

A Stylistic Investigation of the Act of Murder in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract

This paper is a functional stylistic study of a selected passage from Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing*. In the novel *The Grass is Singing*, a white woman in Rhodesia is killed by her black servant but surprisingly the murder instead of bringing a stir spreads a silence in the local white community. Further, the text on an intuitive reading seems to absolve the murderer of the crime which forms the research question of the paper. Thus, close and systematic textual analysis of the text representing the murder scene was conducted and it was found that the linguistic choices of the text does create a semantic universe where the murder and the murdered are allegorical figures representing nature and nurture in a mutual conflict. The methodology for linguistic analysis of the selected text is borrowed from Michael Halliday's theoretical system Systemic Functional Linguistics. The text is analysed by means of transitivity system which provides the investigative tools to study the representational choices of the text.

Keywords: Functional Stylistics; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Transitivity; Ideational metafunction; Experiential Choices; Lessing Studies

Introduction

The literary texts in their most elemental sense comprise of linguistic units tied together by means of grammatical relations. These linguistic units when explored with academic deliberation have the potential to reveal the various dynamics of meaning-making hidden in the lexico-grammar of the text. Linguistics explores the structural aspects of a literary text which enable the text to produce the literary experience which it does. The systematic regularities in the language of the texts are constructed. This helps to hypothesize about the overall internal structure of the text. Thus, stylistic observations are made in an organized way about the most detailed facts of language. Further, one of the most interesting ways to use a grammar of a text is to compare it with the overall grammar of the language in which it is written. Such comparison can reveal, for example, what grammatical categories and options have not been used, and in what ways the text departs from normal usage. Indeed, a grammar of a text provides the only rigorous basis for comparing the language of an individual text with the "language as a whole". (Traugott, 2006, p. 24). Also, Linguistics, provides the necessary theoretical framework and methodology for the stylistic analysis of the text making it both rigorous and explicit. (Jeet, 2015, p. 195)

The literary texts are distinguished in carrying the meaning at three levels. The first and the immediate level of meaning refers to the lexico-grammatical structure of the text including the linguistic patterns and deviations. The second level is realized by the events of a symbolic situation clustered together in logical relation of causality, exemplification or elaboration to each other called the *theses* and presented as the narrative of the text. The third and final level is the *theme* of the text. This thematic level is all-regulative such that the linguistic choices

encoded in the text and the sequential events constituting the narrative are a consequence of it (Hasan, 1971).

The theme carries the socio-political stance of the text such that the text either affirms or refutes certain social conventions, certain stereotypes, certain ideologies and certain power structures. Thus, the theme correlates the linguistic structure and the narrative events to the ideological orientation of the text. Also, this implies that important predictive statements can be made regarding the theme of the text by examining the kind of lexico-grammatical choices made in the text including the patterning and the deviations from the pattern. The patterning and deviations of a text form the 'prominence' of the text. Thus, the linguistic choices present in a text are never random rather they always have a functional motive. They are always chosen (not by means of active consciousness always though) to produce the desired thematic meaning. Language which "is a conventionalized coding system is organised as sets of choices. The distinctive feature of this semiotic system is that each choice in the system acquires its meaning against the background of other choices which could have been made" (Eggins, 2004, p. 3).

The story, theme and the power relations are largely the three types of meanings encoded in the physical structure of the text and they are present at the various levels of the text; the lexical level, the syntactic level, the semantic level, the pragmatic level, the textual level and the discursive level. Also, it must be said that these meanings intersect each other across various levels and it is only for the purpose of academic research that they are isolated like this. The various types of meanings are studied by various types of specialists dealing with the literary criticism of the texts. The present study would limit itself in studying the meaning of the text through investigation of its lexical, syntactical choices and discursive levels.

In Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*, the story opens with a newspaper report about the murder of a white woman, Mary Turner, the wife of farmer Richard Turner at Ngesi, Rhodesia. The man who has committed the act is Turners' black servant, Moses. In the succeeding narrative, it is found that Mary is a strong racist. She is extremely cruel with her native servants and considers them no better than animals. One reason for her racist behaviour is her social distance from the natives which leads to her failure to understand them and empathise with them. She is guided by her colonial prejudices while dealing with them and fails to treat them with natural human dignity. But this kind of attitude and behaviour leads to an intellectual failure in her own person also. She loses her power as an individual and becomes a mere instrument of her racist feelings. At the same time, she is unhappy with her marital life and feeling weak and emotionally vulnerable, she gets into an affair with Moses, a giant black man and grants him some sort of power over herself. This further puts her into a type of conflict in which she suffers great mental distress and agony being in a sexual relationship with a 'dirty native'. Though Mary develops an affair with Moses, the affair is a mere physical relationship and does not involve any feelings of love. In the end Moses kills Mary. But, surprisingly, the murder, instead of bringing any stir, spreads a silence in the local white community. Further, it seems as if the text is sympathetic to the murderer and, in fact, absolves him of the crime. On exploring the linguistic choices of representation in depicting the act of the murder in the selected text, it is observed that the text hesitates to charge Moses of the crime and instead seems to indicate the complicity of all the natural phenomenon in the murder. The linguistic representation of the passage is such that it is difficult to frame a charge of the murder of Mary on Moses directly. It appears as if Mary is killed but yet it is difficult to frame it as a conscious motive of Moses. This kind of understanding of the selected text puts it in harmony with the larger thematic orientation of the novel which sympathizes with the blacks as victims of racism. It appears as it is a conflict between the nature and the culture where Moses represents the nature and Mary stand for the culture. In this context, the final scene of murder of Mary in *The Grass is Singing* is extremely important in placing the ultimate blame of the tragedy and giving

the answer to the question that who killed Mary, was it Moses, the question which has much wider ramifications in terms of racial relations.

The present study explores this question by conducting a systematic enquiry into linguistic form of the selected text. The theoretical approach employed is Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics which along with its investigative tools called Functional Grammar provide an empirical background to the interpretation of meanings of a text. Also, the selected text operates in the socio-cultural context of the white prejudices against the blacks under which blacks are considered no more but animals and the internalized guilt that Mary, the protagonist feels as a result of her sexual encounter with Moses, her black servant and her murderer; and the sense of shame which the local community feels over her death.

"The Systemic Functional approach centres on the notion that the functions of language are the determinants of the structure of language. Thus, the thematic and the semantic concerns decide the syntactic choices. The theory, though, accounts for the syntactic structure of language, begins at the social context in which the language evolves as a system of motivated choices. The Systemic functional approach, thus, shows that functionality is an inherent trait of language and the complete architecture of a language is built around its functional roles." (Jeet, 2017, p. 4)

Methodology

Every clause in a text encodes three dimensions of meaning: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Each strand of meaning is called a metafunction. They are called metafunction to distinguish them from ordinary functions or purposes which are just ways of using language and have no significance for the analysis of language itself (Halliday and Hasan, 1985). The ideational metafunction focuses on the interpretation of the clause as representation. It is concerned with the expression of content, i.e., meaning. Halliday states that it is through this function that the speaker or writer embodies in language his experience of the phenomena of the real world; and this includes his experience of the internal world of his own consciousness; his reactions, cognitions and perceptions, and his linguistic acts of speaking and understanding" (Halliday, 1971, p. 332). The grammatical system which is used to study the ideational metafunction is the system of transitivity.

Under the transitivity system, in Hallidayan Functional Grammar, the unit of analysis is the clause and each clause is taken as a proposition representing events and processes of different kinds in order to investigate how the action is performed, by whom it is performed and on what it is performed. The Verbal element in the clause is considered the nub of the argument and is labelled as a *process*. Further, every major clause normally includes at least one *participant*, which is normally realized by a nominal group. The *circumstances*, which are the additional elements to enhance the meaning of the clause, are typically realized by adverbial groups or prepositional phrases. (Thompson, 2004, pp. 86-125)

Further, the *processes* are of six basic types: *material*, *mental*, *relational*, *behavioural*, *verbal* and *existential* and there are corresponding *participants* for each *process*. The *material processes* encode the actions of 'doing' while the *mental processes* encode the actions of 'sensing' and the *relational processes* cover the different ways in which 'being' can be expressed. Further, while *material*, *mental* and *relational processes* are clearly mutually exclusive, the *behavioural*, *verbal* and *existential processes*, to a certain extent, are extensions of them. On the borderline between *material* and *mental* are the *behavioural processes*. These *processes* represent the outer manifestations of inner working of the consciousness and the physiological states of a person or a personified *participant*. On the borderline of *mental* and *relational processes* is the category of the *verbal processes* which encode the symbolic relationships constructed in human consciousness in the form of 'saying'. On the borderline between the *relational* and the *material*

processes are the *existential processes* by which phenomena of all kinds are simply recognized to 'be' i.e., to exist or to happen. Thus, this completes the circle of the six *process types*.

