

Ineluctable Marriage in Selected Works of Jane Austen and Dorris Lessing

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Abstract: Marriage is a crucial institution that determines the stability of society. Without a proper family structure, one cannot imagine mentally healthy and emotionally satisfied people, who further determine the growth of the nation. But the collective thinking of society has always been different for men and women. For men, marriage is an option. They can spend their whole life as an unmarried man while holding a dignified position in society. However, for women, the case is different. They must get married. Unmarried and single women are out of the picture for society. Even the women who are financially independent are considered a burden if unmarried. The strange part is how women are made to think that marriage is a necessity and the ultimate purpose of a woman's life. Even when a woman actively shows disinterest in marriage, she is made to think that it is a wise choice, irrespective of possible drastic consequences. According to Maurice Halbwachs, there is no such thing as individual memory but a collective memory. A person often makes decisions based on the collective memory of society around oneself. Collective memory is directed towards the needs and interests of the present community in a very selective and reconstructive manner. That is how women are made to choose marriage even when it's not their active choice. At the same time, the same women try to justify their own decisions to adjust in the marriage. In this research paper, a study of cultural memory is done on Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and Dorris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and *To the Room Nineteen* to show how cultural memory affects an individual's memory to alter their beliefs and disconnect them from their true emotions. In these narratives, women are thus pushed to believe that marriage is a necessity and thus ineluctable.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Individuality, Feminism, Individual Memory, Marriage

Introduction

The institution of marriage has always been seen as one of the most sacred institutions, which is essential for a healthy and prosperous society. Broken and disturbed families fail to add mentally and physically efficient human resources to society. But for the past few centuries, it has been observed that all the responsibility of handling this institution has been forced more upon women than men. Elaine Showalter, in her book *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture: 1830-1980*, acknowledges how Darwinian science influenced Victorian psychology and affected the role of women in society. Psychologists believed that by nature, women were constituted to be a helpmate and companions of man (123).

Women's work was clearly motherhood, which fulfilled and exercised her nature as it also served the needs of society and the race. "Man's chief work," as Clouston put it, was "more related to the present"; women's chief work, however, was related "to the future of the world." And women's "foreordained work as mothers and nurses of children," even if it might be seen as less noble than man's work as father of ideas, had to be done in a serious and dedicated way. (123)

This ideology related to women not only continues to live to date but is also often reflected in literature. These ideas are especially reflected in Romantic and Victorian literature, that too written by women. Jane Austen's novels, which were written between 1811-1820, primarily focus on the topic of marriage. In most of her works, the primary concerns remain either getting married or getting another woman married. Since it was considered the sole purpose of a woman's life. Her novels end with women finally getting married and embracing their happily ever after. But for a long time, writers rarely dared to explore whether this happily ever after was happy or not. Marriages are difficult and take a lot of effort. Almost a century later, Dorris Lessing wrote about married life in her works and depicted a real picture of the struggles a person must face in married life. But one thing remains consistent in both the author's works: a woman getting married. Where in Jane Austen's novels women were willingly getting married or made to think that it was a necessity, in Dorris Lessing's works, women are shown doubtful regarding their marriage, along with the struggles of married life. Both authors' work reflects on how marriage and women are inextricably connected with each other, even if it turns

unbearable for women. In this paper, a comparative study of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and Dorris Lessing's *To Room Nineteen* and *The Grass is Singing* is conducted using cultural memory to reflect on how ideas propagate through collective memory and convince women to get married as well as stay married.

Literature Review

Cultural Memory or Collective Memory is a concept of collective recollections of society. Cultural Memory studies aim to study the interplay of present and past from individual acts of remembering in a social group to the national level of remembering, which creates traditional values (Erl 2). This concept of Collective Memory was first given by Maurice Halbwach in his work *On Collective Memory*, which later came to be known as cultural memory. Maurice Halbwach believed that an individual's act of remembering and forgetting is always heavily influenced by one's social-cultural context.

With regard to this first level, "memory" is used in a literal sense, whereas the attribute "cultural" is a metonymy, standing for the "socio-cultural contexts and their influence on memory." (Erl 5)

Societies do not have literal memories of the events of the past. Memory of an individual does not exist only based on interactions with other human beings but also with other things or outward symbols such as artifacts, objects, monuments, anniversaries, feasts, icons, or landscapes. This contact between remembering mind and reminding objects triggers an individual's memory because the objects carry memories which were invested in them (Assmann 111). Since remembering everything that has occurred in the past is a near-impossible task for groups or society, these external symbols or objects become very important for preserving the past. This act of having shared memories at a social level is done selectively and perspectively to create a past "according to present knowledge and needs" (Erl 5).

