D. H. Lawrence’s Feminine Consciousness in “The Horse Dealer’s Daughter”

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Abstract. This essay is aimed at analyzing the subject matter of D. H. Laurence’s short story “The Horse Dealer’s Daughter” from three aspects, namely the discourse exchange, linguistic depiction of the characters, and Mabel’s unusual relationship with Dr. Fergusson. Based on the above analysis, the essay is intending to reveal the D. H. Laurence’s feminine consciousness and deep concern for women who were perceived as inferior to men in that special social period. Moreover, D. H. Laurence’s real purpose in constructing the seemingly simple and absurd love story which occurred all of a sudden between the country doctor and Mable is to be dug. As the forerunner of the Feminism, D. H. Laurence’s literary attention is paid closely to those who are considered to be subordinates—women and he goes to great length in protecting them by depicting various female roles and their contradiction with men so as to arouse societal awareness of women’s social status.

1. Introduction

“The Horse Dealer’s Daughter”, completed in 1916 when its author D. H. Lawrence was spending the most suffering time with his wife in a backward countryside named Cornwall after his works were banned and turned down for being “pornographic” as claimed, was a brilliant expression of Lawrence’s concern about the oppressed women in that special era. D. H. Lawrence’s works has always showed interests in dehumanizing effects of modernity and industrialization and the relationship between men and women. However, in his short story “The Horse Dealer’s Daughter”, Lawrence showed his feminine consciousness and deep concern towards woman in patriarchal society.

2. Mabel’s position in the story

As the name of the story “The Horse Dealer’s Daughter” indicates, the major character Mabel is the protagonist instead of “the other” or “the minor” as suggested in male dominated literature.

According to stereotypes of women in traditional male-dominated literary canon, women were usually relegated to as minor or limited roles. Besides, women were more than often defined only according to their relationships to men. However, with a profound awareness of the importance of women’s miserable situation and their feelings, Lawrence singles Mabel out as the first major character and arranges the whole story to go around this girl’s movement and sufferings. Here, the poor girl, abandoned by her family, is depicted as significant and more importantly, she has a name and an identity. Thus, Lawrence’s sense of sympathy and care towards the girl is overtly indicated.

3. Different languages employed to depict the two sides: Mabel and her brothers

3.1 Linguistic depiction of Mabel

Lawrence opts to use positive language to depict Mabel which may easily arouse readers’ sympathy toward her. For instance, the first appearance of Mabel is described as “alone, a rather short, sullen-looking young woman of twenty-seven and would have been good-looking, save for the impressive fixity of her face”. From this, it can be inferred that a girl with a sullen-looking must live an unhappy life. Also, when faced with her brothers’ repeated questions of her plan, Mabel just
remains silent and “didn’t move a muscle” or “didn’t take any notice of them”. Even when urged, she only utters a briefest reply in a “neutral” way. Actually, Mabel is silently resisting her brothers’ indifference and rudeness. Worked in the kitchen for almost ten years as a servant after the family business collapsed, she reaped not gratitude but abandonment.

Exteriorly, she devoices herself and seems dull and careless, but her heart is bleeding each time when those guys throw a stone at her. When the oldest brother Joe threatens to throw “her lodgings on the kerbstone”, Mabel’s face “darkened though she sat on immutable”.

3.2 Linguistic depiction of Mabel’ brothers

When it comes to Mabel’s brothers, Negative languages are adopted to portray those ill-informed creatures. Three grown-ups who are supposed to take care of their unmarried sister Mabel and each other turn out to be totally selfish and concern only themselves.

Having “shallow and restless” eyes, the oldest brother Joe is a guy who speaks with “foolish flippancy” and he doesn’t smile but “grin”. Though he constantly asked Mabel about her plan, he simply has no patience to listen to or await an answer. When he finishes asking his question, he “turned aside” and “worked a grain of tobacco to the tip of his tongue and spat it out”. He does all this when the four siblings have a family meeting. His utterance is of coarse nature and he addresses the family dog “bitch”. Thus, he is depicted as having “a tail between his legs”. This is the most powerful words Lawrence uses to show his hatred toward this animal-like man.

