumed that living in the two eastern and western societies causes a difference in the views and beliefs of the authors, but the study of the two works indicate other points that will be mentioned below.

### **Discussion**

The comparison of the two works based on Michel Foucault's theory of power requires the definition of some of his views on power; in the following, we present a summary of the novels in order to illustrate the various structures of power in the two works.

### **Foucault and the Theory of Power**

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is a French thinker and theorist calling himself an "anonymous philosopher," who "wants to go toward a philosophical system but cannot" (Ahmadi, 2013, p. 193). Foucault's philosophy analyzes the limitations of life very well and shows us the way of finding freedom and liberation. His philosophy is "philosophy of freedom" (Rajchman, 1985, p. 2). Foucault's studies have crossed the boundaries of humanities and literature and have deeply connected to the fields of politics, medicine, sociology and psychology. However, he could not be limited by any of these sciences, he was a supporter of absolute freedom of thought, and he did not follow any of the known methods and schools. One of Foucault's most important theories has been the field of authority and the identification of the origin of the power structures. He attributed a new ontology to power and knew this new structure as a result of the modern age. He considered a special episteme or notion of knowledge for every era and "claiming that the epistemological relations govern each of the "knowledge systems" which various forms of science and knowledge will gain their essence in the framework of these systems that it means, in every era, the ruling notion has a particular discourse rule" (Zaimaran, 2011, p. 21).

Foucault rejected the theory in which power was considered as a single entity. He introduced power as a kind of system, which has disseminated throughout the society, like the links of a chain, and a tremendous normalization has been created inside it. "We are not facing the power which belongs to one person and he, alone and completely, can impose it on the other. Here, the power is a device that everyone is involved in, whether they are executives or those who are exercised by the power" (Foucault, 1981, p. 156).

Hence, he considers a wide range, which embraces all relations between individuals, for the power. He believes that wide power relations "have different forms and play a significant role in family relationships, in institutions or offices"

(Mills, 2010, p.63). The shadow of power imposes various social and historical constraints on human destiny, challenges and weakens the human's personality in opposition to social structures; and in an increasing attempt to place human spirit and body into normative forms, as far as culture undertakes the effectiveness of this normalization through the use of rational tools (see Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1997, p. 59). Foucault likens a society in which members are constantly exposed to supervision and control to a prison which its guards are individuals, institutions, laws, traditions and different beliefs that attempt to discipline the society through repressing people. Power creates asymmetric relationships by using social and political laws and ceremonies. Foucault believes that the power relations have a dynamic nature that is not created solely in order to control the function of the institutions and the power function would be very important (see Foucault, vol 1, 1990, p. 82).

Foucault believes that the power, along with knowledge, has tried to control humans through capturing them in the form of subject and although, the human body was the target of power in the past, yet, from the eighteenth century onwards, "the body is no longer being targeted, but the soul. The atonement on the body should be replaced with a punishment that affects the depths of the heart, mind, will, and desire" (Foucault, 2014, p. 27). Moreover, "according to Foucault, the human is a "captive ruler" and a spectator who is exposed to the exhibition" (Zaimaran, 2011, p. 126).

From Foucault's point of view, the power, based on similarity and normalization, seeks to apply social habits in order to destroy the individual's identity and take individuality of man. Hence, Foucault's recommendation on not to accept the identity created by the power and society has to be considered. Foucault argues that "wherever there is power, there is resistance as well, and this resistance is never out of the power relationship" (Foucault, vol 1, 1990, p. 95). However, Foucault examines different forms of resistance and made attempts to disassociate the relationships in order to understand the power relationships (see Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1997, p. 346). However, this

disobedience and resistance will not be hidden from the disciplinary institutions that control all points and moments; Foucault considers supervision and normalization as important tools of power. Although, according to Foucault, the resistance to power only happens in a situation which the structure of power permits to be exercised, however, this rebellion against social pressures leads to the definition of new individuality and identity for the individual, which is the product of thinking in order to preserve individual liberty and the wide recognition of one's self. In fact, the individual revolts against the stereotypical definitions of the society through refusing to accept the wide norms that create the society, and this rebellion is combined with a vague pain making the individual to assess his position in the community, to the extent that the individual tries to create a new identity for himself. Foucault sought the liberation of the individual and believed that the humanities, social sciences and the whole truth were part of the process of power over the human which was trying to tame the man. Hence, he forgot the dream of truth for the liberation of the individual. He did not consider freedom and individuality to be subjective and abstract, but considered them as our physical life which should be separated from the social discipline (see Merquior, 2010, p. 143).

