

**TRAPPED IN DESIRE:  
FEMININE DESIRE AND INTERRACIAL COMPLEXITIES**

Farzana Rahman  
Student ID: 05103001

**Department of English and Humanities**  
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**BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh**

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Farzana Rahman

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*For my family and friends, for believing in me*

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Farzana Rahman



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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to look at the complexities related to feminine desire as racial issues get combined with it. I will focus on how white female sexuality copes with race issues by looking into two novels and a play. I hope the study of these texts will bring out the predicaments which white female sexuality had to go through due to colonization.

## Introduction

Why is it so hard to speak about desire? Is it because of the fact that desire goes beyond rationality? Is it because desire is considered to be a part of the 'mysterious' and the 'poetic?' And when it comes to the desires of a woman these premonitions are even stronger. Social taboos through the ages have dubbed both women and desires as 'mysterious,' 'unnatural,' and thus 'unsacred.' 'Feminine desire' is a concept that in itself has been an issue of much disquiet. Throw in the ever burning question of race into it and what you have is a combustive mixture of self contradiction, anxiety and unrest leading rather predictably to violence and even death. This 'racio-sexual' issue of women desiring the 'other' can be a very volatile issue. This paper will first of all look at the different dimensions of female desires to establish that desires can be constituted as central in a person's gendered identity. Then it will go on to analyse what happens if the already 'murky' subject of feminine desire falls into the muddle of race issues.

'Desire' has been used as a window to peek into a person's 'real self.' It has been used as a measure to gauge our identities. Although there can be different forms of social and political constructions of desires, it can also be seen as the essence that reveals the deeply personal side of a human being. It is imperative to look at the patterns of a person's desires in order to determine his or her gendered identity. The importance of having an understanding of a person's desires can be seen in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. In *Disgrace* the protagonist's daughter Lucy is the one who remains an enigma. Throughout the novel Lucy's desires are kept silent or at best merely hinted at-



Is she speaking to Helen? Is his presence here keeping the two of them apart? Would they dare to share a bed while he is in the house? If the bed creaked at night would they be embarrassed? Embarrassed enough to stop? But what does he know about what women do together? Maybe women do not need to make beds creak. And what does he know about these two in particular, Lucy and Helen? Perhaps they sleep together merely as children do, cuddling, touching, giggling, reliving girlhood – sisters more than lovers. Sharing a bed, sharing a bathtub... (*Disgrace*, 86)

This secrecy surrounding Lucy's desires hinders the reader's as well as David's understanding of her character. David cannot fathom his daughter and the readers also keep groping in the darkness thickened by the absence of any clear picture of Lucy's preferences. Feminist critics like Julia Kristeva have also insisted that an understanding of one's desires is vital in order to have any idea of who that person is. This is not necessarily in the sense that what the person "really wants indicates who that person really is," (188)<sup>1</sup> but in the sense that it is "the organization of desire" that holds the very identity despite the intrusions of society and rationality. The question is how to tackle the situation when this "organization of desire" is unknown? Woman's desire has always been a totally silent subject. It has been carefully established as a taboo for ages. As Lynne Pearce has stated-

Woman's desires, and by extension feminine sexuality, cannot be treated as fully public; something dangerous might happen, secrets might be let

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1. Julia Kristeva, "Woman's Time" *The Kristeva Reader* (187-213)



out, if they were open to view... so a woman keeps gyrating in the dark forest of her own subjugated fears, desires and redemption.” (58)<sup>1</sup>

So this ‘gyration’ of woman is due to her ‘subjugated’ desires. Women face severe identity crisis and self contradiction as her desires become dominated as well. In Doris Lessing’s novel *The Grass is Singing* the readers can see the results of suppressed feminine desires. Mary Turner, the protagonist of the novel is a victim of society’s obsession with hiding a woman’s desires. The instilling of these suppressive ideologies is very strong. In fact they are so strong that they irrupt through barriers enabling the readers to see the internal struggles that Mary Turner goes through because of her desire for the black servant-

The knowledge of that man alone in the house with her lay like a weight at the back of her mind... she could see only his big shoulder bulging underneath the thin cloth. She pushed the thought of the two open doors between herself and him out of her mind. She avoided him all that day...

*(The Grass is Singing, 183-184)*

The all consuming and losing battle leaves Mary drained, confused and psychologically imbalanced. She could not understand her needs. She has been moulded to such an extent by society that her own desire became an alien force to her which left her breathless. She was taught to be stiff and firm in hiding her feelings and the clash between the passionate self inside her and the rational social veneer resulted in a deadly obsession-

Alone with the African, she was fighting against something she did not understand. Dick became to her, as time went by, more and more unreal;

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1. Lynne Pearce, “Gesture and Gaze” *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (57-59)

while the thought of the African grew obsessive. It was a nightmare, the powerful man always in the house with her, so that there was no escape from his presence. She was possessed by it... she was undermined with fear, by her terrible dream-filled nights, her obsession. (*The Grass is Singing*, 206-207)

To be liberated from such a trap a woman needs 'a space in which to desire.' Why is it so necessary to have a 'space' for women to desire? Because dreams and desires are like windows to one's soul. Dreams and desires play a big role in order to reach a conclusion about a person. In literature these kinds of psychological riddles have always had a great influence. Freud has made the roles of dreams, desires, fears, etc. clear when it comes to the human psyche. As Kathleen Wheeler has said-

Freud's theories about the censorship of dreams and desires by an internalized authority fascinated writers and artists. The functions of the ego (later superego) in such works, and the nature of the material censored as well as the means, led to the systematic articulation of methods of disguise for desires and fears, often of a sexual or taboo nature... thus repression and sublimation were found to be busily at work at unconscious levels, complicating the psyche even more, and making it still more difficult to untangle the mass of conflicting impulses of that elusive 'self.' What becomes of the status of intention, will, self-knowledge and truth, if even the unconscious disguised itself? (7)<sup>1</sup>

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1. Kathleen Wheeler, "The Influence of psychological Writings on Literature" *A Critical Guide to Twentieth-Century Women Novelists* (3-11)



The feminine condition as perpetually being the 'desired' and not the one who desires can be seen as one of the central predicaments of gender relationships. The ability to desire entails a certain power. In Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* an example of this can be seen as Behn's narrator returns the 'male gaze' by covertly desiring the exotic prince Oroonoko-

His nose was rising and Roman instead of African and flat; his mouth the finest shape that could be seen, far from those great turned lips which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole proportion and air of his face was so noble and exactly formed that, bating his colour there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable, and handsome. (*Oroonoko*, 5)

Why is this position so important? This inverted position shows how feminine desire is not a form of 'lack' against maleness but can be seen as a weapon against the patriarchal system. This passage gives us the first account of a white female gaze upon a Black man. As Firdous Azim, in her essay "Freedom and Slavery: Looking at Behn's *Oroonoko*" says-

It provides, regardless of its historical veracity, the first record of a white woman looking at a Black man...Aphra Behn, the first English novelist, writes a novel in which the Black man is the object of her gaze, in which she, as author of the text, 'looks' at Oroonoko. (49)<sup>1</sup>

Thus women's desires need to be brought into the field of discourse. Because apart from the knowledge of the 'elusive self' hidden inside the organization of desire, the act of

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1. Firdous Azim, "Freedom and Slavery: Looking at Behn's *Oroonoko*" *Infinite Variety: Women in Society and Literature*.

desiring itself acts as a determiner of the position of power. The inscription of woman as the 'other,' as the one who is 'desired' not, the one who desires, is a violation of the feminine position. Thus the Woman, shown as the eternally desired, becomes subjected, fragmented, symbolized, translated, corrected, worshipped, and loathed, and so on. She is forever trapped into this transparent orb in which she is constantly being looked at, being objectified, being desired, from which she ultimately cannot escape. Her desires, which on the other hand may as well be the only means of escaping from patriarchal stigmatization, have been castigated rigorously through time, through rules. By portraying feminine desire as 'impure,' 'unnatural,' 'immodest,' the goal of condemning the Woman as the eternally desired has been well achieved. Thus women's desire becomes of paramount importance; for women must be able to desire freely, to move in a celebration of 'desiring' and not of 'being desired.'