The *participants* corresponding to the six *processes* are given below:

- i. The doer of the *material* action is called the *Actor* (Active voice) or the *Agent* (Passive voice) which the affected *participant* is called the *Goal* or *Range* depending upon the amount of distinction between the action and the 'acted upon'. Here it must be emphasized that *Goals* have clear separate entities distinguishable from their *processes* while *Range* is a mere extension of the *process*. Sometimes, there is a third participant as well which may be called the *Beneficiary*. The *Beneficiary* is the one who receives the action. It must also be mentioned that the material processes can be classified as *intentionive* or *supertentionive* based on the intention of the doer. While *intentionive* actions are deliberate, the *supertentionive* ones are not. (Burton, 1982, p. 199).
- ii. The doer in case of a mental action is called the *Senser* and the outcome of the mental action is called the *Phenomenon* while the recipient of the mental action is called the *Receiver*. The doer may perform a cognitive type, emotive type, perceptive type or a desiderative type mental action. Also, the *Phenomena* may be thoughts or acts assigned to the *Senser* and are accordingly labelled *Phenomenon-fact* and *Phenomenon-act* respectively. In case, there is direct internal monologue in the text, it is called the *Projected Idea*.
- iii. The doer in case of a verbal action is called the *Sayer* and the outcome of saying is called the *Verbiage*. The one who is talked about is called the *Target*. The direct external dialogue in case of *Verbal process* is called the *Projected Locution*.
- iv. The doer in case of *behavioural* activity is called the *Behaver* and the outcome of *behavioural* activity is called the *Behaviour*.
- v. The *relational processes* are not about doing but being. Therefore, the items which is described is called *Identified* and the one which is descriptive is called the *Identifier*. The *relational processes* may be of the *attributive* or the *identifying* type. While in the *attributive* type, the entity is described by means of an attribute and thus the labels may be used as *Carrier (Identified)* and *Attribute (Identifier)*. In case of the *identifying* subtype, the descriptive term is the direct equivalent of the entity. The special terms in this case are *Token (Identified)* and *Value (Identifier)*.
- vi. The *existential processes* are about merely existing. They have only one participant which informs about the entity who exists. The label for this is the *Existent*.

(Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) (Eggs, 2004, pp. 206-253) (Jeet, 2017, pp. 23-43)

Results and Discussion

For the convenience of analysis, the clauses in the selected passage have been numbered and the *process* words have been marked bold.

- i. Two yards away Moses **stopped**.
- ii. She **could see** his great shoulders, the shape of his head, the glistening of his eyes.
- iii. And, at the sight of him, her emotions unexpectedly **shifted**, to create in her an extraordinary feeling of guilt; but towards him, to whom she had been disloyal, and at the bidding of the Englishman.
- iv. She **felt** she had only to move forward, to explain, to appeal, and the terror would be dissolved.

- v. She **opened** her mouth to speak;
- vi. and, as she did so, **saw** his hand, which held a long curving shape, lifted above his head;
- vii. and she **knew** it would be too late.
- viii. All her past **slid** away,
- ix. and her mouth, opened in appeal, **let out** the beginning of a scream, which was stopped by a black wedge of hand inserted between her jaws.
- x. But the scream **continued**, in her stomach, in her choking;
- xi. and she **lifted** her hands, claw like, to ward him off.
- xii. And then the bush **avenged** itself:
- xiii. that **was** her last thought.
- xiv. The trees **advanced** in a rush, like beasts
- xv. and the thunder **was** the noise of their coming.
- xvi. As the brain at last gave away, collapsing in a ruin of horror, she **saw**, over the big arm that forced her head back against the wall, the other arm descending.
- xvii. Her limbs **sagged** under her;
- xviii. the lightning **leapt out** from the dark,
- xix. and **darted** down the plunging steel. (Lessing, 2013, pp. 204-205)

As shown here, there are nineteen clauses in the selected passage; the majority of which are *material* (12) followed by *mental* (5) and *relational-identifying* (2) clauses. This proposes that the passage largely narrates an action-packed sequence of events which represents the dominance of the external reality than the psychological reality of the participants in the text.