In recalling, iterating, reading, commenting, criticizing, discussing what was deposited in the remote or recent past, humans participate in extended horizons of meaning production. They do not have to start anew in every generation because they are standing on the shoulders of the giants whose knowledge they can reuse and reinterpret. (Assmann 97)

Both individual memory and collective or cultural memory are never independent of one another. This interplay of memories between past and present, and collective and individual, also plays a crucial role in shaping the identity of an individual.

We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated. (Halbwach 47)

Astrid Erl refers to John Locke, who stated that there is no such thing as essential identity, but identities have to be recreated by acts of "remembering who one was and by setting this past self in relation to the present self." (Erl 6) Cultural memory is shared by a number of people, and it conveys to these people a collective identity (Assmann 110). Individuals possess various identities depending upon which group, community, belief systems, political systems, etc., they belong to (Assmann 113).

Memory is knowledge with an identity-index; it is knowledge about oneself, that is, one's own diachronic identity, be it as an individual or as a family, a generation, a community, a nation, or a cultural and religious tradition. (Assmann 114)

Pernille Herman explores the connection between cultural memory and literature. He explores memory of literature, memory in literature, and literature as a medium of collective memory, as stated by Astrid Erl, to study how memories are preserved in Saga literature. **Lovro Skopljanac** also studies the connection between literature and memory in the research paper "Literature Through Recall: Ways of Connecting Literary Studies and Memory Studies." Skopljanac acknowledges 'The metaphorical blend of memory with literature where memorizing is the source domain and writing is the target domain.' (197) which also goes vice versa, making the writer the encoder of meaning and the reader the interpreter or decoder. **Michael Cole and John Gay** show how mnemonic performance depends upon a host of cultural factors that need to be explored to study culture-memory relations. **Wellington Wasosa and Michael Mazuru** demonstrate how Oliver Mtukudzi's music acts as a transmitter of cultural memory. They show how every cultural group has its own cultural memory that shapes its identity. **William Ocasio, Michael Mauskopf, and Christopher W.J. Steele** study how collective memory shapes societal institutions. And these societal institutions, in turn, shape collective memory, leading to the reconstruction and reproduction of history itself.

The literature review, thus, validates literature as a confident source of cultural memory. It also shows how literature contributes to the recreation of cultural memory, where it efficiently reflects the identity of social groups, and also recreates identity and institutions. In this paper, we will analyze the shift in the institution of marriage from Jane Austen to Dorris Lessing and attempt to understand why marriage is often considered compulsory for women.

Analysis

Jane Austen wrote *Sense and Sensibility* in the year 1811. Back in those days, women had no professional life. Their only source of income and societal status was marriage. Thus, marrying the right man became crucial for a woman. Jane Austen's novels offer a brief education to women on what love and marriage are. Austen's views on marriage are summed up in Mrs. Jennings's remarks on unions, "HE was rich, and SHE was handsome" (chapter VIII). Indirectly, she refers to marriage as a practical thing in which a man must be rich and a woman must be attractive. In her works, we see women going through dilemmas and then ending up getting married to the right person.

In her work *Sense and Sensibility*, which is a story of two sisters, Elinor Dashwood and Marianne Dashwood, both representing sense and sensibility, respectively. Elinor is the older sister who knows how to always control her emotions. When she learns that Edward Ferrars, her potential romantic counterpart, is already engaged, she controls herself and accepts the reality. When Edward's fiancée breaks the engagement, she doesn't try to change his mind. On the other hand, Marianne is livelier and has some romantic misconceptions. She gets attracted to John Willoughby, who is young and charming, and refuses to accept Colonel Brandon as a suitor who, according to her, is too old to have the opportunity to pursue other young ladies, even if he is scarcely thirty-five years old (348 Zhang). But when Willoughby leaves her to marry someone else, she almost loses herself to the rain. With Colonel Brandon's help, she learns to get hold of herself again and finally gets convinced by her sister to marry Colonel Brandon.