But thanks to Freud, 'desiring' in the realms of psychoanalysis, has fields of disquiet for the feminists. Helene Cixous violently rejects that element of psychoanalysis that perceives femininity inevitably constituted as a lack in relation to masculinity. She deconstructs and moves beyond the psychoanalytic model in its notion of desire based on lack-

Women of course have desires but not because she is gelded; not because - she is deprived and needs to be filled out, like some wounded person who wants to console herself or seek vengeance... What's a desire originating from a lack? A pretty meager desire. (262)<sup>1</sup>

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1. Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. (245-264)



Let us link this issue of female desire to that of racial differences. A lot of theorizing has been going on in the academic world about the more overt questions of fear and violence present in racial relationships. But the entities- 'women' and the 'other,' connected together by the force of desire is a place where there are still a lot of questions left to be answered. Sara Suleri, in her essay "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition" asks-

The coupling of *postcolonial* with *woman* however, almost inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations of oppression... In seeking to dismantle the iconic status of postcolonial feminism, I will attempt here to address the following questions: within the tautological margins of such a discourse, which comes first, gender or race? How, furthermore, can the issue of chronology lead to some preliminary articulation of the productive superficiality of race? (337)<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Suleri methodically links the two by first asking the questions and then attempting to answer them, Homi Bhabha puts race and gender together in his essay "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency"-

Questions of race and cultural difference overlay issues of sexuality and gender and over determine the social alliances of class and democratic socialism. (251)<sup>1</sup>

Bhabha abolishes the possibility of even questioning if there is a palpable thread between

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1. Sara Suleri, "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition" *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory* (335-346)
  2. Homi Bhabha, "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency" *The Location of Culture* (245-282)

race and sexuality. He makes it clear that these two entities are in fact inseparable-

‘Otherness’ is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity... The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of the colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference- racial and sexual. (96)<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to the link between the feminine condition and the postcolonial condition, both Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* and Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* show how they become intermingled to create a very complex and unstable condition. This critical link can be analyzed by looking at the volatile circumstances of *The Grass is Singing*. Here the suppressed desires of Mary, combined with the colonizer-colonized tension, results in the complete breakdown of her psyche. This also leads to the violent murder that makes that makes the reader shudder. This association of ‘desire’ and racial ‘otherness’- from the position of a woman- the problems this creates, the questions this arises, and the consequences this leads to, will be some of the focal points of this paper. To illustrate these issues William Shakespeare’s *Othello* will also be discussed because in *Othello* the issues of female desire and issues of race relationships also come together and the fears and anxieties of an interracial marriage are the very focal point of the play.

What is perhaps most disturbing about this creation of otherness through narration is the way guilt, crime, and other negative actions are not dealt with in the level of “self” (in this case, in the terms of European ideology) but are handled in terms of otherness. In

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1. Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism” *The Location of Culture* (94-120)



*Oroonoko*, Behn's narrator, although constantly suspicious of Oroonoko, nonetheless feels a great deal of pity for him—even after his brutal murder of his beloved wife. Instead of feeling repulsion over his act, she dotes on him and attempts to justify his actions. While it is not explicitly stated, it seems as though she feels that he, being part of this otherness she has created for the reader (and presumably for herself) is not fit or qualified to be punished by the same standards as “self” or the white authority. Instead, she rationalizes his actions, thus even the reader becomes unconsciously implicit in forgiving him of the brutal slaying. We see this same event in *Othello*. Othello murders his wife just as Oroonoko does (although for different ends, of course). Even though the circumstances are different, the reader, due to the narration, is inclined to forgive each character. Desdemona, who we are given to sympathize with, forgives Othello and thus the reader is able to do so as well since it seems much less terrible. In Shakespeare's work, Desdemona seems to be the most sympathetic character, thus when she forgives Othello for his crime against her, so too does the reader with out much resistance. Maybe this happens because the text itself draws Othello as a character to sympathise with. But unlike in *Oroonoko*, we have the option of listening to other voices inside the text that call Othello a “Moor” and an “old black ram,” [*Othello*, Act1, Scene1] thus offering the opinion that he is somehow less than human because of his race.

When one looks at the aspect of the white woman's desire for the black man the fog becomes somewhat clearer. This has for too long been the ultimate ‘Ssshhh...’ factor, something that is kept under the strictest confidence. Any possibility of this desire had to be abolished through the strictest of social prejudices as well as religious and cultural reinforcements. Miscegenation was simply not an option for the colonizers since it put



the sanctity of the whole race in jeopardy. But nevertheless in the pages of literature we find women like Aphra Behn, Desdemona, Adela Quested, Mary Turner, etc who are trapped in a the desire for the 'exotic other.' This form of desire is a composite, a construct of fear and stereotypes which are at work in the confused and repressed sphere of white female sexuality. Homi Bhabha talks about this phenomenon-

The stereotype of the native fixed at the shifting boundaries between barbarism and civility; the insatiable fear and desire for the Negro: 'Our women are at the mercy of Negroes... God knows how they make love'; the deep cultural fear of the Black figured in the psychic trembling of Western sexuality. (114)<sup>1</sup>

I use the word 'trapped' because for these women this desire is expressed in terms of confinement and entrapment. They were women of the 'superior' race. Any possibility of any humane feelings towards the 'others' were violently wiped out through the reinforcement of multitude of racial, social and religious prejudices. Even the accounts we have such as- Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, are marred by such ideas. Frantz Fanon has clearly put forward the major issues involved in black-white relationships in the introduction of his book *Black Skin, White Masks* "-

There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men,  
There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs,  
the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect. (10)<sup>2</sup>

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1. Homi Bhabha "Remembering Fanon: Self, psyche and the colonial condition"  
*Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (112-122)
  2. Frantz Fanon, "Introduction" *Black Skin White Masks* (7-16)



Fanon wants to understand “what happens when the man is black and the woman is white.” (Fanon, 64) The white woman falls into a bottomless pit of self contradiction and anxiety when she recognized within herself a desire for a man of the other race. She has been taught to look at the ‘other’ race as lesser humans or not as human at all but something close to an animal- “a thing... to fear, not to delight.” She might feel that by desiring the black man she has let her race down. She is made to feel that she has ‘disgraced’ or ‘degraded’ herself by her ‘unnatural’ desire. These feelings of self contradiction lead to anxiety, unrest and ultimately violence- murder or suicide.

When it comes to the black woman’s desire for the white man there are the same kinds of unrests and anxieties but from a slightly different point of view. Frantz Fanon gives the example of a novel called *Je Suis Martiniquaise* by a black female writer Mayotte Capecia, and throws light on the aspect of a black woman’s desire for the white man-

Mayotte loves a white man to whom she submits in everything. He is her lord. She asks nothing, demands nothing, except a bit of whiteness in her life... she loved him because he had blue eyes, blond hair, and a light skin.” (42-43)<sup>1</sup>

The black woman’s obsession with the white man goes deeper than just an infatuation for the unknown ‘other.’ She looks at a white man as her ultimate salvation from her own blackness-

The great dream that haunts every one of them is to be the bride of a white

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1. Frantz Fanon, “The Woman of Colour and the White Man” *Black Skin White Masks* (41-62)

man from Europe. They must have white men, completely white, and nothing else will do... for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. (57)<sup>2</sup>

But the anxieties start to form when the black woman realizes within herself that the desire she feels is directed to none other than the very conquerors, the oppressors of her race. She desires the white man for his whiteness; she desires the white man because the white man, to her becomes the only way out of the miseries her race has entitled her to. But she also knows at some level that the white man is the root of all the miseries that her race has been cursed with. She knows "one thing too well: Blue eyes, the people say, frighten a Negro." (Fanon, 43) This throws the black woman into a bottomless pit of self evasion and uncertainty. The black woman becomes victim to the self pity and acute sense of inferiority due to her skin colour and on top of that for desiring a white man, her self worth decreases immensely. She is thus deprived of the strength that the hatred for the oppressive 'other' would have provided her with. The uncharted territories of desire work as a palpable force that to some extent defines the magnitude of black-white relationships. According to Homi Bhabha-

The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference- racial and sexual. Such an articulation becomes crucial if it is held that the body is always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy

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1. Frantz Fanon, "The Man of Colour and the White Woman" *Black Skin White Masks* (63-82)



of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination, power and fear.” (38)<sup>1</sup>

Bhabha points out that existence in such constant state of uncertainties creates a state of perplexity, which in turn gives rise to anxieties into the psyche of an individual, resulting in hybrid beings. Out of this “state of emergency” emerges a new position. Bhabha asks if this condition is not parallel to the “Freudian fable of fetishism” something that resides within the discourse of colonial power and requires the expression of modes of differentiation- “sexual and racial”?

