



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Female Psyche And Act Of Agency In Doris Lessing's Short Stories

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Abstract: The paper strives to look into Doris Lessing's short stories and how she portrays female psyche and the small acts of agency that her female characters exercise. Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" is set in London during 1960s, the story revolves around Susan Rawlings, who tries to organize her family and marital life using her "practical intelligence" (Lessing 6) but eventually descends into madness. The third person omniscient narrator follows Susan Rawlings' thought process, articulating her mental anxiety which Susan fails to bring to realization and confines it within herself. Throughout the narrative, Lessing unravels how the constrictions imposed by society on women affects women, which Susan tries to break through. Lessing employs psychological realism in order to enter into subjugated female psyche. The tragic end of Susan's autonomy comments upon limited choices given to women, whose mere identity is also defined by society.

Index Terms: Gender Performativity, Female Psyche, Agency, Male Domination, Heterosexual Normativity

... "I" becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this "I" fully recognizable.

- Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" is a short story, published in her short stories collection *A Man and Two Women* (1963). The short-story is an exploration of the psychological and emotional toll of societal constraints on women. Set in London during 1960s, the story revolves around a typical middle-class housewife of the 1960s Susan Rawlings, who tries to organize her family and marital life using her "practical intelligence" (Lessing 6) but eventually descends into madness. The third person omniscient narrator follows Susan Rawlings' thought process, articulating her mental anxiety which Susan fails to bring to realization and confines it within herself. Throughout the narrative, Lessing unravels the repercussion of the constrictions imposed by society on women, which Susan tries to break through. This paper seeks to investigate how Lessing portrays the female psyche, with a particular focus on Susan's acts of agency, irrespective of how trivial or seemingly insignificant they may be, and how her actions comment on the broader issues of gender oppression and identity.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a key theoretical lens through which to examine Susan's psychological turbulences and mental conflict. In her book *Undoing Gender*, Butler argues that gender is not an inherent trait but rather a social construct that is performed according to societal norms (Butler 218). Butler talks about the need for identifying and accepting different gender identities as viable human beings. In exploring different gender identities like transgender, transsexual, bisexual and so on, she critiques the conservative societal norms which reject their inclusion as socially acceptable beings. Butler

asserts that one's gender is not within oneself but is formed, articulated and reformulated within the social world. She explores her proposition of "gender performativity" (Butler 218) and subsequent loss of self, while performing the roles assigned coercively by conventional norms.

The opening of the story "To Room Nineteen" sets the tone for the narrative's investigation of societal expectations attached to women at large, as the narrative abruptly starts with a sense of uncertainty and confusion, "This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence" (Lessing 1), which continues throughout the narrative. The story begins with the formation of an image of an idealized couple, Matthew and Susan Rawlings, who are thought to be infallibly "appropriate" and compatible to each other. This imposition of an identity by their friends, or society at large, forces them to live up to their expectations and constantly remind themselves of avoiding any follies. Lessing shows their constant fear of "becoming unrecognizable and unviable" (Butler 5) if they deviated from their assigned identities, highlighting the suffocating role of a woman in 1960s.

Lessing stresses upon the practicality and intelligibility with which Susan organized the white house in South Kensington, adulterous husband, innocent children and her wandering self. Hélène Cixous in her essay *Sorties* talks about women's identity being defined in polarity with men like head/heart, activity/passivity, intelligible/palpable and so on (Cixous 64). Lessing explores how for women, restraining emotions from being articulated lead to mental depression. By chiding her emotions completely, Susan tries to move beyond the acceptable behavioral norms defined for women. Her imitation of Matthew's practicality leads to loss of her true identity. As Lessing writes, "Her mind felt dark, full of obstacles and the unasked-for comments of others" (13), illustrating the growing internal chaos she experiences as her sense of self becomes increasingly distorted.

According to Butler, intelligibility is "produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms" (Butler 3). The intelligibility Susan and Matthew clings to throughout the story, resonates with the non-existing spatial freedom provided to them within constrained site. Since Susan and Matthew are acceptable beings of the society maintaining "heterosexual normativity" (Rich 1), their intelligence is produced within those societal constraints and does not lie outside that sphere. They believe in their individuality and power of taking decisions, not knowing that their intelligence is a construct, produced within already existing norms.

When Susan is confronted about Myra Jenkins, Matthew's love interest outside marriage, she starts questioning about her worth and begins the journey of self-exploration. Being too oblivious about her identity apart from being defined by her family, she never interrogated her position as a human being detached from socially constructed identities. A feeling of detachment and disinterestedness overpowers Susan when she tries to indulge herself with household chores and nurturing children. She starts feeling claustrophobic in her organized house and tries to find recluse away from innumerable pressures.

Lessing portrays Susan as a woman trying to grapple with harsh realities of women's position during 1960s and shows Susan's resistance against the oppressive social structures. Susan demands a break from her conventional roles in order to explore herself as an individual. She spends some time alone in her house in "Mother's Room" (Lessing 14), which becomes incomprehensible to her family. Being a victim of social conservatism, women were expected to be passive receptors of their predetermined roles and were not given any rights to question the dominant patriarchal structures. Susan eventually finds solace in a room "Number 19" (Lessing 24) of cheap hotel located in Paddington. In this sense, Room 19 becomes a symbolic space where Susan seeks freedom, but the very act of needing to seek refuge in such a space underscores her inability to break free from the constraints imposed upon her.