Marianne's gradual shift from being an emotional person to a sensible, mature self reflects on the functioning of society. Firstly, the topic protagonist always gets married at the end, showing how marriage was a crucial part of a woman's life. While male characters like Colonel Brandon had the liberty to stay unmarried till they found someone special, women didn't have that option. Marianne is not given enough space to explore her choices and end up with someone she would prefer apart from Colonel Brandon due to her family's financial condition. Thus, Marianne's life choices in marriage were influenced by her sister's ideas and her family's financial condition.

The Short Story 'To Room Nineteen' is an example of what happens to women who completely contribute themselves to marriage and household duties. For Susan Rawlings, it was her practical intelligence that made her marry in her late twenties. For Susan, it was completely practical and rational to leave her job so that she could take care of 'Matthew, the children, the house and the garden-which unit would have collapsed in a week without her.' (Lessing, To Room Nineteen 398)

When her husband Matthew Rawlings confesses to cheating on her with his colleague, Susan's practical intelligence tells her to forgive and forbade "quarrelling, sulking, anger, silences of withdrawal, accusations, and tears. Above all, intelligence forbids tears." (Lessing 402)

Susan goes through an extensive mental fight to suppress her emotions. She could not help thinking about the incident for some time. It made both irritable, bad-tempered, and annoyed (Lessing 400). But still, they chose not to talk about it. This incident of suppressing emotions lays the foundation for her mental health issues, which show up in later years when all her children start to go to school. The very house in which she invested years of her life starts to haunt her. She tries to convince herself that she signed herself to others for over 12 years, and she had not had alone time, and now she just must learn to be herself again (Lessing 404). But all the attempts go in vain. She started to have weird thoughts when she went to the garden alone, but chose not to talk to her husband. Because 'they were not sensible' (Lessing 404).

She was possessed with resentment that the seven hours of freedom in every day (during weekdays in the school term) were not free, that never, not for one second, ever, was she free from the pressure of time, from having to remember this or that. She could never forget herself; never really let herself go into forgetfulness (Lessing 407).

This resentment poisoned her mind, and she simply could not tell her husband because it looked ridiculous (407). Her practical intelligence again forbade talking about any emotion. Her mental health starts to degrade to the point where she starts to rent a room in a hotel to get herself a free place. But it turns out to be a futile attempt. When her husband, at the end, confesses to being in a relationship and wanting to give Susan a divorce, she commits suicide in room nineteen instead of confronting her husband.

The practical intelligence that shaped all the decisions of Susan Rawlings reflects cultural memory. As a society, we expect women to behave in a certain way. To be cheerful, vivacious, and have powers of endurance, because their main role is that of a companion to man and embracing motherhood (Showalter 123). Deviation from these qualities and duties, responsibilities towards men were believed to be the main cause of insanity (123).

But Dorris Lessing presents a different view. She mocks Susan Rawlings' and society's practical intelligence that assigns certain social roles to men and women. She presents the opposing view that suppressing original thought and emotion leads to mental health issues.

In the novel *The Grass is Singing*, Dorris Lessing presents a character of Mary who hated her childhood and felt comfortable living alone. When both of her parents die, she feels relieved that 'the last link that bound her to a childhood she hated to remember' (Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* 36) was removed. When Mary turned 30, she did not feel any different from her 16-year-old self. She was working as a "personal secretary of her employer, and was earning good money" (36) as well. Mary's individual memory of her childhood was harsh.

When Mary thought of 'home' she remembered a wooden box shaken by passing trains; when she thought of marriage she remembered her father coming home red-eyed and fuddled; when she thought of children she saw her mother's face at her children's funeral- anguished, but as dry and as hard as rock. (Lessing 39)

These memories created a barrier between Mary and marriage. She sometimes thought about her life, whether it is going to be enough? Sometimes these thoughts brought her 'a restlessness, a vague dissatisfaction that took the pleasure out of her activities for a while' (Lessing 59). But then she would forget all this and go back to her work and social life because 'the mood never lasted long' (Lessing 39). But one day she overheard her friends talk about her and stated that she will never marry because 'she just isn't like that, isn't like that at all. Something missing somewhere.' (Lessing 40) This is the point where cultural memory intervenes. Culturally, our society is so used to the institution of marriage that we don't know how to see people who stay single by default or by choice. There was a huge difference between how Mary saw herself and how people saw her as an unmarried woman. By what people already remember from other marriages they had seen, Mary should have been married before 30, but she was still single. Instead of trying to understand her state of mind, people around her labelled her as 'she is not like that,' and made fun of her.