The racial issues and relationships are muddles of countless confusions and contradictions. When it comes to women and race, these aspects gain further complications through the gendered issues involved. Thus the attraction for the ‘opposites’ or the ‘others,’ for a woman where race is involved, is the ultimate source of perplexity, confusion, anxiety, uncertainty and self-contradiction. The following chapters of this paper will look at some literary texts that examine interracial sexual relationships. The first text is William Shakespeare’s *Othello* which is a seventeenth century play and the second text is Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, a seventeenth century novel. From there we will proceed to look at a twentieth century novel- Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*. All three of these texts are set against a racial-sexual backdrop against which an interplay of fear and desire can be examined.

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1. Homi Bhabha “The Other Question” *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (37-55)

## Chapter 1

### ***Othello- Deadly Insecurities***

William Shakespeare's *Othello* is a play that combines the issues of desires, race and insecurities together to form a volatile situation. The conclusion of the play rather predictably exhibits a series of deaths but a chill runs down the spine when one looks at how the expression of feminine desire combined with interracial anxieties lead to this kind of overwhelming violence. This chapter will deal with Desdemona and her desires. In the introduction it has been stated that it is the 'not knowing' of the feminine desires which creates the difficulties in the feminine condition. But the stalling fact in *Othello* is that this text from the very beginning declares Desdemona's desires loudly and clearly to the characters and the audience alike. So the unsettling question is that- is it the acknowledgement of Desdemona's desire that leads to her tragic death? And how far is the violent climax due to the misreading of Desdemona's uninhibited expression of desire? How far is it due to Othello's deadly insecurities regarding his race and sexuality? And will the result of miscegenation always unfailingly lead to the ultimate violence?

The text *Othello* goes overboard with sexual connotations which create the load of tension in the play which is transferred to its audience and readers. The play's overall frustrated and racialized sexuality and the expression of feminine desire clashes with each other and balances each other at the same time to form a combustive mixture of anxiety which the audience clearly experiences. From the very first scene of Act one, the overtly sexual images, put through the trial of race and expressed through explicitly animalistic imagery, set the ground for the play. Iago informs Brabantio that- "an old black ram/ Is



tupping your white ewe... your daughter/ and the Moor are making the beast with two backs.” [*Othello*, Act1, Scene1] and he also warns that if it is not prevented – “the devil will make a grandsire of you... you’ll have your daughter/ covered with a Barbary horse; you’ll have your nephews/ neigh to you; you’ll have coursers for cousins and/ jennets for germans.” [*Othello*, Act1, Scene1] This best like contamination of Othello and Desdemona’s courtship and their future marriage bed by Iago has a certain voyeuristic side to it that effects the audience at different levels, making them apprehensive of what they will see when they finally come across Othello and Desdemona. First they see Othello being charged by Brabantio of being “a practicer/ Of arts inhibited” [*Othello*, Act1, Scene3] for how else would Desdemona, “A maiden never bold... fall in love with what she feared to look on?” [*Othello*, Act1, Scene3] With this question hovering, the audience sees Desdemona. There was a hope that the love between this fair Venetian maiden and the black moor could be a Platonic one when Othello said “She loved me for the dangers I had passed,/ And I loved her that she did pity them.” [*Othello*, Act1, Scene3] Because there is no way she can be attracted to “the sooty bosom/ Of such a thing... to fear, not to delight.” [*Othello*, Act1, Scene3] But from Othello’s speech we also learn that Desdemona “wished/ That heaven had made her such a man.” [*Othello*, Act1, Scene3] This statement of Desdemona, yearning for Othello, is the necessary assurance that in the white man’s world he is in fact a ‘man’ and not an ‘animal’ or a ‘thing.’ This statement is crucial in understanding Desdemona’s position. At one level she wished that she was made into such a valiant, adventurous man as Othello and it cannot be denied that in another level she wished that such a man as Othello was made for her. And as Desdemona announces- “That I did love the Moor to live with him”

[*Othello*, Act1, Scene3] she once and for all certifies the fact that their love is far from a Platonic one and that she did desire this man.

The play unsettles the audience through the representation of unusual sexual power play. A lot has been said by the critics on the situations where the organization of a woman's desire is unknown. But in Desdemona's case it seems that the bold expressions of her desire lead to not only her tragic death but also to a lot of misreading on the part of readers and the critics alike. There are two camps of critics when it comes to 'reading' and 'interpreting' Desdemona. One set of critics see her as the picture of female perfection given by the patriarchal standards- a "Truly obedient lady!" [*Othello*, Act 4, Scene 1], whereas the others see Desdemona as the exact opposite. Again the tendency to split the woman into two separate categories- the angel and the vampire can be seen at work here for the critics as well. As Sara Munson Deats has stated-

The role of Desdemona, an individual woman in a very unconventional early modern marriage, has sparked considerable controversy... The hagiographic commentators depict a saintly Desdemona, with a passivity verging on catatonia; the demonizing commentators portray an overconfident Desdemona, with an aggressiveness approaching shrewdness."

(241)<sup>1</sup>

Now the question is: how do we rescue Desdemona from this metaphorical prison of opposing representations? Why not try to see her as a human being- a culmination of the

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1. Sara Munson Deats, "'Truly an Obedient Lady': Desdemona, Emilia, and the Doctrine of Obedience in *Othello*" *Othello: New Critical Essays* (233-254)



so called 'angelic' and 'vampire' like qualities; a complete human being not a mere fragment? Why is it so hard for the society to acknowledge that a woman can also have opinions? She can also be clear about her wishes, straightforward about her desires. It does not make her a 'whore,' on the contrary is only natural. Clifford Ronan brings out the human side of Desdemona-

Though Desdemona can be accused of self-important nagging, presumption towards her husband, and tactlessness, she truly cares for both her husband and other human beings. She is adept in upper-class accomplishments and is almost unceasingly possessed of a good heart. Her husband admits that in the post-consummation relationship, her "chastity" has been "cold" (a5, s2) but that need not be the entire truth nor, if it is, a particularly damning admission... St. Jerome argued that "A husband who is too ardent a lover of his wife" is guilty of "adultery." (Neill, 140) Protestant views of sexual pleasure in marriage were somewhat less severe on husbands, but wives were especially cautioned to keep their native hypersensitivity under strict control. (279)<sup>1</sup>

Desdemona was indeed 'tactless' in the sense that she did not take the necessary precaution of keeping her 'appetites' hidden. And as Desdemona announces in the Duke's court- "That I did love the Moor to live with him" [*Othello*, Act1, Scene3] she pronounces her death sentence. Her undoing was the expression of this simple natural wish. She committed the 'sins' of not only choosing a male of the other "inferior" race

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1. Clifford Ronan, "Keeping Faith: Water Imagery and Religious Diversity in *Othello*" *Othello: New Critical Essays* (271-292)



but she also blasphemously expressed her desire to be with him. She, 'the divine Desdemona,' suddenly from 'a maiden never bold,' 'a delicate youth' and a 'gentle mistress,' became 'a super-subtle Venetian whore,' with 'unnatural appetites.' [*Othello*, Act1, Scene3] The expression of her desires became a testament of 'her body's lust' [*Othello*, Act2, Scene3] and Desdemona's headstrong pursuit of Othello, even to Othello himself, started to seem 'most rank,/ Of foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural.' [*Othello*, Act3, Scene3] Perhaps she misread Othello's different race as being a different maleness altogether. Desdemona had to pay dearly for this fatal mistake. How important was it that Desdemona hide her natural 'appetites' even if it was for her married husband? Sara Munson Deats believes it was indeed a fateful issue-

Othello's references to his wife's hot, moist palm –a hand requiring “A sequester from liberty, fasting and prayer/ Much castigation, exercise devote.” (a3, s4) –suggest an erotic warmth and sensuality in his marriage partner that perhaps arouses in the older man a fear of sexual inadequacy, or even, as some commentators suggest, a sexual revulsion. (242-243)<sup>1</sup>

This inherent male insecurity of being inadequate, with time and the expert assistance of Iago, becomes the fatal 'revulsion' in Othello that ultimately Desdemona has to pay for.