### **The summary of *Edrissis' House* and *The Grass Is Singing***

This novel describes the events that occur in the city of Ashgabat in the house of Edrissi; some newcomers enter the house of Edrissi as the heroes with the victory of a proletarian revolution and the arrival of the central firehouse company. The main objective of the new revolution is the struggle against capitalism; hence the rich are the targets of new power. The fate of the Edrissi family changes when the newcomers enter the house. Mrs. Edrissi who, when she was young, loved a rebellious man named Ghobad, meets him among the fighters and the years that she wasted for this love make her despair; so she tries

to stay away from Ghobad. Leqa, the timid daughter of Mrs. Edrissi, who is not beautiful, unlike other girls in the family, is very afraid of the masculine world. Wahhab, a graduate student from the United Kingdom, is constantly thinking of his late aunt, Rahila.

All heroes are a kind of spy for the central firehouse; until a woman named Roxana Yashwili, who is a famous theater actress, arrives at house; she bears a strange resemblance to Rahila. This similarity causes Wahhab to be attracted to Roxana. After the arrival of Roxana, the characters start talking of the deviation of the new revolution from its previous beliefs and they, one after the other, begin to protest against the commands of the central firehouse. The presence of Roxana in the house eliminates animosities and stresses; and Yunes tells the tragic life story of each character in the house through his writings, on the night that is considered as the last supper at the house. After hearing the suffering of each person, the people of the house feel they are sympathetic towards each other. Eventually, Roxana, Mrs. Edrissi, Shaukat, Ghobad, Kaveh and Borzu are arrested by the firehouse. Other heroes are also fired from the house and they are sent to public houses; Wahhab leaves the country, and Leqa, who was just a piano player before the arrival of heroes, discovers her inner talent with the help of Shaukat and finds the power of social life; hence, in the end, she becomes the heiress of the destroyed house of Edrissis.

Lessing tells the story of the life and death of a woman, called Mary, who lives in a South African farm in a poor family. Mary's father is a habitual drunkard man and her mother is a wretched woman who has lost her two older children due to illness. Mary grows up with a sense of hatred towards the farms; she works in the city at a young age, and with the death of her parents her connection to the farms is completely cut off. She lives in a comfortable and peaceful way, but, in her thirties, to comply with the path of social beliefs and norms, she marries Dick Turner, a man who she does not know very well. Mary is facing poverty after arriving at the farm of Dick; she is forced to deal with the black workers and these encounters shape the events of the story and life of Mary.

When a native worker, named Moses, becomes a servant in Mary's house, her life enters a new stage; a relationship of hatred along with love is created between Mary and Moses. Mary, who believes that whites should be masters over the native blacks, has an affair with Moses, leading to her mental deterioration. Dick sells the farm to his neighbor, Charlie Slatter, who is somehow a representative of the white community. On last night of the presence of Mary and Dick in their farm, Moses returns to the farm to kill Mary among the grasslands but he does not run from the scene and waits for the arrival of the police.

### **Differences and Similarities in the Fields of the Emergence of Power in Two Novels**

#### **Power of the Current Ruler**

The first and most important power structure in the novel *Edrissis' House* is the political power of the current government, which is in the hands of the central firehouse in the story; the communist leaders have this power and the people's revolution is the communist revolution. In the early chapters of the book, we see the tenacious encounter of the power in a confrontation with the Edrissi family; the current ruler of power has taken over their house, hence, different people come to the house without entry permission and the former order collapses and doubles the family confusion and lack of comfort. Edrissi family, who have been involved with their own inner pains, are finding themselves accused of new charges faced with judging looks and behaviors of the new characters. The power, by attacking the house, is destroying furniture and treating the house, its inhabitants and their assets recklessly. There is no longer any privacy or security for the family.