The second brother Fred, resembles exactly his big brother, is no better than Joe. Again he is referred to as “an animal” who has the quality to control others but “he was not master of the situations of life” in reality. Joe’s hatred toward his sister is more obvious and is showed in a very direct way. He’d rather glance than look at Mabel. Fred doesn’t sit but “straddles” on a chair “in real horsey fashion”.

The youngest brother Malcolm is of the same kind as his brothers. Lawrence doesn’t fail to depict the youngest baby as having “a fresh, jaunty face.” Through the negative language, Lawrence successfully shaped out three animal-like males who are completely unconcerned of their sister, which in turn help to refract Mabel’s pitiful condition and the direct cause of Mabel’s committing suicide.

4. Discourse exchange between Mabel and her brothers.

“Men, consciously or unconsciously, have oppressed women, allowing them little or no voice in the political, social, or economic issues of their society” [1] (p.144). Mabel’ voice is almost silenced in her dialogue with her brothers. Limited discourse exchange between Mabel and her brothers is another element that can demonstrate Lawrence’s feminine consciousness.

It can be generally noticed that throughout conversations carried out between Mabel and her brothers, Mabel is a devoiced character and nearly all the talking is done by her brothers. She is silenced to a degree that she even refuses to respond to questions addressed to her. She speaks only when she has to.

When her oldest brother Joe asks: “Well, Mabel, and what are you going to do with yourself?” [2] (p.167) Mabel makes no response at all. Although it was not stated obviously by Lawrence whether Mabel answers or not, it can be safely inferred that Mabel must ignore this stupid question for the addressee himself turned aside without listening for an answer”. Joe later shouts at Mabel: “You’ll have to make up your mind between now and next or else find your lodgings on the kerbstone.” [2] (p.167) So the dialog between Mabel and Joe is unilateral and Mabel is a silenced role before her indifferent brother who actually considers himself the patriarch of the household.

The discourse exchange between Mabel and his second brother Henry and the youngest brother Malcolm is also arranged quite the same. Lawrence offers an account in this way:

‘You’ll go and stop with Lucy for a bit, shan’t you?’ he asked. The girl did not answer. 'I don't see what else you can do,' persisted Fred Henry. 'Go as a skivvy,' Joe interpolated laconically. The girl
did not move a muscle. 'If I was her, I should go in for training for a nurse,' said Malcolm, the youngest of them all. [2] (p. 168)

But Mabel did not take any notice of him. They had talked at her and be around for so many years, that she hardly heard them at all.

From the above depiction, Lawrence tries to picture an oppressed woman whose individuality and personality are forced to be imperceptible by her brothers who are the patriarchs typical of that patriarchal society. Women like Mabel are reduced to the minor or the suppressed. In the above conversation, Fred is repeatedly urged Mabel for an answer in a rude and laconically manner and all he cares is that Mabel can leave the family as soon as possible and be no burden for him. He even advises her to go as a servant in their sister’s household. However, Mabel merely pays no attention to her brother’s words. She doesn’t move a muscle to neither Joe’s suggestion of being a servant nor Malcolm’s self-murmured proposal of training herself to be a nurse.

Another round of conversation carried out between Mabel and Fred is accounted in the following mode. 'Have you had a letter from Lucy?' Fred Henry asked of his sister. 'Last week,' came the neutral reply. 'And what does she say?' There was no answer. 'Does she ask you to go and stop there?' persisted Fred Henry. 'She says I can if I like.' 'Well, then, you'd better. Tell her you'll come on Monday.' This was received in silence. [2] (p. 168)

In the above conversation, Mabel’s voice is made heard but it’s always in briefest way. Thus, again Mabel’s role as the minor is indicated by Lawrence and readers’ sympathy towards Mabel can be easily aroused.

At the end their conversation, Fred Henry stares after Mabel, clenching his lips, his blue eyes fixing in sharp antagonism, as he makes a grimace of sour exasperation when he curses Mabel “You could bray her into bits, and that's all you'd get out of her.” [2] (p. 168) Fred really goes beyond the limits as he utters words like that. The cold and indifferent guy is clearly carved so as to form a sharp contrast and let the readers understand Mabel’s miserable condition in that special family even special society. Also, Lawrence’s deep concern towards the girl is thus manifested.