Desdemona is the steady, but never static, point of the play while the world around her shifts and the characters around her fluctuate. However adventurous and unusual Othello was in the Venetian society, he has not really deviated at all from the universal 'male' ideas and principles. It was not Desdemona's fault that let alone the

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1. Sara Munson Deats, ““Truly an Obedient Lady”: Desdemona, Emilia, and the Doctrine of Obedience in *Othello*” *Othello: New Critical Essays* (233-254)

Venetian society; even the Othellos of the world were not quite ready for her. Is the society ready to encounter a woman sure of her desires yet? According to David Bevington the answer is no and nor ever will be-

Othello's supreme confidence in his marital bliss frees him to cherish what is so humanly characteristic of Desdemona –her appetite for pleasure. Yet some eighty lines later, still in the same scene, Othello has become the stereotype of the anxious male beset by fears of womanly duplicity. The very things that have counted so heavily in Desdemona's favour –her openness and warmth of response to the tactile pleasures of physical existence– are now the basis of the most terrible indictment against her... "O curse of marriage/ That we can call these delicate creatures ours/ And not their appetites!" (a3, s3) The fact that Desdemona has appetites is what makes her so threatening, from the point of view of males who assume that men have a right to own women (to "call these delicate creatures ours") but then find they cannot control that part of them, their appetites, which should "belong" to their husbands. (221-222)<sup>1</sup>

Loss of 'manhood' is a fear that disturbs Othello's colonized self. The colonial condition for the male colonized individuals is like existing in an inverted situation. Here the power of the patriarchal system becomes the weapon of the colonizer as it feminizes the colonized male. Just as ages of patriarchal hierarchy has worked upon female subjectivity, colonized male subjectivity has also been reduced to a subhuman level by

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1. David Bevington "Othello: Portrait of a Marriage" *Othello: New Critical Essays* (215-227)



the process of feminization. This process results in destructive and desperate measures taken by the black self to regain or preserve the last thread of 'manhood' they believe they possess. An instance of this can be seen in Othello's deep fear of being cuckolded by a white man. He almost begged Iago to give him 'a living reason she's disloyal' [*Othello*, Act3, Scene3] as his worst insecurities about his race, his manner, his age and most of all the nature of his wife gets the best of him. Iago, the master of manipulation, makes Othello believe that his worst fear is in fact the truth, that Desdemona has betrayed his 'black' love for a white man. And he starts believing his worst insecurities to be true-

That she with Cassio hath the act of shame  
A thousand times committed...  
And she did gratify his amorous works  
With that recognizance and pledge of love  
Which I first gave her.            [*Othello*, Act5, scene2]

He fed on the gross, sexualized and animalistic images Iago painted of Desdemona and Cassio- "as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,/ As salt as wolves in pride." [*Othello*, Act3, Scene3] Desdemona did not have a chance to stand against the joint forces of racial and sexual insecurities which gnawed at Othello's mind. From being his 'soul's joy' she turns into a 'lewd minx,' [*Othello*, Act3, Scene4] 'that cunning whore of Venice.' [*Othello*, Act4, Scene2] 'A forgone conclusion' [*Othello*, Act3, Scene3] indeed on Othello's part as he alludes to Desdemona's sexuality as insatiable- "Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on/ And turn again." [*Othello*, Act4, Scene1] He suffers from profound unconscious insecurities about his manhood and Iago plays his tricks based on these insecurities. Iago voices the exact fears which Othello harbours in his unconscious

self about his 'manhood' compared to that of a white man's. How did Iago manage to corrupt Othello thus? By pulling the strings of the universal male insecurities. As David Bevington has shown-

The male imagination is all too ready to abuse itself with this most recurring of male fantasies, because that fantasy speaks to the deepest fear of all: the conviction in the male that he is ultimately unlovable, and that women are merely playing their game of deception to lure him into a situation where he will be cuckolded and thereby deprived of the self image upon which his emotional well being depends. The power of women to cuckold men is the power to deprive them of their sense of self-assertion and male accomplishment... Without the sense of phallic power, men are ridiculous. (226)<sup>1</sup>

Othello, despite being a Europeanized 'gentleman' in manner, has been instilled with the fear of his so called lack of manhood compared to the white man. He himself has been made into an active participant in the social prejudices concerning his skin colour. Desdemona saw Othello's visage in her mind but Othello himself did not. He saw it with the eyes of the white society. The fear of the whites is based on their inability to comprehend their racial 'other.' Fanon has put this fact as "The shameful livery put together by centuries of incomprehension." (12)<sup>2</sup> and this incomprehension is what creates deep fears in the colonizer's mind about the colonized. First of all, the white

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1. David Bevington "Othello: Portrait of a Marriage" *Othello: New Critical Essays* (215-227)
  2. Frantz Fanon "The Negro and Recognition" *Black Skin White Masks* (210-223)



colonizers fear the myth of black sexuality. This is overtly portrayed in *Othello* through the over-sexualization of Othello and the accusation placed upon Desdemona of sexual abnormality just because she preferred a black man over a number of eligible white suitors. The white Venetian society was unable to accept the white woman's desire for the black man. As John R. Ford points out-

Desdemona was especially adept at creating the mysterious theatricality of her own feminine desire, as remote from Venetian definitions of gender as Othello's was from their ideas of race. (157)<sup>1</sup>

Othello, on the other hand as a result of his fear and jealousy, suffered from immense racial and sexual insecurities which make him assert himself violently on his gendered 'subordinate.' So Desdemona becomes the ultimate victim of both gender and race politics. In Act 5 Scene 2, Desdemona is shown to be lying in her marriage sheets and calling Othello 'to come to bed' to her as she desperately hopes that the love and physical attraction between them will cure Othello of whatever depression or anger he is suffering from. Shakespeare builds the scene in such a way so that it becomes the final explosive climax to the build up of sexual tension throughout the play. As Michael Neill has stated-

What makes the ending of *Othello* so unaccountably disturbing and so threatening to its spectators is precisely the brutal violation of decorum that is registered in the quasi-pornographic explicitness of the graphic tradition. The illustrator's voyeuristic manipulation of the parted curtains and their invariable focus upon the unconscious invention of Desdemona's

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1. John R. Ford "Words and Performances: the Mixed Dramaturgy of Race"  
*Othello: New Critical Essays* (147-168)

gracefully exposed body serve to foreground not merely the perverse eroticism of the scene but its aspect of forbidden disclosure.(308)<sup>1</sup>

Thus Othello's deadly insecurities regarding his race and sexuality are fatally mixed up with the misreading of Desdemona's uninhibited expression of desire. And ultimately the woman pays dearly for being frank about her desires.

