

Identity Crisis and Psychological Conflict in Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen": A Study of Women's Failure in Patriarchal Society

A. K. Zunayet Ahammed¹, Ms. Rokeya², Md. Nuruddin Pier Shihab³

¹Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, R. P. Shaha University, Bangladesh

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Asian University of Bangladesh, Bangladesh

³Lecturer, Department of English, R. P. Shaha University, Bangladesh

Corresponding Author: zunayet1972@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the depiction of female identity crisis and the resulting psychological conflict in Doris Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen" through the portrayal of its protagonist Susan Rawlings, a middle-aged housewife from a middle-class family in a mid-twentieth century London suburb. Lessing shows that gender inequality is a problem in human society that challenges feminine identity. To evaluate this identity crisis, the author portrays a female figure, Susan who is a victim of the male chauvinist society. The patriarchal social structure ultimately annihilates feminine individuality. The underlying reasons behind gender inequality flatten the identity of Susan as a woman. Susan cannot establish her distinctiveness. Being a representative of all oppressed women in a male-dominated society, Susan longs to be a person, to be free, and to settle down based on her own decisions. She pines for emancipation from her psychological turmoil but sadly enough, her desire for liberty increases her conflicts, and mental breakdown more and more, and ultimately leads her to make a decision to commit suicide that reflects a woman's failure. Thus the paper deals with the dilemma of female identity crisis and consequential psychological conflict in a male-dominated society.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, feminine figure, identity crisis, psychological conflicts, Susan Rawlings, "To Room Nineteen"

1. Introduction

Doris Lessing (1919–2013) was a prolific post-war British writer who is best known for her novels, poetry, and short stories. She is also known as an author with a strong sense of feminism, owing to her concern with the plight of women. Her works convey a background and characteristics of the time. Lessing has seen the harsh realities of contemporary society and through her writings, she has revolted against those menaces. She always wants to establish a society free from corruption, exploitation, gender inequality, and social turbulence. In "To Room Nineteen", Lessing wishes to ascertain the distinct identity of a woman through Susan Rawlings who becomes lost in the social conservatism of London in the 1960s. Susan experiences an identity crisis while struggling to balance her multiple roles as a wife, mother, and professional. She is feeling increasingly trapped by the expectations of her marriage, motherhood, and society. She feels she has no identity outside her family seeks a way to escape from her heavy household responsibilities and tries to find the strength to rebuild her life. Deeply depressed by her husband's infidelity, subsequent lack of companionship, and perceived meaninglessness of her life, Susan longs for her own distinct identity and thereby the kind of freedom she once had during her maiden days. But her quest for undefined identity and liberty does not comfort her at all. Instead, it gradually deepens her mental anguish and psychological conflict, and she opts for a controversial definition of freedom that will tempt her to commit suicide. It is not only an outburst of madness but also a sign of ultimate freedom for Susan that does not require any social attestation. The insanity encapsulating Susan is something worth psychoanalysis as well as seeing in the context of the social structure of time. Here, we intend to focus on an inward suffocation tormenting her and setting an existential crisis. While dealing with this claustrophobic crisis, Susan retreats to her solitary self. Through her loneliness, she tries to rediscover her true and lost identity. She turns into a non-essential existence in her family and her rediscovered self does not end the crisis. This article deals with the role of the patriarchal society that enhances the psychological crisis of women. While women's identity is a fundamental factor in building a proportionate society, Susan's discovery of identity crisis brings about a remarkable conflict in the story. However, this paper intends to explore the dilemma of identity crisis and the psychological conflict Susan is facing as a woman.