In the novel *The Grass is Singing*, the author has deliberately studied various areas of the power and has described the lives and destinies that she experienced

during her life in South Africa. By studying this novel, according to Foucault's theory of power, we can understand that the power has been shown in the form of the political power of British colonialism on the afflicted body of South Africa. The author's objection to the British racist regime in African natives' lands is shown through the words. She has been mocking the whites' community and its unwritten but powerful rules with a sarcastic and humorous language. In this novel, similar to the novel of Alizadeh, political power has the strongest impact on the lives of human beings, whether white or black natives, "The police was not arresting him. They were only watching him because he was a white man; and black people, even if they were a policeman, were not allowed to touch a white man, even if he was crazy" (Lessing, 2009, P. 24).

Lessing, due to living in South Africa, has very well described the living conditions of Black natives and white settlers. The author's emphasis on beliefs of the Whites and laws in relation to Blacks is strong; these laws are very powerful so that the whites do not tolerate any other newly arrived White, who does not obey the laws and considers the natives as human beings equal to the white population. Violence and death are the most natural things in the South African society, which attract the attention of some of the Whites, who still have human emotions, as soon as they arrive in the community. Taking the bodies of Moses and Mary away shows how segregation works, "They could not put Moses the murderer into the same car with her; one could not put a black man close to a white woman, even though she were dead and murdered by him" (Lessing, 41).

The main focus of the novel is on the human relationship between a white woman and her black servant; a strongly forbidden relationship by the power of colonial society. Mary Turner, who meets Moses through an unpleasant accident, whips him and when he becomes a servant in her house, she receives his kindness and attention; Mary feels hatred and love towards her servant; this feeling is a clear insult to the white colonial community.

### **Spy Maker Power**

The normalization principles defined by the power, continue to exist in the social arena through monitoring by people who are involved with these rules; and in these novels, we see the presence of these watchmen around the main characters of the novels. One of the important points in *Edrissis' House* is watching the role of the characters who are acting as spies in order to establish the teachings of the new government and improve their situation within the new system.

-Why are you forcing me to speak? Are you spying?-

-No, they did not let me be a spy. They said you are not intelligent...

-Is spying a good job?-

-Where do you live? You know nothing. It's called Reporting. If the letter is accurate, it is a step forward. (Alizadeh, 1998, p. 60)

The power in *The Grass Is Singing*, as in the *Edrissis' House*, has been indicated through monitoring the human life. Unwritten, but accepted traditions and social beliefs have tried to shape human beings in the society. Mary Turner, who had a happy and peaceful life, is influenced by this feature of social power which tries to make everyone look the same; so, she marries hurriedly and without thinking. After this disastrous marriage, she loses happiness and tranquility forever. She destroys her life due to surrendering to social norms. In addition, the traditions of the South African farm community do not accept the rebellion and resistance of Mary in interacting with other farmers making her a hated person. Socially-determined laws will punish rebellious people, so, they should pay a huge price for being a different one,

The Turners, who might have been living on the moon for all the thought they gave to 'the district', would have been astonished if they had known that for years they had provided the staple of gossip among the farmers round about. Even people they knew by name only, or those they had never

heard of, discussed them with an intimate knowledge that was entirely due to the Slatters... the Slatters would have cried, had they been challenged: 'We have told people nothing but the truth' - but with that self-conscious indignation that confesses guilt. (Lessing, 2009: 235)

### **Power of the Masculine World**

In the *Edrissis' House* we can feel the power of the masculine world over women by reading the fates of women like Kowkab, Pari and Rokhsareh. Kowkab is an abandoned woman who tolerates her husband's violent behavior and the frustrations of a poor life, but eventually, her husband leaves her and her children. Though her body is crushed under the masculine beating, she does not stop searching for him. Her character is the symbol of traditional women in closed societies that consider a woman without a man as a person without an identity. Hence these women are willing to tolerate the most severe atrocities committed by the masculine world over their existence. This woman, who thinks she is a person without an identity if she does not have a man, is searching for her lost identity by searching for her man.

