

# A Study of Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" from the Perspective of Feminism

WU Yi-ling

Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

Doris Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen" is considered to be the pioneering work of the climax of the second feminist movement. It focuses on how Susan, a housewife, pursues her selfhood in patriarchal society. From the perspective of feminism, and starting with Susan's daily life and inner world, this paper will demonstrate the predicament faced by Susan, analyze how she pursues self after the awakening of female consciousness, and reveal the lessons implied in the novel about women's correct pursuit of self.

*Keywords:* "To Room Nineteen", feminism, pursuit of self

## The Predicament Faced by Susan

Derrida (2014) believed that modern Western society was both phallogocentric and logocentric, which he collectively called "phallogocentric". The realization of patriarchal phallus depends on a rational tradition based on a series of hierarchical binary opposition (Zhang, 2001, p. 114), such as male/female, rational/emotional, sober/crazy etc., in which the former is superior, the latter is inferior. Thus discourse violence is generated, normalizing everything in patriarchal society. That's why Culler calls for an "examination of how our reason is complicit in the rights of men" (Culler, 1995, p. 59).

At the beginning of the story, the author makes it clear that Susan is well educated and "the Rawling's marriage is grounded in intelligence" (Lessing, 1993, p. 447), which indicates that Susan has totally accepted the knowledge and discourse of patriarchy. Before marriage, Susan has a well-paid job and her own comfortable flat. The author comments that she "has a talent for commercial drawing" (Lessing, 1993, p. 448). But after being pregnant, she quits her job and becomes a housewife, while her husband still works and supports the family. In the following twelve years, Susan is four children's mother, Matthew's wife, and Mrs Parkes' hostess, only not herself. It means that she has lost her economic independence and played the gender roles that patriarchal society stipulates for females.

What's worse, Susan has internalized the discipline made by patriarchal society. At first, the author describes Susan and Matthew's marriage and life conform to social tradition and perfectly satisfying, because they have the "sense of choosing right" (Lessing, 1993, p. 449). It's like a modern version of a fairy tale: Adam and Eve live in a paradise made by themselves. However, through the details of Susan's inner world, we can know that she is constantly overwhelmed by the gender roles, feeling that "her soul was not her own" (Lessing,

1993, p. 455). She naively believes that after the youngest twins go to school, she can regain freedom seven hours a day. In contrast, she can't comfortably enjoy her leisure time. Because she is deeply immersed in the "sense of female achievement" as a wife and mother advocated by society and media. Friedan (2002) believes that happy housewives shaped by the media and society often face spiritual emptiness and emotional desolation in real life. When women sacrifice their personality and career to play the role of good wives and mothers, they feel pain and extreme emptiness in their hearts, unable to find their own sense of existence and value. Therefore, they face a personality split similar to schizophrenia. In the novel, Susan's knowledge imparted by patriarchal society tells her to perform female duties, while her real thought in the deep heart resents all these roles and duties and feels like being prisoned. Thus, her ego and superego constantly conflict with her id, torturing her spirit.

Susan dares not to tell Matthew what's going on in her mind, because Matthew once said: "But Susan, what sort of freedom can you possibly want—short of being dead! Am I ever free? I go to the office, and I have to be there at ten—all right, half past ten, sometimes. And I have to do this or that, don't I? Then I've got to come home at a certain time—I don't mean it, you know I don't—but if I'm not going to be back home at six I telephone you. When can I ever say to myself: I have nothing to be responsible for in the next six hours?" (Lessing, 1993, p. 462). She agrees with the words and can not rise above the influence and discipline of the so-called common sense and reason. So she concludes that there is something wrong with her, and that she is an irrational person. Females are surrounded by social conventions in patriarchal society that simply does not allow free women to exist. What is even more tragic is that Susan herself believes that her freedom is undesirable and she is full of guilt towards her husband and children, indicating that she agrees with the patriarchal society's demands on women. It can be seen that as dependency on men, the existence of women has neither self-value nor independent personality, let alone the right to speak. Women's needs, their own value and individual freedom are outside the male vision and are drowned by this society. What women see and say is a repetition of what men say.

### **Her Awakening of Feminist Consciousness**

The opportunity for Susan's awakening of female consciousness can be divided into two kinds. The external turning point is stimulated by Matthew's extramarital affair. Patriarchal society has a double standard. This society believes that a wife should accept her husband's extramarital affairs calmly. When Matthew confesses it to Susan, although her rational self constructed by society keeps telling her that her response is banal, her emotional id refuses to accept, and in the deep heart she feels anger, insecurity, and suspicion. The internal reason is that as long as Susan is alone in the house, she feels "as if something is waiting for her there that she does not wish to confront" (Lessing, 1993, p. 456). Later she can see the image of her illusion in real life, who "is lurking in the garden and sometimes even in the house, and wants to get into her and to take her over" (Lessing, 1993, p. 456). According to Freud's theory, humans' desires and impulses are suppressed because they do not conform to social moral norms, but they will not disappear, but appear in disguised form through compression and transfer. Susan's illusion of the monster is the externalization of her repressed inner world, and the release of her inner emotions in a tortuous and abnormal form. Based on the reasons above, she begins to "dream of having a room or a place, anywhere, where she can go and sit, by herself, no one knowing where she is" (Lessing, 1993, p. 465). Her female consciousness is gradually awakening.