2. Literature Review

Some researchers have already worked on different literary writings by Doris Lessing. A few of them concentrated on the short story "To Room Nineteen" as well. Most of them in their write-ups noted the gender issue in the patriarchal society. However, the dilemma of identity crisis, psychological conflict, and failure of women in "To Room Nineteen" are not significantly explained in those research works. We have studied some research articles such as "A Comparative Study of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and 'To Room Nineteen'" by Irem Seklem published in *European Academic Research*, "The Hotel Room Nineteen: A Passage to Freedom" by Seher Özsert published in *Journal of Language and Literature Education*, "A Stylistic Analysis of To Room Nineteen" by Ya Hua and Guo Jian published in *Linguistics and Literature Studies*, "In Room Nineteen Why Did Susan Commit Suicide?" published in *Studies in Literature and Language*, Rula Quawas' "Lessing's 'To Room Nineteen': Susan's Voyage into the Inner Space of 'Elsewhere'" published in *Atlantis*, M. Subash's article "An Analysis of Feminism and Patriarchy in Doris Lessing's 'To Room Nineteen'" published in *Literary Endeavour*, Kun Zhao's paper "An Analysis of Three Images in Doris Lessing's 'To Room Nineteen'" published in *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, and some other research papers related to this topic. These researchers have critically analyzed different aspects of Lessing's "To Room Nineteen." According to Seklem, Susan's madness is the expression of an outburst against a male-dominated society. Özsert suggests how patriarchy makes women a passive entity, entrapped both externally and internally. Hua and Jian also agree on the point and note this entrapment as the reason for Susan's suicide. Ningchuan and Yiping argue this suicide as a psychological surrender. In addition, some researchers have applied feminist and psychoanalytic approaches to interpret the short story "To Room Nineteen." However, identity crisis, psychological conflict in women, and women's failure are not justified well by any researcher. Our research intensively addresses the underlying reasons behind females' failure in a male-dominated society. Moreover, we attempt to explore Susan's failure as a protagonist to elucidate the dilemma of identity crisis and psychological conflicts in Lessing's "To Room Nineteen."

3. Materials and Methods

The research will be a qualitative one by nature based on the close reading and analysis of Lessing's "To Room Nineteen." Apart from the rigorous study of the primary text, we have also gone through some scholarly articles to analyze the story. The quintessence of these write-ups also helps us to add a new dimension to our work. Furthermore, we have studied different literary journals, books, and discussions for updated information to enrich our research. We have also compared the analysis of the scholars and attempted to give our research a new facet that was previously unexplored by other researchers.

4. Discussions

In Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen," the whole story centers on Susan Rawlings. Susan marries Matthew Rawlings in her late twenties who is a subeditor for a large London newspaper while she works in an advertising firm. It is worth mentioning that "The Rawlings' marriage was grounded in intelligence". Susan and Matthew are well-matched. They have known each other for a very long time. However, two years after their marriage, when Susan gets pregnant, she leaves the job and thereby gives up her independence for the family. She is a housewife with a stable marriage and a nice home with four children. Although they are seemingly a happy couple, Susan is not happy at all. She suffers from psychological conflicts. She is increasingly getting fed up with the life she is leading. Inwardly she is feeling empty and alienated. For the next several years, Susan 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 a week without her (Lessing)." She is so busy with the children and the family that she is never, not for a moment of her day, alone while she expects some time of her own. Indeed, Susan is all entrapped in household chores. Everything seems more of a boring drudgery than a duty that has to be performed. Susan Rawlings feels disrupted from her daily routine. She thinks about what her life will be like when the kids leave. She endeavors to keep herself busy, reckoning that all she needs to do is to "learn to be [her]self again" after 12 years of identifying as a wife and mother. She is filled with resentment at life and her husband. She is in a dilemma with everything. She is in a fix on what to do and getting more impatient and bitter.

