

## AN ANALYSIS OF FEMINISM AND PATRIARCHY IN DORIS LESSING'S *TO ROOM NINETEEN*

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**Abstract:**

*To Room Nineteen explores the warring impulses of intellect and instinct, mind and heart, against the setting of early 1960s London, when women were caught in the social conservatism of the past and unable to see the promise of a future that would encourage choice, fulfilment, and personal freedom. In this story Lessing illuminated the restrictions placed on women of that time and the tragic consequences of those restrictions. Lessing described Susan's searching for an authentic self which led to her madness and ultimate suicide by using the images analyzed in this paper. It also helps to explain the tension between feminism and patriarchy why feminists have been scrambling for getting rid of diverse patriarchal suppressions but failing to subvert. This paper does not discuss whether or not she is a feminist, but her gynocentric perspective, reflecting female inner struggle over sexism and patriarchy. In Lessing's works, she always depicts the heroines' internal struggles on the journey to their self-actualization. However, some could fulfil it, others failed.*

**Key words:** *social conservatism, personal freedom, feminism, patriarchy, gynocentric.*

In *To Room Nineteen*, the main female character Susan, before getting married, had a well-paid job, working in an advertising firm. She had a talent for commercial drawing. She was humorous about the advertisements she was responsible for. When getting married, she did not want to base her marriage on her husband's pleasant flat, whereas they moved to a new flat. All of these were clear proofs that Susan did not want to submit her personality and she wanted to keep her own personality. She should have lived a real happy life. However, after marriage, for the sake of the children, husband, family and intelligence, Susan was compelled to give up her job. That was the beginning of her tragedy. No job meant no money. Without money, she had to depend on her husband for money, which led to her husband's unfaithful behaviour.

However, many years of domestic seclusion and isolation from the outside contributed to her falling behind and lack of the knowledge about the real meaning of life. She did not know how to deal with her inner emptiness, which was thought as a devil by her. Especially when she was in the garden, the devil was like a stranger lurking in the garden, intending to get into Susan and taking her over. She thought of doing a part-time job, which could help her get through fast and efficiently, leaving time for her. Unable to get rid of the emptiness at all times and not wanting to go away to a place where no one knew her and no one could disturb her. She turned into her own world, hiding from reality.

The novel *To Room Nineteen* begins its story like this, "This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence: the Rawlingses' marriage was grounded in intelligence". When they get married in their late twenties, all of their friends feel that they are well matched. Matthew is a subeditor on a large London newspaper, and Susan works in an advertising firm. Before they've married, they both possess a pleasant flat of their own. So they decide to buy a new flat in South Kensington. Two years later, Susan is pregnant. However, they feel it is "a kind of submission to personality on the part of the one whose flat it is not. Thus, she gives up her job, and lives in Richmond. Just as the author reveals that "it was typical of this couple that they had a son first, then a daughter, then twins, son and daughter." From then on, Susan voluntarily shut herself out from public sphere and was restricted to private sphere, which was the root cause of sexual inequality between man and woman.

The first fault that Susan made after marriage was her voluntary dispossession of her private

property, the flat. And then she renounced her job for being expectant. The both symbolized her unintelligent relinquish of material or economic independence, withdrawing her into an inferior or subordinate social position. Nominally, it is due to Susan's reconciliation toward marriage. Ontologically, the reconciliation was surrender to her gender identity that it was natural for a marital woman not being individual. Indeed, the unequal social practice was also deep-rooted in her unconsciousness, of which she wasn't aware.

Therefore, at that time, she couldn't be aware of the fact that it was more prone to ensnare her in a perilous state for future's material and economic reliance on her husband. The more reliant she was, the more inferior to her husband, who could be regarded as a symbol of patriarchy. Rather than those tragic female characters who were passive recipients in economic oppression, she did it voluntarily, rendering her independence to male dominance unconsciously, which became the first step inevitably leading to her economic embarrassment after marriage. And next, what happened? For the next several years, Susan just has been staying at home, taking care of her children without having any jobs. "And Susan's practical intelligence for the sake of Matthew, the children, the house and the garden which unit would have collapsed in week without her." Though Susan played a cohesive role in uniting the nucleus family, yet she was deeply involved in the housework, bored. It was the only "job" depriving of her economic independence, contributively to the dominance of male over female in the family.

Room nineteen was found after Susan's fourth attempt to find her own free-willed garden. She had ever set Mother's Room to escape from pressure, but she failed to get rid of the trivial chores. In Mother's Room, she would be frequently interrupted. Mother's Room soon became a valuable lesson in respect for other people's rights. It had been turned to be another family room. So "she dreamed of having a room or a place, anywhere, where she could go and sit, by herself, no one knowing where she was." (Lessing, 1980, p.970) She rented a room near Victoria. The room was ordinary and anonymous, and was just what she needed. But she was bothered by Miss Town, the owner of the hotel. She left the hotel. Susan's next escape was the wild country in Wales. She saw nothing but her devil there. So she "returned to her home and family, with the Welsh emptiness at the back of her mind like a promise of freedom." (Lessing, 1980, p.975) Finally, she escaped to room nineteen, whose owner was the kind of person who would agree everything if you gave him money. That provided Susan enough freedom in room nineteen. "The room was hideous. It had a single window, with thin green curtains, a three-quarter bed that had a cheap green satin bedspread on it, a fireplace with a gas fire and a shilling meter by it, a chest of drawers, and a green wicker armchair." (Lessing, 1980, p.980) She did nothing in room nineteen. But it gave her a reassuring presence. In it, she found peace and knew that it was here she belonged. "From the chair, when it had rested her, she went to the window, stretching her arms, smiling treasuring her anonymity, to look out. She was no longer Susan Rawlings, mother of four, wife of Matthew, employer of Mrs. Parkers and of Sophie Traub, with these and those relations with friends, schoolteachers, and tradesman. She no longer was mistress of the big white house and garden, owning clothes suitable for this and that activity or occasion. She was Mrs. Jones, and she was alone, and she had no past and no future." (Lessing, 1980, p.981) But when she was found by her husband, and she was forced to create a lover, which drove her, mad.

### **Conclusion**

*To Room Nineteen* vividly shows us the authentic and common living condition of modern women with its unique artistic charm. Susan, just like other women, suffers a lot from the male-centered society, which deprived their rights to go out to search and to receive intellectual improvement. Thus, limited in view and money, they have no real power in the outside world and no place in decision-making. They are separated from the wonders of the outside world. With the unseen chains, they are bored, restless, confused and depressed. To be angel in the house or to be devil, this is a question. Susan's experience once again shows the revolution for women against the male-centered society is a long course.

### **Work Cited**

1. Lessing, Doris. (1980) *To Room Nineteen*. New York: Vintage Books. Print.