5. **Mabel’ unusual relationship with Jack Ferguson**

Mabel’s relationship with the young doctor and their contact is designed by Lawrence with great care and is bound to carry the most weight in showing the writer’s purpose. Mabel’s committing suicide and Jack’s saving her are considered the climax of the story. It was claimed by many critics that Mabel experiences not only a physical but also spiritual rebirth after she is rescued by Jack. Wang Zhiqin claimed that the pond symbolizes the womb where Mabel’s new life is given birth to with the help of the doctor Jack Ferguson. [4](p. 61) It is Jack who offers Mabel another chance to survive in the earthly world. However it is also safe to argue that Mabel is the savor of Dr. Ferguson. This hidden point in turn helps to prove Lawrence’s concern about women and his feminine consciousness.

Dr. Ferguson is simply an assistant whose life is confined to a small circle. He travels each day with his worn-out body from “dwelling to dwelling among the colliers and the iron-workers” to perform surgeries or “fill empty bottles with cheap pill”. [2] (p. 169) Being slave to the countryside, his life is black and white. Also, maintaining the only close friendship with fellows like Mabel’s coarse and shallow brother Fred, he is considered by Lawrence as a poor incomplete soul as well. In addition, Dr. Ferguson is a man who shares no love relationship with any lady and he seems to lose his interests in most aspects in life. For example, the town he lives in is described as alien and ugly. But, it can not be failed to notice that “it was a stimulant to him to be in the bones of the rough working people, powerful men and women” [2] (p. 169) and his nerves were excited and gratified. From this account, we can learn that he possessed the keen liking of observing people.

However, Jack’s life is transformed for good after his interests fall on Mabel in graveyard and after he pulls her out of the pond and brings her back to life again. Upon their meeting in the
graveyard for the first time, Jack’s life is touched by some mystical element in Mabel and he watches her as if spellbound. Again when their eyes meet, Mabel’s portentous face seems to mesmerize him because there is a heavy power in her eyes and now he feels the life which was weak and done before now comes back to him. Personally, he “fancied the motion restored him.”

What makes that change? To a spiritually dead man who almost loses his ability to love others, Dr. Fergusson is touched to his very soul by the mysterious yet fascinating facial expressions of Mabel. Mabel’s self-determination and courage to terminate her life and her desire to another world where she expects to meet her late mother are fully displayed in her physical body. Thus, Dr. Fergusson who observed all this feels his dead soul begins to wake up and he feels a new self in growing inside him.

Another contact between the two is after Mabel regained her consciousness. Mabel repeatedly pushed him to confirm her belief that Jack loves her. However, Doctor’s response to this quick-coming love is rather faint-hearted which in turns shows the inward timidity of Jack. Though his body and his soul already yield to Mabel’s love confession and her naked body, he still tries to put his last strength to resist this love. Eventually, Mabel’s female individuality and courage deeply impress Jack and arouse his admiration and love for her and the two have a happy ending. Wang Zhiqin holds that Mabel unconsciously realized the holy job of teaching Jack how to love a woman and how to feel the real beauty in life. [4](p. 62)

6. Conclusion

Mabel is the character endowed with souls. She is a lively and cogitative human with hopes and desires, and she has a strong sense of love and hatred. By putting Mabel in the center of language and consciousness, Lawrence reveals himself as a writer with a strong feminist consciousness.

Rather than catering for the dull convention in which men are all dominating and knowledgeable, while the women are all essentially innocent and passive, Lawrence creates a self-determined and courageous girl who is abandoned by her brothers. However, Mabel wakes up Jack’s dead soul and complements Jack’s male nature so that he again has the ability to love and accept love. So Mabel is Jack’s savor as well. It’s Mabel’s love for Jack that makes it possible for him to be a complete and noble man. In this short story, Lawrence manifests his condemnation of the patriarchal society that suppresses women’s personality and appeals to an acceptable, reciprocal male-female relationship between the two genders.

7. References