



Restlessness as the Spirit of Becoming: A Hegelian Interpretation of the Novel *Restless Dolly Maunder* by Kate Grenville

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Abstract

Kate Grenville's *Restless Dolly Maunder* is a thought-provoking Australian novel that narrates the journey of Dolly through the high and low tides of life through three alternative generations. The protagonist Dolly, who in real life named as Sarah Catherine Maunder, is the maternal grandmother of the author. Shortlisted for the Women's Prize, the novel captures the plight of the First Nations people, especially women and their voyage towards liberty, that is powered by the engine called restlessness. In the world of imitation, mind is real. Though the material world seems explicitly crumbled and real before our eyes, the actual reality is spiritual and unified. In other words, the physical world simply shadows the mental reality. Mind unifies all the time period in the entire universe into a rational whole, making it into an absolute spirit or geist is the theory called Absolute Idealism, formulated by the German philosopher George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. This paper attempts to analyse the rigorous expedition underwent by Dolly in her life from being a carefree kid to a restless woman in the novel *Restless Dolly Maunder*, by making use of the philosophical tenets of Hegel's Absolute Idealism. The finding is brought forth in such a way that it pounces on to challenge the negative perspective of unsettledness in the novel.

Keywords: absolute spirit, reality, dualisms, history, freedom, self development, restlessness

In the world of imitation, mind is real. Reality is fundamentally mental or spiritual, a unified, all-encompassing absolute consciousness or a spirit (Geist). Though the material world seems explicitly crumbled and real before our eyes, the actual reality is spiritual and unified. In other words, the physical world simply shadows the mental reality. Mind unifies all the time period in the entire universe into a rational whole, making it into an absolute spirit or geist is the theory called Absolute Idealism, formulated by the German philosopher George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Idealism is an umbrella term that brings various branches within it; a few being, subjective idealism, transcendental idealism, objective idealism, metaphysical idealism, epistemological idealism, ethical idealism and so on. The foundation being laid by Berkley's subjective idealism portrays that the world seen outside is the manifestation of the idea that is in the mind of God. The pioneering German philosophers Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schelling and George Hegel shifted their focus to deep objective analysis by formulating transcendental idealism and objective idealism, in which the human



knowledge or the ego is the central idea of study. Whereas Hegel chose to study the development of human spirit by postulating a theory of his own called Absolute Idealism.

Hegel's *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* involves the analysis of the odyssey of the human mind, which in literary term can be addressed as the bildungsroman of the spirit. The primary work of the mind is to think. There is always an opposite for what a person thinks. Examining both of the ideas, a conclusion is made. Hegel calls these three aspects as thesis, antithesis and synthesis. In short, ideas clash to synthesize the higher form of understanding or truth. This process is called as the dialectical process. By overcoming dualisms over the years, the spirit's self is developed to understand the absolute knowledge.

The Australian author Kate Grenville is widely known for her writing of historical fiction. Her works highlight the themes of class, race and gender in colonial and contemporary Australia. She bags numerous literary awards; the prominent ones being the Orange Prize for The Idea of Perfection in 2001, and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for The Secret River in 2006. Grenville's *Restless Dolly Maunday* is a thought-provoking Australian novel that narrates the journey of Dolly through the high and low tides of life through three different generations. The protagonist Dolly, who in real life named as Sarah Catherine Maunday, is the maternal grandmother of the author. The novel was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2024.

The objectives of the paper are to examine Dolly's journey through life from being a child to an adult; to estimate her mind's growth in the course of life; to figure out the absolute knowledge that unifies everything. Hegel's Absolute Idealism is taken for the theoretical analysis. The philosophical tenets of the theory are studied to investigate the ultimate journey of Dolly's spirit.

A Hegelian Interpretation of Being and Becoming: Reality is a Rational Whole:

The primary principle of Absolute Idealism puts out that reality is a rational whole. No being can exist all alone. And so, the protagonist Dolly Maunday is not an individual entity. She has become one by those

around her. The family, school and marriage life which comprises past, present and future has made her into what she is. By studying Dolly in relation with her parents, she is found to be an energetic kid among her siblings. Instead of fuelling her positive energy, her parents burnt and broke her every wish and will. All she got from them are denials and refusals. Sadly, her parents understand her as a hyperactive child. Currabubula Public School brought out the best of Dolly's intelligence, making her a smart kid over her classmates. This pushes her to quest for intellectual heights in professional world. When she blurts out her desire of becoming a teacher, her father replied, "Over my dead body any daughter of mine goes out to work" (Grenville 19). Those hammering words dashed her dream to scatter into pieces, making her into a dejected being. Such past events, paints her future making her into an unsatisfied dominant wife. Throughout the novel, Dolly is found to be emotionally unavailable to anyone and everyone around her.

Dialectic Process of the Mind

What made Dolly into such a person is, the working of dialectical process of the mind. This dialectic process is the pursue of human mind through contradictions in life, overcoming dualism to arrive at higher truth. A drastic change can be witnessed in her life with parents and after marriage. What she thinks (thesis) is completely opposite (antithesis) to what her parents plan for her. Both of their ideas clash to win a higher understanding (synthesis) that formed her a new path to tread upon for the rest of her life.