Also, in a high majority of clauses i.e., 12 clauses out of total 19 clauses, the doers of the action are not human beings. They are either parts of the body of the characters involved or the non-human actors, including the inanimate natural elements like the lightning). Thus, it may be derived that the two human beings who are present in the passage as Moses, the murderer and Mary, the murdered, are not entirely in charge of the events. In other words, the action which is happening in the passage involves non-human forces also. There are 13 clauses in the passage which are attributed to Mary, 12 for the natural elements and 1 for Moses suggesting the passage is largely about Mary.

Experiential Profile of Mary

Out of the 13 clauses attributed to Mary, there are 7 material processes, 5 mental processes and 1 relational process. The close analysis of the lexico-grammatical choices employed to construe Mary in the passage, reveal her as a passive victim in the encounter. The *Actors* of the *material clauses* associated with Mary are listed as under:

- Her emotions (iii)
- She (v)
- All her past (viii)
- ...her mouth opened in appeal (ix)

- ...the scream (x)
- ...she (xi)
- Her limbs (xvii)

It can be seen that out of the seven *material clauses* for Mary, two are attributed to her body parts (ix and xvii) and one each to her emotions (iii), her past (viii) and her scream (x) and there are two clauses (v and xi) where Mary does act as the *Actor* but therein her material actions are self-directed, in the sense that her Goals are her own body parts- her mouth and her hands. Thus, it may be concluded that these seven material clauses do not construe any material activity on behalf of Mary. They in fact, emphasise that Mary was ineffectual in all situations which demanded a material response. Since material activity is a powerful way of acquiring control on one's physical world, this kind of experiential profile suggests Mary's loss of control over the material world surrounding her. It connotes that Mary is a fragmented person and her body parts and her thoughts are also split and her she is actually governed by non-material and as a result she is unable to act herself out as a complete effective human being. The situation demanded physical resistance in self-defence but Mary is engrossed in mental activities. Her emotions, her past which exists in her memory and her scream which is choked in her stomach only add to her mental activity. Thus, it may be summed up that the passage is construed in a manner that more than as a participant, Mary appears to be an observer of her own murder.

Mary's indulgence in mental activity can also be observed in the five mental clauses (ii, iv, vi, vii and xvi) in which she is the *Senser*. Out of these five clauses, three are *perceptive type* (ii, vi and xvi) which depict her passive perception of the act of the murder and the remaining two (iv and vii) are of *cognitive type*. Among the two cognitive clauses for Mary, one has the lexical choice as 'felt' which suggests a lack of conscious thought and in the other one the clause is followed by the *Phenomenon-fact* 'it was too late' thus, bringing out her failure at assessing the seriousness of the situation which actually depicts a cognitive failure. See the concerned excerpt below:

"She felt she had only to move forward, to explain, to appeal, and the terror would be dissolved. She opened her mouth to speak; and, as she did so, saw his hand, which held a long curving shape, lifted above his head; and she knew it would be too late." (Lessing, 2013, pp. 204-205)

The *relational clause* (xiii) construing Mary, also has the *Identified* as 'her last thought.'

Thus, it may be summed up that Mary is largely realized by mentalistic lexical choices. Her material and relational activity is also conducted through mental *participants*. It construes that Mary had lost all charge over her physical circumstances and all she could do was passively observe her own murder.

Experiential Profile of Moses

Now analysing the case of Moses, it is observed that only one clause is attributed to Moses as an *Actor* although his presence is accounted seven times in the passage. The details of Moses' presence in the passage are as given below:

- the *Actor* of a *material process* (i)
- the constituent of a nominal phrase functioning as *Goal* in a clause (ix)
- the constituent of the *Circumstances* in two clauses (iii and xi)
- and the *Phenomena* of three clauses (ii, vi and xvi)

'A black wedge of hand' as part of the nominal phrase functioning as *Goal* (ix) exemplifies the fragmentation of Moses into his body parts. He is being denied a whole intact identity as a complete human being who commits actions out of deliberation and will and thus owns the responsibility for them. Also, being *Goal*, he is acted upon rather than acting diffusing his role as the one who is committing the murder.

Moses realized as part of the *circumstances* (iii, xi and xvi) of the murder depicts that he is the part of the conditions under which the act of murder takes place. He is not the murderer but a constituent of the atmosphere of the murder. Significantly, he is not made to see, think or feel because he is not construed as a human being and the act of murder is not construed as a conscious wilful act.