The white woman's desire for the black man has always been the ultimate 'Ssshhh...' factor, something that is kept under the strictest confidence. Any possibility of this desire had to be abolished through the strictest of social prejudices as well as religious and cultural reinforcements. Miscegenation was not an option for the colonizers since it put the purity of the race in danger. In *Othello*, according to G. K. Hunter-

Shakespeare with Othello's colour produced a daring theatrical novelty- a black hero for a white community- a novelty which remains too daring for many recent theatrical audiences... Shakespeare was not only not unaware of the implication of his hero's colour, but was indeed intensely aware of it as one of the primary factors in his play. (249)<sup>2</sup>

What Shakespeare does is that he creates a 'daring,' a challenging situation in staging the palpable sexual tension between Desdemona and Othello as they are constantly interrupted in their nuptial bed. According to Sujata Iyengar-

Desdemona's white desire and the sexual charge that this interracial marriage generates help to precipitate the tragedy. And it is Othello's

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1. Michael Neill "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*." *Othello: A Norton Critical Edition* (306-329)
  2. G. K. Hunter "Othello and Colour Prejudice" *Othello: A Norton Critical Edition* (248-262)



It is obvious that sexuality and insecurities work as forceful catalysts which define the black-white relationships. But what are the implications and the consequences of such sexualized influences? According to Homi Bhabha-

The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference- racial and sexual. Such an articulation becomes crucial if it is held that the body is always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination, power and fear. (38)<sup>1</sup>

Bhabha points out that existence in such constant insecurities creates a state of confusion, which in turn gives rise to anxieties in the psyche of an individual, resulting in hybrid beings. Out of this “state of emergency” emerges a new position. Bhabha asks if this condition is not parallel to the “Freudian fable of fetishism”- something that resides within the discourse of colonial power and requires the expression of modes of differentiation- “sexual and racial”? But sadly in *Othello* the outcome is so violently disastrous that any form of merging between the races seems to be out of the question. So is death the ultimate solution? In *Othello*’s case death seems to be inevitable. The audience is somehow inclined to forgive his sins, because Desdemona, with whom they sympathizes with, forgives *Othello* and thus they are able to as well. But right after the death of Desdemona, the death of *Othello* was something the reader not only accepted but

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1. Homi Bhabha “The Other Question” *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (37-55)

anticipated as well. Death thus becomes clearly the easiest way of getting rid of any subversion of the socio-cultural norms regarding race issues. It seems that ultimately society cannot function in a constant state of emergency and so individuals who create that state of emergency has to be killed.

The acknowledgement of Desdemona's desire leads to her tragic death. The other violence and deaths in the drama however is a capricious mixture of racial and sexual issues on an individual and general societal level. Othello's deadly insecurities regarding his race and sexuality are fatally juxtaposed with the misreading of Desdemona's uninhibited expression of desire. And thus the unavoidable series of deaths take its course.



## Chapter 2

### ***Oroonoko*- The Female Gaze**

“All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn... for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.” (72)<sup>1</sup> –said Virginia Woolf in *A Room of Ones Own*. But we will come to that later on in the chapter. First in continuation of the previous two chapters of this paper, the issues of Behn’s white female narrator and her gaze upon the black prince along with the silencing of the black woman need to be sorted out. Behn gives a lot of effort to make *Oroonoko* sound like just another travel/ adventure log but underlying the story is a complex web of issues concerning race, gender and colonialism. These issues merging and colliding with each other charge the novel with a shifting and unstable power play on both sexual and racial levels. Inevitably it all leads to violence just as in the previous text but this time the white woman escapes by pulling a perfectly timed disappearing act that would baffle Houdini himself.

The first aspect that sets *Oroonoko* apart is Behn’s white female narrator. Considering the cultural-historical context of the late seventeenth century England in which *Oroonoko* was originally written and published, it is an important issue indeed. *Oroonoko* is sometimes argued to be the first novel in English literature. Whether the narrator is Behn herself or not is yet another field of extensive debate. But for this paper the important point is that *Oroonoko* is the narrative of a white woman. Behn’s heroine is

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1. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of Ones Own*.

a crucial female voice in early modern English literature, but we must also recognize the burden of racist discourse she must assume to speak as a white English woman in *Oroonoko*. What Behn claims as a true account of the “noble savage,” the representation of “otherness” is achieved by her technique of using a highly personal, journalistic, and first-person narrative. Before beginning with her tale, she assures the reader of her reliability and prefaces the novel with-

I was myself an eyewitness to this great part of what you'll find here set down, and what I could not be witness of, I received from the mouth of the chief actor in this history, their hero himself (*Oroonoko*, 1)

Indeed, Behn's *Oroonoko* is a text full of possibilities for exploring the author's complex textualization of gender discourses and representations by a woman of ‘other’ men, women, race and colonial slavery. The female author from the beginning apologizes for her ‘female pen’ taking up the initiative of writing about the valiant black prince. Why is the fact of the ‘female pen’ so significant? Critic Jane Spencer informs us-

The reputation of Aphra Behn's pen certainly was great at the time that *Oroonoko* was written, and she uses that reputation to present the female narrator as authoritative, disinterested and sympathetic, with as much authority as a male writer and also with special insights gained from her woman's position. The marginality of the narrator's position is very important to Behn for another reason. It enables her to create her self-image as a writer, free from some of the restrictions on behaviour and feeling which operate on women as represented in the narrative. The



contrast between the heroine, Imoinda, and the woman who writes her story is instructive(218)<sup>1</sup>

This first person narrative also serves, in fact is rather consciously formed to create the sense of 'self' and 'other.' In *Oroonoko*, the construction of 'otherness' is based on the lone narrator's interpretation and recitation of events and perception, More importantly, this first person narration sets her apart as an individual and forms our (the narrator herself and our own) perspective. So it becomes really difficult for the reader to view the subject of her story as anything but the "other". In *Oroonoko*, we are given the account through the eyes of a narrator who is clearly enthralled with the 'exotic'-

Noses and Lips, where they hang a great many little things; as long Beads, bits of Tins, Brass, or Silver, beat thin; and any shinning Trinklets. The Beads, they weave into aprons about a quarter of an Ell long, and of the same breadth; working them very prettily in Flowers of Several Colours of Beads; which Apron they wear just before 'em, as Adam and Eve did the Fig-leaves; the men wearing a long Stripe of linen , which they deal with us for. They thread these Beads also on long Cotton-threads and make Girdles to tie their Aprons to which come twenty times, or more, about the Waist; and then cross, like a Shoulder-belt, both ways, and round their Necks , Arms, and Legs. This Adornment, with their long lack Hair, and the Face painted in the Specks or Flowers here and there, makes

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1. Jane Spencer, "The woman Novelist as Heroin," *Oroonoko: A Norton Critical Edition* (209-220)

'em a wonderful Figure to behold. Some of the Beauties which indeed are finely shap'd, as almost all are and who have preety Features, are very charming and novel, for they have all that is called beauty, except colour.  
(*Oroonoko*, 9)

All of her descriptions of the non-white characters are imbued with a sense of wonder and magic and these black or Indian characters are always presented in such romantic, exoticised language. In this pattern of self versus other, we the reader become this new self, this narrator, and take on not only her version and chronology of events, but also more importantly, her biases and weaknesses since she makes personal interjections throughout the text. Instead of being permitted to view the black prince Oroonoko as anything but novel, we are only told how he looks in terms of otherness, thus the emphasis is placed more on exoticism than a more subjective view. By doing this, Behn sets Oroonoko both within and outside white society. But he is more alienated by the mere fact that he cannot be easily incorporated into this narrator's sense of self and other. At once, Behn's narrator seems to think of him as one of her own "kind" yet on the other hand, it seems that once she gets too close to that notion, she pulls herself away. She first begins to connect him with her version of 'self' (white and thus noble) and then seems to fear danger and immediately discounts herself, by stating that he is beautiful, but that "bating his color" nothing else should prevent this man from becoming a part of her 'self,' as opposed to an oddity, a foreigner. And no matter how amusing or fascinating she might find him he is ultimately an 'other'.