The author has displayed this weakness in a beautiful conversation between Golrokh, Kowkab's daughter and son, Yusef, with Leqa.

-The girl cried: "mother still loves him."

She put her head on her knees, her body got smaller, Leqa touched her hairs gently: "you're wrong."

"No, three years she was looking for him. Her eyes are still looking for him in the crowd..."

"Don't you love your mother?"

"I do, it's a pity that she loves that man more than all of us."

Leqa tightened the scarf: "No, I do not agree. No one likes the person who torments him/her."

"Yes! Some people like it." a voice from behind said.

Leqa turned back. Yusef was leaning on the fence." (Alizadeh, 1998:147)

Rokhsareh is another woman who has to endure the authority of the masculine world. As a result of her husband's selfishness, moves to the city from the village and her husband, who is an addict, neglects her and their children smoking opium with the landlord of their house. Finally abandons his wife and two children in a big city. The hardships that Rokhsareh endures throughout her life are the products of the power of the masculine world over the feminine world. Pari is another abandoned woman who has to raise her children alone.

In *The Grass Is Singing*, we can also observe the dominance of the masculine power over the women's world. Mary Turner is central victim of this world. She, who hurriedly decides to marry Dick Turner, is severely caught up in the masculine power webs which ultimately lead her to perplexity, numbness, insanity and perdition. Dick Turner, who is portrayed as a weak person in the novel, considers himself superior to his wife. He does not pay attention to the sensible demands of Mary and neglects her; so, she seeks refuge in the black servant and the pain of conscience resulting from this relationship destroys the woman.

The violent behavior of men of the white community and their judgments about Mary after her murder is also a clear indication of the power of men over women in the South African community. Only Tony Marston, who lived for a while with Mary and Dick in the farm and still not involved in the rules of white society, is able to deal with the issues more fairly and is surprised by the hatred of white men towards Mary. Sergeant Dunham, who is the legal representative in the district, has the same attitude toward Mary and her death as others,

His reactions were as Charlie's had been: vindictiveness towards the murderer, emotional pity for Dick, and for Mary, a bitter contemptuous anger: Sergeant Denham had been in the country for a number of years. This time Tony saw the expression on the face, and it gave him a shock. The faces of the two men as they stood over the body, gazing down at it,

made him feel uneasy, even afraid. He himself felt a little disgust, but not much; it was mainly pity that agitated him, knowing what he knew. It was the disgust that he would feel for any social irregularity more than the distaste that comes from the failure of the imagination. This profound instinctive horror and fear astonished him. (Lessing, 2009:34)

In addition to Mary, wife of Charlie Slatter is another woman in the novel who complied with the orders of her opportunist and cruel husband in the colonial society. This woman, who is aware of the hardships of living on South African farms, tries to help Mary compassionately; but embarrassment from the poverty has enclosed Mary in her loneliness, "He [Slatter] was a crude, brutal, ruthless, yet kindhearted man, in his own way,... he was hard with his wife, making her bear unnecessary hardships at the beginning..." (Lessing, 2009:26).

Moreover, Mary's mother was also a woman living in the same society with a poor and habitual drunkard man and she suffered from this powerful masculine world.

### **Gender Authority**

In the *Edrissis' House*, the gender authority is shown in the format of raping the frail and sick body of Borzu's sister, Sara. Borzu's mother, who sells her body, is the cause of this rape because she has abandoned her children. Sara, after the rape, commits suicide and the unfortunate events that have happened to Borzu change his character. The tremendous power of poverty in the destruction of human existence, in addition to gender authority can be seen in the lives of Sara and Borzu. Although most of the characters in the novel are involved with poverty, in the fate of Borzu and his sick sister, this kind of power has become more than ever evident. The author in order to express the destroying power of poverty has deliberately emphasized the effects of poverty on women's lives. In this novel, female's body, in addition to her soul and thought, is also the target of

power and is not respected by the masculine world; Sara has been subjected to psychological and physical abuse in both upper and lower social classes.