She starts searching for her true self, which is continually impeded by her husband and family's requirements. The search for her inner self and true existence leads the reader to think that the patriarchal society rarely recognizes women's household responsibilities. A leading reason for such an unvalued consideration is the economic system that hesitates to acknowledge women's domestic contributions. Matthew, Susan's husband, also fails to evaluate his wife's earnest sacrifice, although he does acknowledge Susan's efforts for the family. However, it reminds Susan of her captivity instead of comforting her with a sense of relief. For Susan, this unrecognized responsibility is a monotonous entanglement. Nevertheless, this monotony transforms her into a frustrated individual, perpetually disturbed by the traditional feminine role assigned by the patriarchal society. Being "confused and suppressed" (Ningchuan & Yiping 68), Susan tries to rediscover herself. The attempt to find herself complicates her situation instead of leading to a solution. She lives with dual identities, unable to explain her condition, both to herself and her husband. The critical situation makes us contemplate the role of the male-dominated society in Susan's identity crisis. It is not merely about the superior-subordinate binary of two genders. It mainly focuses on the role of women inflicted by the patriarchal society. Susan fails to comply with the identity crisis. Her declining psychological conflict remains unacquainted with her spouse which shows his reluctance to the responsibilities toward Susan. Susan creates an imaginary personality for herself to ease her mental anguish. She becomes a Mrs. Jones who does not exist at all. To find the meaning of existence, she renounces her reality and lives an idealistic life. However, it ultimately does not calm the inner flame burning within her. On the contrary, her undefined freedom turns out to be her imprisonment. The scattered imagination of her feminine existence draws her toward a schizophrenic state. All she desires is to define her feminine entity, but in her quest, she loses her sanity. Later, we see in the story that she is unable to explain her agony to her husband thereby making the situation worse. Her husband, Matthew, is a symbol of a stereotypical man, and his extramarital affair is also responsible for Susan's paranoia. Susan invested herself in her family, but her husband did not deserve that integrated investment. Susan's frequent visit to Room 19 in Fred's hotel to rediscover herself opens another dimension in the story. She understands that her children will be able to live without her presence as she finds Sophie Traub has already become like a mother to her children. When her husband accuses her of an affair, she lies about having an imaginary paramour, Michael Plant. This incident brings forward an indescribable condition, where Susan feels that lying about an affair will be far better than confessing the truth to her husband. So, the relationship for which she leaves her career turns out to be an utter failure. All her attempts to live a free life make her alienated from her family, and society, and consequently, she fails to discover her true identity. In the process, she loses her consciousness within the crowd consciousness (Martin Heidegger, *Das Man*) as a wife, as a mother, and finally as a woman. Thus, her existence becomes inauthentic. Although, she thinks freedom from her household entanglement will assemble meaning in her life, ironically the opposite happens. Her expedition for identity takes her to an undesirable destiny of insane nothingness, and her suicide is the outcome of the pain of identity crisis as evident throughout the story.

It is a controversial issue whether suicide is the only way of emancipation for Susan. For this, we must investigate the "well-matched" marriage of Susan and Matthew. At the outset of the story, it is seen that Susan is a dutiful woman, not a submissive one. Susan sacrifices her "talent" and a "well-paid" profession for her pregnancy. She has a seemingly perfect life with "marriage, four children, big house, garden, charwomen, friends, cars" (ibid). However, these successful material possessions develop a spiritual crisis within Susan. Moreover, after leaving her job, she no longer remains financially independent. Matthew's confession of having an extra-marital affair is a hinged moment in the story. Susan forgives her husband which explains her submissive self. Her indifference to the affair shows her helpless surrender to a disloyal man's dominance. This reveals the 'fragile and docile feminine images' (Zhao 1651) of Susan to us. In addition, the entanglement of her household responsibilities paved the way for an imperfectly perfect marriage. Susan desires to rest, some solitary moments as she feels a vacuum in the togetherness with her family. She wants to revive her lost existence. However, she hides her "irritation, restlessness, emptiness" (Lessing) from Matthew. So, the "picture of ideal husband and wife" (Hua & Jian 90) keeps losing its color with the development of the story. After that, an imaginary "enemy" or "demon" relentlessly threatens Susan. Susan slowly turns into "an irrational person" (Lessing). Her hallucinations of the devil also add a pointer to her psychosis. To stay away from the devil, she hankers after "an absolute solitude (ibid)." She begins secretly renting a hotel room. In Fred's Hotel, she finds her desired place of loneliness, she sits there in silence for hours. Meanwhile, "a fireplace with a gas fire" (ibid) shows Susan's ominous image. Her frequent whereabouts in Room Nineteen at Fred's Hotel makes Matthew suspicious of her activities. Room Nineteen becomes a new world for Susan where she wants to hide from her husband. Matthew's acknowledgment of the room puts her in extreme discomfort. The "peace" she finds in that room has disappeared. "The unnamed spirit of restlessness" (ibid) keeps haunting Susan. Matthew acts