Although this form of depiction has its own share of doubt and debates, it does give us the first account of a white female gaze upon a Black man. The description that



Behn's narrator gives of Oroonoko is highly sexualized and thus objectified. As Firdous Azim, in her essay "Freedom and Slavery: Looking at Behn's *Oroonoko*" says-

It provides, regardless of its historical veracity, the first record of a white woman looking at a Black man... Aphra Behn, the first English novelist, writes a novel in which the Black man is the object of her gaze, in which she, as author of the text, 'looks' at Oroonoko. (49)<sup>1</sup>

From the very beginning of the story the character of Oroonoko, is always subject to the narrator's visions of fancy. For example, in the long series of introductions to Caesar, she states, almost in the form of an itemized list of 'objects'-

His Face was not of that brown, rusty Black which most of that Nation are, but a perfect Ebony, or polish'd Jett. His Eyes were the most awful that cou'd be seen, and very piercing; the White of 'em being like Snow, as were his Teeth. His Nose was rising and *Roman*, instead of *African* and flat; his Mouth the finest shap'd that cou'd be seen; far from those great turn'd Lips which are so natural to the rest of the *Negroes*. The whole Proportion and Air of his Face was so noble and exactly form'd that, bating his Colour, there cou'd be nothing in Nature more beautiful, agreeable, and handsome (*Oroonoko*, 13)

Behn's narrator who happens to be a female is the desiring subject here. She is the one objectifying the male. The gendered hierarchy is turned upside down. This is the first impression that hits the reader. But there are two other factors involved here as well. One

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1. Firdous Azim, "Freedom and Slavery: Looking at Behn's *Oroonoko*" *Infinite Variety: Women in Society and Literature*.

is the fact that the desiring subject here is white and the other is that to make his 'beauty' more 'valid' the description is being Europeanized. So Oroonoko is in one level being feminized and objectified while in another level he is being 'whitewashed.' And that not only in terms of physical attributes but characteristics as well-

'twas amazing to imagine where it was he learn'd so much Humanity; or, to give his Accomplishments a juster Name, where 'twas he got that real Greatness of Soul, those refin'd Notions of true Honour, that absolute Generosity, and that Softness that was capable of the highest Passions of Love and Gallantry, whose Objects were almost continually fighting Men, or those mang'd, or dead; who heard no Sounds, but those of War and Groans; Some part of it we may attribute to the Care of a *French-Man* of Wit and Learning; who . . . took a great pleasure to teach him Morals, Language and Science; and was for it extreamly belov'd and valu'd by him. (*Oroonoko*, 12)

These constructions of female sexuality and race are discursive sites in which power fluctuates constantly and is appropriated and negotiated frequently. This gives us a powerful angle from which to examine power negotiations and gender in the narrative. So we see that when a white 'gaze' is upon a black entity, they have to Europeanize it to appreciate it. The colour black was not considered beautiful. It is almost like "A black man can only be admired conditionally –the 'but of perfect ebony,' 'instead of African and flat,' 'bating his colour' and so on." (Azim, 50) As the colour black was not considered beautiful Behn had to convey her attraction only in the language that was recognizable to her audience. "Feminist criticism has protested against the male gaze in



literature, as it defines woman as the sexual ‘Other’- as object.” (Azim, 49) Here we see in the descriptions that Oroonoko is being feminized, and thus racialized representation also becomes gendered. Whichever way we look at it, these views are rooted in the material, biological, sexed body, yet ultimately are historically/ culturally/ socially determined, constructed, and ‘discoursed about.’ Such theorizing is useful for examining issues of power and identity that surround race, class, and gender, without losing sight of historical specificity. But as the sexuality of the white female is unfolded, the black woman is pushed further and further away. Kadiatu Kanneh has stated this fact in her essay “Feminism and the Colonial Body”-

Black and female representations and identities are not simply figurative or superficial sites of play and metaphor, but occupy very real political spaces of representation, dispossession and resistance. What is complicated is the simultaneity of suffering and power, marginalization and threat, submission and narcissism, which accrue to Black and Women’s bodies and their representation in raciest cultures. (348)<sup>1</sup>

What is perhaps most disturbing about this creation of otherness through narration is the way guilt, crime, and other negative actions are not dealt with in the level of “self” (in this case, in the terms of European ideology) but are handled in terms of otherness. In *Oroonoko*, Behn’s narrator, although constantly suspicious of Oroonoko, nonetheless feels a great deal of pity for him— even after his brutal murder of his beloved wife. Instead of feeling repulsion over his act, she dotes on him and attempts to justify his

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1. Kadiatu Kanneh, “Feminism and the Colonial Body.” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*.

actions. While it is not explicitly stated, it seems as though she feels that he, being part of this otherness she's created for the reader (and presumably for herself) is not fit or qualified to be punished by the same standards as "self" or the white authority. Instead, she rationalizes his actions, thus even the reader becomes unconsciously implicit in forgiving him of the brutal slaying of his wife and with her killing his unborn child. Although Imoinda is mostly silenced in the novel but like all proper heroines fit for such heroes as Oroonoko she pleads for death in the hands of her husband than to be subject to the 'nasty lusts' of the whites. This form of resistance has been a subject of fear for the colonizers. Charlotte Sussman in her essay "The Other Problem with Woman" has argued, Imoinda's body is the battleground on which the sexual politics of slavery, as well as particular colonial anxieties, are laid bare -

At the same time the novel imagines Imoinda as a conventionally disposable possession, it also imagines her as an enormously powerful erotic figure. Yet although the conventions of heroic romance allow Imoinda no nature that marks her as distinctly African, the context of slavery make the erotic power of women seem coercive and constraining... The possibility that captive women might take their biology into their own hands, either through abortion or the more extreme violence of murder, must have lurked in the imaginations of their white owners. The image becomes a sign of the colonist's fear of the consequences of slave culture. (251-252)<sup>1</sup>

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1. Charlotte Sussman, "The Other Problem with Woman," *Oroonoko: A Norton Critical Edition* (232-246)



Many of the narrative's conflicts surrounding intersections of race, slavery, and gender are played out on the site of the black female body, and the reproductive outcome of female sexuality haunts Behn's text and its female characters- Imoinda, Onahal, etc. Imoinda loses first her liberty and then her life, violently yet sentimentally erased, along with her unborn child. Onahal on the other hand is more 'effectively' erased. Her black, maternal body disappears abruptly from the narrative, never to be heard of again. Behn's white female narrator seems to have the twentieth-century white feminist critic's fascination with the black woman as embodying material 'otherness.' She inspects and puts on show the black woman's suffering but ultimately refuses to 'comprehend' it. Thus "A white woman meets black for the first time in the pages of the English novel" but the silencing the other woman is deafening in both sexual and racial levels. Just as white society does not comprehend the native rebellion, the white female narrator seems not to understand and so remains silent about the black woman.

Violence in *Oroonoko* seems to follow as naturally as it did in *Othello* and will do in *The Grass is Singing*. But whereas in *Othello* and *The Grass is Singing*, the white woman, due to their desires for the male of the other race, had to face death; in *Oroonoko* the white woman does not suffer from any violence at all. Both Desdemona and Behn's narrator are white women and both are attracted to a man of the other race. Desdemona; after being stigmatized by the society and mistreated by her beloved husband; faces a violent death in the hands of her husband Othello, who later commits suicide. But Behn's narrator escapes from the violence committed upon Oroonoko very diplomatically. So where and how does Behn's narrator go different Desdemona? At the exact moment when the exotic and beautiful black prince Oroonoko was being cut to death by the public

mutilation of his body, Behn's narrator disappears. Although she does mention that if (and it is a big 'if') she was there she might have been able to prevent it. But the readers are not necessarily convinced because her actual position in the whole setting is never properly clarified. And judging from the fatal consequences of the white woman in *Othello* and *The Grass is Singing*, it seems that she might have spared herself from violence and/or death by 'excusing' herself from the brutal scene of Oroonoko's death.

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of Ones Own*, celebrates Aphra Behn as the woman who is the first novelist of English literature. From a more one tracked point of view of western feminism this in itself is a rather significant issue. But from the more complex point of view of postcolonial feminism where the issues of race, gender, colonialism, etc becomes intertwined, Behn's *Oroonoko* develops into a very important discourse because it is the first account of a white woman's point of view, an expression of her desires.