Although we do not observe the sexual assault on the female's body in Lessing's novel, the magisterial behavior of Moses, the black servant, with Mary, indicates a kind of gender authority; the woman, who has been emotionally and sexually sought refuge in her servant, was caught up in the servant power circle due to her mental problems. However, the offensive in Alizadeh's novel is more apparent and the body and thought of the woman are directly abused.

#### **Power in the Family Relationships**

Another area of power advent in the *Edrissis' House* is within the family relationships. The undeniable power of fathers in the Edrissi family is obvious; the decisions of Mrs. Edrissi's father have changed the fate of women. Rana, according to the father's command, marries Wahhab and she is not happy; Mrs. Edrissi, frightened by the violent behavior of her father, has been forced to reject Ghobad's love and spend many years with a man that does not love him. Rahila, according to the grandfather's command, has been engaged to a man who has a significant age difference with her, and the great sorrow resulting from this engagement leads to her death. Luba is another beautiful girl in the family, who is also the victim of the selfishness of the family men; they imprison her in a room and try to turn her blood into an elixir and eventually, she dies mysteriously, "They were tyrants; hired men, had guns, killed people and scared the peasants" (Alizadeh, 1998:185).

The father's power can also be seen in the fate of Roxana; she is also imprisoned by her father at home. With the presence of Rana in Roxana house, the rebellious spirit awakens in Roxana and she dares to escape from the house. In Roxana's behavior, rebellion against the teachings of power is obvious, but according to Michel Foucault, this rebellion will not be successful and will never

fall outside the bounds of power. The author agrees with Foucault; hence, we face the despair and frustration of Roxana in the novel. She, who as a rebellious woman has escaped from the fetters of her father's authority and followed her dreams, is not happy and she is sad because of her mother's painful death and the fragmentation and humiliation of her father's soul. She thinks her father is a conqueror and her own rebellion has failed.

Signs of this kind of power can also be seen in Doris Lessing's novel. Mary's parents have tension in their marital life, and this distressed life had a great impact on Mary and caused her the irreparable mental injuries. But the intensity of this kind of power is less frequent compared to Alizadeh's novel. Mary's father does not play a role in her decisions and she separates from her parents and begins an independent life by her own choice. This is a component that distinguishes the women of two stories from each other, and it indicates the definition of female's existence according to the two different societies.

### **The Enclosed Revolts**

Foucault never approves of silence against power, "There is no way to remain silent; because we are already involved in the power relations... resorting to power against the power is more complicated than remaining silent" (Teichmann & White, 2000, p. 330). In *Edrissis' House* we can observe the revolts of the characters like Roxana, Ghobad, Shaukat, Kaveh and Borzu against the structures of political power. Roxana, Ghobad and Shaukat, who, at first, concurred with the political power, after thinking about the teachings of that power realized their mistakes; so, they endanger themselves to help the Mountain Movement in order to compensate for their mistakes and finally they pay a large indemnity due to the society that forbids humans from thinking and forces them to obey. Selfishness, mercilessness, and forgetfulness of the power are obvious in these characters' fates.

The enclosed revolts in Mary Turner's power can be seen in Doris Lessing's novel. Mary, who hates her parents' way of life in African farms, leaves her home

at the first opportunity and goes to the city; but it does not take long that she again finds herself in the farms entangled by poverty.

### Conclusion

It is concluded that the power structures are similar in both novels. Furthermore, the current ruler power is the first institution of the power advent in both novels; the reckless encounter of the current ruler power in Alizadeh's novel and the British colonial power in Lessing's novel demonstrate the protest of the writers to this institution of power. The spy maker power that abuses the weak people by turning them into spies and the power which normalizes through the unwritten social rules appear in both novels. The power of the masculine world in contrast to the subtle world of women can be seen in both novels. The writers being female understand and present women's physical and psychological injuries who are under the masculine power. Gender authority exists in both novels, but in the novel written by Alizadeh, the female's body is directly attacked since the body and soul of human are still the targets of power. It is worth noting that power in the family relationships in Alizadeh's novel is more frequent and in Lessing's novel, the woman has more power and choice. The enclosed revolts in the power circle can be seen in both novels and the characters have not been successful in this rebellion against the teachings of power.

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