indifferently after Susan's false confession of having a paramour. It is an example of the frailty of their seemingly perfect relationship. Her world of love and trust remains shaken because she cannot accept the way Matthew reacts to the mutual infidelity in marriage. For the sake of her family, she sacrifices her career and it is the beginning of her decaying identity. Consequently, a disloyal husband threatens Susan's identity as a wife. Besides, her children can manage themselves with the help of a caregiver, Sophie Traub. So, Susan becomes replaceable in everyone's life and it turns out to be her ultimate defeat. She feels death will be easier than explaining her state of mind to Matthew. That's why, she commits suicide to get into "the dark river" (ibid) of eternal freedom as seen in the story "the faint soft hiss of the gas that poured into the room, into her lungs, into her brain, as she drifted off into the dark river (Lessing)." We cannot bluntly denounce her suicide; it cannot be defended as a justified action as well. Hereafter, we look forward to finding an explanation that culminates in a solution to the identity crisis and psychological conflicts that Susan goes through.

First of all, Susan forsakes her independence to be a dutiful wife and mother. However, her husband's disloyal attitude ruffles all of her dreams. This is a prime reason behind Susan's overwhelming frustration. From an independent individual, she transforms into an entrapped woman. It is very unlikely for a woman to express her indifference toward her spouse's perfidy. However, the underlying fact is that her inner self cannot forgive her husband. Her husband's unfaithful character is a trait of patriarchy, and Susan's coldness toward Matthew's trickery signifies a declining and submissive reflection of herself. Furthermore, her confused inner self leads her to lunacy. A thorough analysis of her character suggests that her ultimate demise at the end of the story could have been avoided. Financial independence might have saved her from the feeling of an unwanted burden. Moreover, the economic independence of women snatches them away from the vicious grasp of patriarchal dominance. Matthew would have thought twice before cheating on Susan if she had remained financially solvent. In addition, she would have had a life beyond being a wife and a mother. Instead of escaping from the turmoil of life, she could have stood as a headstrong woman. All of these are suppositions and propositions, but the implementation of these might have taken the ending of the story to a different and more convincing reconciliation. The above arguments imply patriarchy does have a drastic effect on Susan's tragic suicide. A male-dominated society destroys her career and her authentic existence. Her husband's infidelity makes the situation worse as it intensifies her identity crisis and inner conflicts. So, society and its norms notably lead Susan to a psychotic imbalance. We can say that Susan's irrational outbursts and suicide are the results of a disproportionate and unjust society.

Based on the discussions above, it may be affirmed that Susan's life deals with an identity crisis, psychological conflict, depression, mental instability, restlessness, indecisiveness, extreme sensibility, irrationality, whimsicality, her sense of loneliness and alienation, and ultimately failure in intelligence. Moreover, Susan's identity crisis is not solved and it leads to an intense internal conflict as portrayed in the story. Truly, the room she finds as her escape alienates her from the real world. Finding no other alternative, at last, she ends her life with "the faint soft hiss of the gas that poured into the room, into her lungs, into her brain, as she drifted off into the dark river (Lessing)." Thus, we find conclusive evidence of Susan Rawlings' identity crisis and psychological conflict in the patriarchal society.

5. Conclusion

Finally, it may be asserted that Susan is a true representative of all women in the world relentlessly struggling to establish their identity in the male-dominated society but failing miserably again and again. Throughout the story, Susan cannot be a robust feminine character, not an influential character. Instead, we find her as a fragile woman. Susan's ultimate surrender to life does not mean her emancipation. Her final suicidal decision proves her "failure in intelligence" as a woman in a male-dominated society. Here, Susan is unable to resist herself from the psychological imbalance. Their seemingly "well-matched" marriage is ultimately doomed. At last, out of confusion, Susan commits suicide. Susan tries to break away from the social demands of her gender. Thus, through the depiction of Susan Rawlings, this paper investigates the dilemma of identity crisis and psychological conflict in the patriarchal society. Our attitude towards women should be changed and certainly, we should create a space so that women can use their intelligence in a way both fulfilling and compatible with their other roles to build a proportionate society.

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