### Chapter 3

#### ***The Grass is Singing- Forbidden Desires***

Doris Lessing, in her novel *The Grass is Singing*, talks about the hidden and 'forbidden' desires of a white woman for a black man. This novel is a revealing text about the black white relationship from several different points, particularly from a sexualized angle. The first chapter of this paper concentrated on the expression of female desire that lead to violence and death. So logically one might come to the conclusion that the repression of female desire is the answer to this problem. But Doris Lessing proves this notion to be wrong in *The Grass in Singing*. Mary Turner, the protagonist of this novel, also faces a violent death. But, unlike Desdemona, in her case the cause was the repression of her desires at many different levels- social, cultural, psychological, etc. The eerie force of attraction and repulsion that Mary has towards her black houseboy Moses is the driving force of this novel. The story is set in South Africa of the 1950s. Various forms of racial, cultural, ethnic, and spiritual discrimination existed in that world. It was preposterous for someone to be attracted towards an individual of the other race. Mary's attractions are caused by suppression of her sexuality and her repulsion is caused by years of social preconditioning of her mind against the other races. This clashes violently inside her and she breaks down completely. It is important to look at the extent to which Mary's feelings about the male natives and about Moses in particular might be coloured by her repressed sexuality. The question that arises from such observations is how much these feelings are responsible for the manifestation of the psychological, emotional and

physical violence portrayed in this novel? It is also essential to understand how the Orwellian make-up of the white civilization in Rhodesia imposes boundaries on the thought process of the individuals and deforms their identity- inside and outside; to an extent that nobody recognizes their essence or existence.

The principal thematic focuses of the novel as well as its central narrative line are constructed around the issue of racism- in this case, the institutionalized racism of apartheid. The relationships between the Turners and their black workers, particularly the field-hand turned house-servant Moses, serve as a kind of microcosm of the relationships between blacks and whites in the South Africa of the time. These relationships in turn were founded upon hatred and resentment on both sides- a reluctant need for the other on the side of the whites, and increasing frustration and resentment towards the colonizers on the part of the blacks. The sense of the other is made uncomfortably real throughout the novel. In the end the readers are left with the sickening knowledge that Dick and Mary's lives meant nothing, that they were destined to disappear into oblivion, slowly swallowed up by the country they found so unforgiving. Was this retribution? Perhaps- thus a growing atmosphere of alienation, relentless heat, and the physical presence of the land become three other palpable characters of this book. And the readers are left with the feeling that, although it makes a very sharp social comment, this is a novel about the vengeance of the land, and the fact that the white South African colonizers can never hope to get used to it or tame it.

The protagonist Mary Turner is a self-confident, independent young woman who turns into the depressed, frustrated wife of an ineffectual, unsuccessful farmer. Little by little the ennui of years on the farm works its slow poison on Mary. Mary's despair



progresses until the fateful arrival of an enigmatic and virile black servant- Moses. Locked in anguish, Mary and Moses- master and slave- become trapped in a deadly web of mounting attraction and repulsion. Their psychological and physical tension explodes in a disturbing scene that ends this electrifying tale of racial strife and sexual tension. This is a story of a woman who goes mad within marriage, fighting to stay inside the lines drawn by the society. But Lessing makes sure that the readers have trouble feeling any real sympathy for her. Because this is also a serious study of the 'moral' collapse of a white woman- which comes to represent the fall of white rule in Africa as well as an exploration of that seemingly eternal quartet of dividers - race, nationality, gender and class. But one must not forget that she is ultimately a helpless victim of society's obsession with hiding a woman's desires. The instillation of these suppressive ideologies is immensely strong. In fact they are so strong that the readers can see the struggles that Mary Turner goes through with her own self concerning her desire for the black servant-

He was there, just through the thin wall, so close that if it had not been there his back would have been six inches from her face! Vividly she pictured the broad muscular back, and shuddered. So clear was her vision of the native that she imagined she smelled the hot acrid scent of native bodies. She could smell it, lying there in the dark. She turned her head over, and buried her face in a cushion. (*The Grass is Singing*, 198)

The all consuming and losing battle leaves her drained, confused and psychologically imbalanced. She did not understand her needs. She has been moulded to such an extent by the society that the alien force of her own desire left her breathless. She was taught to

hide her feelings and the clash between her passionate self and the rational social veneer resulted in a deadly obsession-

She dreamed directly of the native, and on each occasion she woke in terror as he touched her. On each occasion in her dream he had stood over her, powerful and commanding, yet kind, but forcing her into a position where she had to touch him. And there were other dreams, where he did not enter directly, but which confused, terrifying, horrible, from which she woke sweating in fear, trying to put them out of her mind she became afraid to go to sleep... Often, during the day, she watched him covertly, not like a mistress watching a servant work, but with a fearful curiosity, remembering those dreams. (*The Grass is Singing*, 192-193)

'Desire' and a person's 'self' have been seen to be linked closely together. It has been used as a measuring device to gauge out who we are. Desires are said to be the very essence that reveal the deeply personal being that a human is when the social, religious, cultural, individual controls are not at work. It is imperative to look at the patterns of a person's desires in order to determine his or her gendered identity. Feminist critics like Julia Kristeva have also insisted that an understanding of one's desires is vital in order to have any idea of who that person is. This is not necessarily in the sense that what the person "really wants indicates who that person really is," (188)<sup>1</sup> but in the sense that it is "the organization of desire" that holds the very identity despite the intrusions of society and rationality. As Kathy J. Whitson has stated-

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1. Julia Kristeva, "Woman's Time" *The Kristeva Reader* (187-213)



The rigidity of gendered categories became problematic for people who did not fit the expected mould... and for people whose preferences were not known. (222)<sup>1</sup>

Woman's desire has always been a totally silent subject. It has been carefully established as a taboo for ages. As Lynne Pearce has stated-

Woman's desires, and by extension feminine sexuality, cannot be treated as fully public; something dangerous might happen, secrets might be let out, if they were open to view... so a woman keeps gyrating in the dark forest of her own subjugated fears, desires and redemption." (58)<sup>2</sup>

But why is there not a space to desire for women? Why has it been established as one of the most rigorous taboos? Simone de Beauvoir believes that a woman's eroticism is much more complex and deep and it also reflects the complexity of the feminine situation. She also accuses the male insecurities and their desire to control as being the reasons behind the 'rigorous taboos' on female desire-

The erotic attitude of the female is very complex at the moment when she faces the male for the first time. It is not true, as is some times maintained that the virgin is unacquainted with sexual desires and that the man must awaken her sex feeling. This legend once again betrays the male's flair for domination, expressing his wish that she should be in no way independent, even in her longing for him. (397)<sup>3</sup>

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1. Kathy J. Whitson, "Sexuality" *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature* (221-223)
  2. Lynne Pearce, "Gesture and Gaze" *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (57-59)
  3. Simone de Beauvoir, "Dreams, Fears, Idols" *The Second Sex* (171-228)

This can be clearly seen in the novel in the very beginning through the reaction of the society that Lessing records as well as through the character of Charlie Slatter and Tony Marston. Society wanted to censor the news of Mary's murder-

Keeping it perhaps as an omen or a warning... They did not discuss the murder; that was the most extraordinary thing about it. It was as if they had a sixth sense which told them everything there was to be known. The murder was simply not discussed. 'A bad business' someone would remark; and the faces of the people round about would put on that reserved and guarded look. 'A very bad business,' came the reply- and that was the end of it. There was, it seemed, a tacit agreement that the Turner case should not be given undue publicity by gossip. (*The Grass is Singing*, 9-10)

But why is there a secrecy surrounding Mary's death? Because if her death is talked about, her desire, her relationship with Moses will come into focus. And that was simply not an option. The white society was not ready to acknowledge that such feelings existed even in gossip. Another instance where the magnitude of the mindsets becomes clear is when Charlie comes to visit the Turners. He noticed the poverty, the sickness, and everything but what spurred him into taking immediate action is Mary's behaviour towards Moses-

It was the tone on Mary's voice when she spoke to the native that jarred on him: she was speaking to him with exactly the same flirtatious with which she had spoken to himself. (*The Grass is Singing*, 219)



Tony's reaction is also important because he is the only witness of the relationship between Mary and Moses. He has been portrayed as someone who has a new outlook of some sort. His reaction was to completely block out that any such thing could happen-

Hypocrisy, as Tony defined it, was the first thing that had struck him on his arrival. He had read enough about psychology to understand the sexual aspect of the colour bar, one of whose foundations is the jealousy of the white man for the superior sexual potency of the native; but he was surprised at one of the guarded, a white woman, so easily evading the barrier... he felt it would be rather like having a relation with an animal, in spite of his 'progressiveness.' It was from this point of view that he chose to see the affair; the other was too difficult for him. (*The Grass is Singing*, 230-231)

These reactions show the extent of the prejudices existing in that society. The nature of what was between Mary and Moses was too much to handle for them.