To find such a room, Susan has tried several times. She seeks temporary relief and peace in her attic room, or goes on holiday to Wales in search of freedom, but is repeatedly drawn back into family confinement by the duties and obligations as a wife and mother. She feels like a prisoner firmly imprisoned in the cage of her family, and the sense of loss of freedom suffocates her. Each failure to escape makes her yearn for the next escape. She continues to struggle to find the freedom she longs for.

Eventually, she finds a governess to take her place, look after the children and keep the house functioning, then she has time to escape the house for a while. She disguises as Mrs Jones and rents Room 19 in the Fred's Hotel. Although the room is rough and dirty, it is the sustenance of her soul and is her spiritual home. During those hours she spends in this room, she is all her own, totally free. She doesn't do anything specific but "broods, wanders, simply goes dark" (Lessing, 1993, p. 475), slowly falling into a mass of confusion. In Rawling's big house with a garden, Susan is used to disciplining and examining her own thoughts and behaviors with the discourse of patriarchal society, and dares not speak out her true inner thoughts. Only in Room 19 can her inner world be expressed freely and unhindered, and the repressed emotional consciousness be transformed into female discourse. It can be said that Room 19 has long gone beyond its materiality and become a psychological space. It emerges as an illusory utopia. Because of its dark and humble character, it offers an unreal promise. When the room door is closed, it seems to be an independent kingdom, outside the network of social relations, in which people can get rid of the shackles of various identities and return to their original selves. But there is no socially isolated utopia, and what fake identity brings is merely temporary and illusory. Susan's dream is destined to shatter. The room is soon discovered by a detective hired by Matthew, and the aura of illusory redemption fades. Susan can never find the same peace there. Desperately, she chooses to take this room as the end, committing suicide there.

### **Reflections Drawn from Susan's Tragedy**

Although with the awakening of feminist consciousness, Susan still becomes a sacrifice of patriarchal society, whose experience can provide lessons to later feminists.

Firstly, females must pursue independence not only economically but also psychologically and spiritually. In the text, Susan doesn't actually own a single room in the big house. The room she feels at home is rented, and ironically, she has to ask her husband for the rental of that room every week. A house of one's own is not only a guarantee for females' economic and social status, but also a symbol of women's freedom and independence. But a house of one's own in an economic sense is far from liberating women. As long as women still assimilate the patriarchal social values and norms at the psychological and spiritual level and lose their self-pursuit, a house of their own in multiple senses will be in a state of absence, and the impossibility of realizing their desires for such a room will bring devastating blows to women.

Secondly, females should subvert the discourse and knowledge based on binary oppositions. Susan is well educated and steeped in the intellectual discourse of patriarchal society. It is precisely the gender distinction in the binary opposition bringing about the thinking of women's social responsibility that Susan's reason and emotion have been in a struggle, resulting in her physical and mental separation. Simone de Beauvoir expresses the socially constructed meaning of gender: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman... The two sexes are in competition, and women are always in a state of existence under the consciousness of repressed subjectivity" (Beauvoir, 2015,

p. 54). In the binary opposition of gender, the gender distinction constructing women's social responsibility is strictly guarded to maintain the dominance of men over women, which is the purpose of the patriarchal society. Thus, the overthrow of the patriarchal discourse is an integral part of the feminist movement.

Last but not least, females themselves should work together to confront the oppression of patriarchal society. In the novel, in order not to be disturbed by female responsibilities when Susan is alone in the hotel, she finds a governess to substitute her. To some extent, she becomes an accomplice of patriarchal society by turning another girl into a prisoner of gender roles. Sacrificing other women for individual freedom goes against the original intent of the feminist movement. In addition, Susan is fighting alone in the novel. Without the help of other females, her power is limited. In the face of stubborn patriarchal rule, her failure seems inevitable. Therefore, to achieve the goals of the feminist movement, all women must unite in the common pursuit of freedom, equality and self-realization.

### References

- Abrams, M. H. (1993). *To room nineteen, the norton anthology English literature, Sixth Edition, Volume 2*. London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- de Beauvoir, S. (2015). *The second sex (vintage feminism short ed.)* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). New York: Vintage Classics.
- Derrida, J. (2014). Plato's pharmacy. *Tragedy* (pp. 338-360). London: Routledge.
- 贝蒂·弗里丹. (2002). *女性的奥秘*. 程锡麟, 朱徽, 王晓路, 译. 哈尔滨: 北方文艺出版社.
- 弗洛伊德. (1998). *英语人文世界-弗洛伊德文选-论无意识与艺术*. 北京: 中国人民大学出版社.
- 乔纳森·卡勒. (1995). *作为妇女的阅读*. 张京媛. *当代女性主义文学批评*. 北京: 北京大学出版社.
- 张岩冰. (2001). *女权主义文论*. 济南: 山东教育出版社.