Fred's hotel provides a sense of recluse to Susan as she changes her name to Mrs. Jones. She discards her former identity in order to feel socially and psychologically free but then too she is reminded of her children, household duties and husband. Butler's theory of gender performativity becomes particularly relevant here. This shows that how difficult it was for a woman to detach herself from everything and define herself anew. She feels torn apart between her true self "I," which belongs to the room nineteen and her constructed self, which is caged in her own house. Lessing writes, "She felt as if Susan had been spirited away" (Lessing 21), showing how Susan feels detached from her own identity.

Since Susan isn't able to express herself freely in oppressive environment, she fantasizes "devils" (Lessing 17) in the garden that tempt her to revolt against patriarchal dominance. According to Butler, "...fantasy is part of the articulation of the possible" (Butler 28), which reveals what reality forecloses. Susan's illusion about a devil's presence comments upon her desire to articulate various possibilities available to her as a woman. In portraying devils as strong and free, she expresses her desire for freedom, which is devoid to her in reality. Lessing shows devils as an epitome of her inner self that is silenced and desires to be freed.

Susan hires Sophie Traub, an “*au pair* girl” (Lessing 20), in order to fulfill all the duties which must be performed by Susan. Lessing portrays Sophie as Susan’s doppelganger, created by Susan herself in order to be freed from the clutches of her duties. She even imagines Matthew as getting married with Sophie, showing how she has internalized the idea of men exercising their power freely without being criticized by society. Whereas, she is being tracked down by Matthew when he thinks Susan is having an extramarital affair. This hypocrisy is critiqued by Lessing and she shows how Fred also discloses information about her to Matthew, as being a woman she was unsuitable for this kind of disposition.

Susan encounters some moments of ecstasy when she treads on the path of self-exploration. Butler defines ecstasy as a moment when a person is “...transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be *beside oneself* by rage or grief” (Butler 20). This dual consequence of ecstasy is incorporated in Lessing’s narrative as well. Susan’s ecstatic moments transport her beyond herself, when she breaks through already formed identities but it is also tarred by her rage towards her loss of self, when she is transported beside her true self. Susan is torn between these choices and the ecstatic moments lead her more towards madness as she isn’t able to define her identity apart from socially acceptable norms.

Susan creates a fake love interest, Michael Plant, in order to evade the confrontation with Matthew about her distressed state of mind. She knows pretty well that she will be forced to go through psychological treatment from a misogynist doctor, which will further oppress her free-will. Throughout the narrative, Lessing portrays Susan as a woman who tries to identify herself, rejecting societal oppressions. In retaliation to the oppressions, Susan commits suicide rejecting all the identities conferred upon her. As Butler asserts, “...choosing one’s own body invariably means navigating among norms that are laid out in advance...” (7) Susan commits suicide exercising her agency over her own body, unaware about the norms that define a person irrespective of their retaliating actions. By taking her own life, she attempts to assert control over her body and her identity, choosing to “undo” the performance of femininity that has been demanded of her.

Lessing portrays Matthew as product of the times in which he was living. He took on the masculine roles of economically supporting the family and taking practical decisions. He is well aware that no one will question him for having extramarital affairs as being a man; he can be attracted to other women. He only helps Susan financially and does not try to understand her inner thoughts. Devoid of any emotional attachment and employing his practical intelligence, he even suggests Susan to meet his lover. Matthew adapts to the masculine identity assigned by society, which “precedes formation of ‘I’” (Butler 23).

Butler talks about gender identities and the prescribed roles one needs to perform in order to be a socially viable being. Since “gender is a kind of a doing,” Butler suggests “the experience of becoming undone...” (1), in order to reject these conventional norms. Lessing shows how Susan tries to undo her gender by committing suicide, which is the only act of agency available to her. Lessing employs psychological realism in order to enter into subjugated female psyche. Susan becomes a microcosm of women at large, depicting the plight of each woman torn apart between emotions and intelligence. The tragic end of Susan’s autonomy comments upon limited choices given to women, whose mere identity is also defined by society.

In conclusion, Doris Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen” presents a poignant exploration of societal constraints and the psychological toll they take on women. Through Susan Rawlings, Lessing illustrates how women’s identities are shaped and limited by rigid social roles, leading to inner conflict and self-doubt. Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity and the struggle for self-definition are central to understanding Susan’s descent into madness, as she attempts to break free from societal expectations. Despite her attempts at self-exploration, Susan’s tragic end highlights the oppressive forces that prevent women from realizing their autonomy. By drawing on Butler’s theories and Lessing’s psychological realism, this paper underscores the intersection of gender, identity, and the limitations imposed on women by patriarchal structures. Ultimately, Lessing’s narrative serves as a powerful critique of these structures and the devastating consequences they have on women’s sense of self and agency. By delving and culminating Butler’s theories and Lessing’s psychological realism, this paper reinforces the intersection of gender, identity, and the hegemonic forces that shape the lives of women.

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