Mary suffers from what Homi Bhabha calls "the insatiable fear and desire for the Negro" (114)<sup>1</sup> She was a woman of the 'superior' race. Any possibility of any human feelings towards the 'others' were almost violently wiped out through reinforcing a multitude of racial, social and religious prejudices. Whenever one white woman took one tentative step towards the desire that might have just begun to form in her heart for the 'other' she becomes walled in by the ideologies hammered into her-

There remains the fact that he is black... you're going to get yourself

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1. Homi Bhabha "Remembering Fanon: Self, psyche and the colonial condition" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (112-122)

talked about if you go on attracting attention this way. A Negro? Shameful- it's beneath contempt. Associating with anybody of that race is just utterly disgracing yourself. (66)<sup>1</sup>

Mary fell into a bottomless pit of self contradiction and anxiety when she recognized within herself a desire for a male of the other race. As a woman physical desire in itself was a foreign and forbidden concept to her. On top of that she has been taught to look at the 'other' race as lesser humans or not as human at all but something close to an animal. She feels that by desiring the black man she has let her race down. She is made to feel that she has 'disgraced' or 'degraded' herself and her race by her 'unnatural' desire. She becomes the victim to the self pity and acute sense of inferiority due to the skin colour of the person she desires. On top of that, for desiring a black man, her self worth, her own sense of self justification within herself decreases immensely. She is thus deprived of the strength that hatred for the 'other' would have provided. These feelings of self contradiction lead to anxiety, unrest and ultimately her violent murder by Moses. Thus the uncharted territories of desire work as a palpable force.

Apart from the racial complications, existence of desire in the female is basically shocking and must therefore be suppressed. The exclusions of female desire from literature as a whole works like a domino effect, a recipe of disaster. Because neither truth nor desire, however one chooses to define it, is the exclusive property of any certain text. So if a female character yearns for, that is, desires someone she is still expressing

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1. Frantz Fanon, "The Man of Colour and the White Woman" *Black Skin White Masks* (63-82)



a desire not officially permitted in society. This rare 'scandalized' occurrence is not the common behavior norm, except in fictions, even that is not comfortably handled. Otherwise it carries the threat of becoming the living breathing proof of women having a mind of their own; they might even be proved to be as much of human as men think themselves to be. That cannot be an option for the patriarchal system. So the plots of the fictions that shape fates insist that female capacity for desiring, unlike its male counterpart, generates eternal suffering. That may be the reason why Mary got obsessed trying to redirect her desires, but Lessing allows it to surface exactly when it is being repressed.

*The Grass is Singing* is a book that leaves the reader with a lot of questions. By the end the reader is filled with mounting frustration because Moses was the one voice that Doris Lessing consciously makes them really want to hear, but ultimately denies. The readers develop a need to know what goes on in his mind corresponding to what goes on in Mary's mind in order to compare and contrast the two so that they can understand or at least come to terms with the uncanny story. Yet his is the one voice Lessing denies. On the last page, she shifts from referring to him as Moses to calling him "the native" once more. Nothing here is accidental, but the question is what are her reasons for denying Moses a voice and finally even an identity? Is it because she did not feel qualified, having lived as a white South African herself, to put words in the mouth or even thoughts in the mind, of a black houseboy? Or is it because, at that time and place, the black man really had no voice to call his own? And also why do the readers yearn to hear the voice of Moses? Through the complete absence of Moses' voice the sense of the other is made uncomfortably real. In the other two texts this act of silencing is at work as

well. In *Othello* the audience gets to know Desdemona's desire and Othello seems to just go with the flow. But it is not made clear what Othello desires besides becoming a part of the white Venetian society. Othello is the protagonist of a play and thus through his dialogues the audience senses his jealousy, his insecurities, his fears, everything but somehow his desires seem to be hidden from view. In *Oroonoko* this act of silencing is even more visible. The novel is a narrative of a white woman who restates the stories she had hear from the protagonist Oroonoko himself. But in all the stories, events and descriptions that she provides, nowhere can the readers hear the voice of Imoinda. Her function in the novel seems to be like a stage prop that is moved around, stared at, but never heard from. There is an almost uncanny similarity between the way the characters of Moses and Imoinda are dealt with in the two texts which otherwise are centuries apart. Both Behn and Lessing give a very detailed description of the physical attributes of these characters. They both compel the readers to stare or to gaze upon the silenced 'other.' Thus it seems that in order to give voice to one, some 'other' has to be thoroughly silenced. In *The Grass is Singing*, it is obvious that she has known the white people, for she clearly knows not just what they think, but how they think. Her narrative very sardonically, very accurately conveys the racist outlook of her characters. But the black people are left as an impenetrable black mass. Everyone knows that the murder is nothing like the black and white, open and shut case it is widely portrayed to be. But the authorities are not capable of portraying it in any other way. They are simply incapable of contemplating the idea that the native could be anything but wholly responsible for the murder of Mary Turner. Clear mitigating factors are not only swept aside; somehow they just are not seen. Charlie and Tony know that the murdered had been having a



relationship with the murderer. They see the mitigating factors, but shut their eyes against it. They see themselves as “defending” the values and integrity of the white community.

*The Grass Is Singing* is a terrifying analysis of a failed marriage. It is a horrifying study of the obsession and neurosis of suppressed white female sexuality. And it is also a study of the fear of black power and energy that Lessing saw as underlying the white colonial experience of Africa. The novel’s treatment of the tragic decline of Mary and Dick Turner’s life, marriage and most importantly their minds becomes a metaphor for the whole white presence in Africa.

## Epilogue

“Desire can be seen as an antidote to domination. But ‘miscegenation’ undermines the purist’s notions of racial ‘purity’ and difference. Interracial connection, both social-political and sexual, has sometimes been seen as a primary challenge for racial separatists, both white and black. They tried to discredit and undermine interracial desire by linking them to miscegenous desire and to the annihilation of racial identity and race itself.” (3)<sup>1</sup>

The threat of cross-racial unions, especially between black men and white women, was enhanced by fear of emancipated blacks. Anti-black sentiment created a mass frenzy about the need to protect white people, especially white women, from ‘contamination.’ This resulted in increased numbers of violence against black men and heightened tension between white and black populations. As a result, any writer who attempted to address issues associated with race relations in general, and with transgressive interracial relations in particular, risked censure or more violent repercussions. The potentially explosive responses that actual and represented black/white sexual unions produced, symbolizes more than the taboo of crossing racial lines. They invoked a history of slavery and exploitation. Moreover, interracial unions challenged racist ideologies, which claimed that whites were superior and should

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1. Pamela E. Barnett, “Desire and Domination” *Dangerous Desire: Literature of Sexual Freedom and Sexual Violence since the Sixties* (3-46)



therefore maintain a separate and higher status than blacks. Despite the forbidden nature of cross-racial alliances, particularly the involvement of white women with black men, the three texts chosen for this paper deals with this sensitive issue.

Feminism and post colonialism are both initially ways of revolting against white male supremacy. Thus there are two delicate and complicated sides to analyzing interracial desire. The first is the issue of female desire and the second is the interracial aspects of it. Expression of the desires of women in it self is a sensitive issue. The patriarchal society has done all it could to prevent the expression of female desire. All three texts chosen for this paper deals with the expression and the repression of female desire and the consequences related to this. It only serves to complicate the situation more as the interracial struggle is mixed with it. When it comes to the white woman's desire for the black man, the society is absolutely unforgiving. Any possibility of this kind of desire had been eliminated through severe implementation of social prejudices as well as religious and cultural reinforcements. Miscegenation was not an option for the colonizers because it was the biggest threat for the 'purity' of the whole race. But nevertheless in the pages of literature we find women like Aphra Behn, Desdemona, Adela Quested, Mary Turner, etc who are trapped in a the desire for the 'exotic other.' This desire is a complex and constructed kind of a desire that has an interplay of fear and stereotypes which take control of the confused and repressed white female sexuality. Thus through all the elements such as fear, desire, gaze, silencing, power play, etc. it is the consequent violence that reinforces the taboo nature of interracial desire.

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