Dolly's life as a submissive kid under her parents can be taken as the thesis. She grows up enduring the obscured hegemony of her father and learning the implications of the ideas of women slavery from her mother, which are disguised under the masque of women's etiquettes. The antithesis or her expectation is that she has to be cherished by her parents like her other siblings. Her father should have granted her freedom to join the teaching career and to marry the boy named Jim Murphy whom she loved.

The synthesis that is made out of these contrast ideas is that Dolly has married Bert Russell and is given a piece of wheat land in Rothesay by her parents. She has become an unsettled woman and a



cold-hearted mother for the rest of her life. Nance's cry evident this truth of Dolly, when she cried to her daughter saying, "In her own last days, Mum asked again the question she'd so often come back to in talking about her childhood: Why did my mother never love me?" (Grenville 238). What Dolly's mind once actually craved for is liberty, but what has become of her in reality is tyranny.

Spirit's Self Development

Tracking Dolly's adventurous life unfolds that her spirit has developed itself through the tough journey. It is a jungle cruise of mind from being a poor kid to a dominant woman i.e., from being atrocious to absolutism. In other words, it is a voyage from the known world to the unknown world that is hidden within her spirit. Hero's Journey by Joseph Campbell is also taken to study the journey of the protagonist. The growth and change are not attained after the end of the journey, instead it happens on the way. The crisis of life summons the dialectic process to arrive at ideal solution, thereby triggering the transformation within.

One of the key factors for Dolly's development is the denials she got; every counterstatement from Mr. and Mrs. Maunder and withdrawal of the boys she loved namely Tom Connolly, Jim Murphy and Will Shaw. These denials couldn't cage her forever. Instead, it called for a breakthrough, thereby making her strong and capable enough to fight back in life. The spirit of slavery is captivated so that the spirit of supremacy can be activated.

History as a Progress of Freedom

Freedom is progressed through history. The novel spans events from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, roughly covering over six to seven decades of Australian history. By navigating through Dolly's past, present and future, the lives of three generations of women could be explored. Dolly mother, though portrayed as a dominant woman, has actually camouflaged Mr. Maunder. She was trained and made to live under the shade of her husband. She belonged to the "Lost Generation". The generation that didn't even attempt to challenge the society. They preferred quietness in the family which halted them forever.

Dolly stands up to fight back the social constraints. Right from her childhood, she has been determined to attain greatness. In the male dominant world, she strives to run her own business, challenging the odds. Her generation is called as the "Greatest Generation". Women toiled to taste the liberty, snatching it off from the patriarch's grip. They became dictators in the family and society, taking charge of everything themselves. The following generation is the pathetic one, as they are under the control of the greatest generation. Nance's life is completely built after her mother's wish and will. Though this generation thrived in all the fields like education, healthcare, marketing, defence and so on, they are addressed as "Silent Generation", as they lived the life that their mothers wanted for themselves to have lived once. What is left behind for this generation is, to whimper over the lost dreams and unloved mothers.

A mammoth transition took place between the greatest and silent generation. One of them being the empowerment of women through education and profession. During the time of Dolly, every child has to study till they attain fourteen years old. The age limit was blotted out by the time Nance started her education. Dolly encouraged Nance to become a pharmacist and gave her in marriage to a solicitor, making her a higher standard of living. Concerning the profession earlier, neither Mrs. Maunder nor Dolly are permitted to go out to do any job other than farming in their own field. Whereas Dolly earned her autonomy to become a business woman through personal strife and Nance was ultimately free from fitting into any moulds of societal expectations. On the whole, this transformation created the women history of freedom in Australia after the settlement of the First Nations people.

Conclusion

Joseph Campbell highlights, that the hero is both the seeker and the found, who is finally understood as the outside and inside of a single, self-mirrored mystery that stands parallel with the mystery of the manifest world. He arrives at the higher truth when he says, "The great deed of the supreme hero is to come to the knowledge of this unity in multiplicity and then to make it known" (Campbell 37). Dolly travelled through the adventure of self-realization to



arrive at an absolute knowledge. The contradictions came her way lead her to the discovery of her absolute spirit. At the end of the journey, the absolute knowledge is found. It is the restlessness which acts as a dynamic force behind everything. This force had driven the dialectic process where dualisms are conquered to synthesize an integrated state of understanding. It developed the spirit to perceive the reality as a rational whole. The restlessness never lets her to settle with what life throws at her. The novel objectifies restlessness as a negative drive. “That restlessness in her had its bad side—she could never be quite happy with where she was” (Grenville 203). On the contrary, the conclusion of the paper asserts that the restlessness is a constructive force that built the life of Dolly into an absolute whole. Not delimiting with Dolly’s life, but that restlessness has grown out to the whole of Australia changing the history of women from the lost generation into the greatest of all time.

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