Further, when he appears as *Phenomenon* in *mental-perceptive clauses* (ii, vi and xvi), Mary sees his body parts in action not the complete Moses as if she is unable to convict him of her murder, as if Moses' body parts are committing the crime out of their own will. She sees his shoulders (ii), his head (ii), his eyes (ii) and his hand (iii). It is his hand which is holding the curved weapon and it is his big arm which forces her head back (xvi).

Thus, the transitivity profile of Moses is realized in such a way that it discharges Moses of the commission of the murder.

Thus, it can be seen that Moses is present only once in the passage as the primary participant. Rest everywhere, he is part of the secondary participants or the circumstances of the clauses.

This suggests Moses as a part of the circumstances killing Mary not as the willing, conscious actor who conducts the action. Further, the single *material clause* (i), in which Moses is an Actor, is intransitive clause. He is not affecting any *Goal* and, markedly, although the *process* is transformative the transformation only leads to stopping of the action. Also, the action is of *intensive* type which construes that Moses chooses inactivity over activity and thus further confirming that the subsequent events which lead to realization of murder are beyond his control. Thus, this clause, therefore, exonerates him of all responsibility of the subsequent events which lead to Mary being killed.

Experiential Profile of the Inanimate Forces

In the passage, there are five clauses (xii, xiv, xv, xviii and xix) attributed to the inanimate forces present. Out of these four clauses xii, xiv, xviii and xix are *material clauses* and the bush, trees and the lightening are in the role of Actors of these *material processes*. Further, although these are inanimate elements, the *process choices* are of the *intensive* type as if these natural forces are committing this act deliberately, wilfully. In clause xii, the bush is the *Actor* and it does the *material-intensive* act of avenging itself on Mary. The immobile *Actor*, 'the trees' have been attributed with the action of movement (xiv) and the thunder (xv) heralds the upcoming action. The final action of driving the knife into Mary's body is assigned to the lightening. The lightening 'leaps out' and 'darts' the knife down into Mary. The syntactical structure of the clauses xviii and xix and the lexical choices employed clearly project the Lightening as the assassin. Thus, all these natural players come together, plan, announce and charge the murderous act on Mary and markedly, Mary is aware of this conspiracy against her. She knows that it is between her and the bush (xiii).

Conclusion

On conducting the detailed transitivity analysis of the passage, it is found that when Moses kills Mary, he appears as an instrument in the hands of elemental nature while nature itself appears as the animate, wilful force, capable of plotting, conniving and avenging itself on a passive

observer who is Mary and thus delivering a cold, amoral and natural justice. It appears as if it is just between Mary and the bush. Moses appears as an instrument of murder but not the murderer. His syntactic choices show him fragmented into parts of his body and in the functional roles of *Phenomenon* or *Circumstance* while the natural elements are foregrounded with their active functional roles as the *Actors* of the action. Moses appears just as a tool of murder employed by the real culprits which are the natural elements, the bush, the trees, the lightning and the thunder. Thus, Moses plays the part of the representative of the nature. In fact, she herself does not consider Moses as the murderer. Thus, the linguistic exploration of the text seems to have given an answer in negative to the inquiry. "Who killed Mary? Was it Moses?"

In clause xiii of the text, it is said that Mary knew that she was being avenged against by the bush. This leads to the earlier events in the context of the novel wherein Mary Turner relies only in the indoctrinated conventions of the white colonial civilization. She is closed to any new form of learning and depends solely on the racial prejudices propagated by the colonial ideology. Her own judgement is limited and so are her natural human responses towards the natives, the animals and the bush. Thus, she remains isolated from the nature within her and the nature outside her and acts as a mere puppet of a divisive civilization. Mary and Moses have become almost the allegorical figures who are representing their characteristics. Mary represents her colonial prejudices therefore she stands for an ideology while Moses refers to his physical power and raw primal being.

Thus, the problem presented in the novel does not remain a mere local incident of passion and violence but assumes the proportion of an issue of conflict between instinct and ideology. The clash is between primordial nature and incipient civilization, and the apartheid which had virtually turned the Africans invisible to the racist white settler and forced them to move to the native reserves to make room for progress. In the struggle between the civilization and nature, the civilization thrives on the variations among human beings and classifies them on the basis of their differences while nature strives to bring balance, uniformity, equality and universality among human beings and among all forms of life and natural entities. A constant power struggle runs between them and this time the nature strikes hard.

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