This incident bothered Mary, and she decided to get married. She chose a man over fifty with kids. On the surface, everything went well, but when he tried to get intimate with her, she ran. Then Dick Turner found her at the movies and decided to date her. Both got married after a brief courtship period.

Mary Turner's life goes downhill when she slowly realises how poor her husband was. One day, when she finally broke her silence on their condition, she realized that she was using a new voice that she had never used before.

It was taken direct from her mother, when she had had those scenes over money with her father. It was not the voice of Mary, the individual (who after all really did not care so much about the bath or whether the native stayed or went), but the voice of a suffering female, who wanted to show her husband she just would not be treated like that. (Lessing 79)

Thus, the influence of her childhood shows up in her marriage. Her choice of not getting intimate with her husband and using the voice of her mother was influenced by her individual memories and psyche. She eventually thought of breaking away from the marriage, but the idea of her friends making fun of her stopped her from doing so.

What would they say, breaking up a marriage like that? The conventionality of her ethics, which had nothing to do with her real life, was restored by the thought of those friends, and the memory of their judgements on other people. (Lessing 97)

She was "haunted by a feeling of inadequacy, because 'she was not like that'" (97). This shows how cultural memory influences our identity at personal and social levels. Mary chose to stay in her difficult marriage that did not give her happiness, only to escape the identity that society had made of her. She did not want to be remembered as a woman who was not like that or inadequate.

Comparison and Conclusion

Both Austen's and Lessing's works agree that marriage brings social security to women. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor's sense convinces Marianne to get married to Colonel Brandon despite being old because he has money. And social-financial security was more important than looks. In *The Grass is Singing*, Mary chooses to stay in marriage out of fear that divorce would make her an object of mockery. In other words, it will disturb her image in society. Susan also chooses to stay in marriage for the same reason. She convinces herself that her husband's cheating was no big deal. Her practical intelligence told her to bear the incident instead of running away. She had invested herself wholly in her family, and when her husband chose to divorce her, she committed suicide. So, in all the cases, marriage meant social security.

Cultural memory influences both Austen and Lessing to present married lives in different ways. Jane Austen never got married, so she had no experience or memories of the struggles and challenges that a woman goes through in marriage. Austen's idea of what

marriage should be like or what women must look for while getting married reflects her knowledge of her surroundings. Her works reflected already existing opinions for women on marriage. Her works end with the protagonist getting married and do not go beyond that point. Because she had no memory as a married woman. She had love interests but never got married. On the other hand, Lessing was twice divorced. Her memories of her marriage influenced the portrayal of women characters in her work. Both Susan and Mary leave their jobs after marriage. And both miss their jobs at a certain point, but fail to get them back. It reflects on Dorris Lessing's real-life memories of focusing on her career after her second divorce. These characters also show influences of Dorris Lessing's real-life memories of her mother, who became an alcoholic because she was a stay-at-home mother. That is why her characters who became housewives went through mental health issues.

Conflict between individual memory and cultural memory can also be seen in these works. In *Sense and Sensibility*, we see a conflict between what Marianne thought of as her ideal man and what Elinor thought of as an ideal man. For Marianne, an ideal man was young, vivacious like John Willoughby, and for Elinor, it was someone who brought financial stability. Culturally, marrying rich was considered more sensible, even if he did not look good. Eventually, Marianne is convinced to keep her individual perspective aside and accept the perspective of society.

In *The Grass is Singing*, Mary hated to think of her childhood. The idea of marriage brought up her old memories, which she hated. In her own memory, she was happy alone. She never pictured herself with a man or kids. But cultural memory does not hold any image of a woman living on her own. When Mary found out what her friends thought of her, she decided to get married. So that she does not end up as a laughing stock for her friends.

However, in *To Room Nineteen*, Susan completely embraces society's idea of a perfect marriage and married life forcefully by suppressing her emotions. She left her job, forgave her husband, and severely suppressed her honest emotions towards her husband's cheating scandal. But it did not help her much. Eventually, she starts to feel suffocated and empty in her own house. Instead of facing her emotions, she tries to run away from emptiness. When Matthew declares that he wants to divorce her, she commits suicide.

So, even though these works of two authors were written many years apart. We see how not much has changed for women. The expectations and obligations are quite similar. The differences in these authors' works occur due to differences in their personal experiences. But overall, the values, ideology, and cultural memory of women remain the same. And that cultural memory of women says that a woman must control her emotions to get married and submit to their duties completely. This cultural memory makes marriage ineluctable for women.

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