

Room Nineteen: A Room of Susan's Own

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Abstract

Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" chronicles a passionate account of Susan Rawling's pathetic fate. Susan, a middle-aged English woman, appears to have a happy married life with her husband and four children. But her disillusionment of this illusory happiness principally caused by her husband's infidelity forces her to embark on a quest for self-discovery and freedom. However, Susan's misinterpretation of the ideas of her 'true self' and 'freedom' ironically propels her to a descent into madness and finally to committing suicide in Room Nineteen in Fred's Hotel. For the purposes of this paper I propose to examine how Susan's conjugal life gradually degenerates, and how Room Nineteen stands for the ideas of Susan's emancipation and disintegration at the same time. Room Nineteen gives Susan hopes to rise from the frustration of her maladjusted family life. But it is this very hotel room that, like a silent assassin, devours her in the end. Thus Room Nineteen offers multifold significations as it becomes the symbol of Susan's mental trauma, her aspiration and also her failure to subvert the authority of patriarchy

The Title of Doris Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen" speaks of a hotel room, "Room Nineteen," which is preceded by the preposition "To," and thus stands for a voyage towards a goal that is thought to be ideal. But the journey that we observe in the story does not end in optimism, rather it shows the disintegration of an individual, Susan Rawling, who appears to be a victim of patriarchy. So, the title itself is ironic. Parallel to this, Susan's marriage also turns out to be ironic since it falls apart, although the initial phase of her conjugal life looked almost perfect. Thus the story takes on a dual nature as it shows the determination of Susan to break free and at the same time her tragic death in the end. And "Room Nineteen" becomes the epitome of both Susan's freedom and failure.

The story begins with a description of the history of Susan and Matthew Rawling's marriage, which has been a very practical union, and which is "grounded in intelligence" (Lessing, 1993: 2301). They married in their late twenties after having known each other for some time and after having experienced other relationships. Their friends consider them to be "well matched." Susan and Matthew are said to have handled their relationship "sensibly." They have had children: "a son first, then a daughter, then twins, son and daughter." They were certain that they had chosen "everything right, appropriate, and what everyone would wish for, if they could choose."

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(Lessing, 1993: 2302). They also adopted conventional roles. For example, their "foresight and their sense" prompted them to decide that Susan would give up her job with an advertising firm and take care of the house and the children while Matthew would support them, both determining that "children needed their mother to a certain age" (Lessing, 1993: 2303).

But one may wonder how could a marriage end in disaster after having a dream start? If we carefully observe Susan's family we may notice that Susan's relationship with her husband lacks warmth in it.

Everything in Susan's house is arranged and done with almost a mathematical precision. However, Susan is probably the only one to sense the lack of passion in their relationship. And it is probably this sense of "flatness" that makes Susan uncomfortable. This realization makes Susan desperate to find a uniting factor behind their bondage, or a centre for it; so that either of them could say: "For the sake of this is all the rest." After considering a number of factors, Susan manages to convince herself by thinking that it is the love between her and Matthew, which is "the wellspring," and around which "the whole extra-ordinary structure revolved." Thus Susan's restlessness is pacified for the time being (Lessing, 1993: 2302).

However, disaster finally arises when the centre, that is Susan and Matthew's love itself, cannot hold. One night Matthew comes home and confesses to Susan about his extra-marital relationship with Myra Jenkins. Initially, Susan tries to forgive him and represses her resentment. She tries to believe that things will smoothen again. But on the contrary, the incident leaves an indelible mark in their minds and makes both of them irritable. This is because Matthew's infidelity has shattered the very foundation of their marriage. So, after this, both of them become "bad-tempered, annoyed." And it is after this particular point of time that the Rawlings couple gradually starts to move apart from each other. Susan now understands that their ten years' marriage has been destroyed. She senses the absurdity of the whole scenario as she thinks that either "the ten years' fidelity was not important, or she isn't" (Lessing, 1993: 2304). Consequently, she starts to suffer mental alienation. So, Susan's husband's disloyalty is the first and probably the most influential cause that ultimately drives her towards 'Room Nineteen.'

Secondly, Susan leaves her job after giving birth to her first child. And taking care of her children becomes her preoccupation from then on. But problem arises when all her children grow up. When Susan is in her early forties, her youngest children, the twins, are to go to school. Susan begins to wonder what she would do now as all her children are away from home. On the day she drops her twins off for their first day at school, Susan returns home and spends a restless morning, not knowing quite what to do, how to fill up this suddenly created vacuum in her daily routine caused by the absence of her four children. Susan's mental alienation, which she has been suffering from since her husband's confession of having an extra-marital affair, is intensified after this period.

Thirdly, Susan gets utterly disillusioned to discover her insignificant existence in her family. Earlier, she used to think that Matthew, the children, the house and the garden- the total unit "would collapse in a week without her" (Lessing, 1993: 2304). She also thought that the "four

children and the big house needed so much attention" from her. Now, after leaving her job and also after being betrayed by her husband, Susan needs to find a meaning to her family life, which revolves around her children. But very much to her surprise and shock, the children also behave indifferently with her. One day Susan hears her son Harry telling the little ones: "It's all right, mother's got a headache" (Lessing, 1993: 2307). Susan becomes really upset to know that her having pain is all right with her children. Susan discovers that during her stay out of the house, the children pass their time quite happily with Mrs. Parkes, and especially, with the new au pair girl Sophie. One day Susan secretly peeps from outside her house to see her children and observes that they do not seem at all aware of their mother's absence. This shocking revelation shatters Susan's sense of belonging to her family. From this moment on she starts to feel like an outsider, and consequently, moves a step further towards her tragic fate.

Susan's too much suppression of her pangs and sufferings is another reason for her psychological dilemma. In the whole story we do not see her bursting out in anger at Matthew even though there are strong reasons to do so. She has always tried to define herself as a rational human being and has thought that it is "sensible" to curb her inward feelings. Even if Matthew asks her about her problems, she answers in a generalized way by saying, "I don't feel well" (Lessing, 1993: 2309). Thus Susan's difficulty to pass her time remains unrevealed to Matthew.

However, one may wonder what would have happened even if Susan had voiced her anguish to Matthew? Throughout his married life Matthew has been indifferent to Susan's passions. His callous attitude towards Susan has made her more desperate than she actually is. Furthermore, Matthew, very much paradoxically, becomes suspicious of Susan whereas it was he who committed adultery earlier. Being a hypocrite himself, it is more convenient for Matthew to believe that Susan has been unfaithful to him than to realize that there are serious problems in their marriage. And Matthew gives a final blow to Susan and simply puts "an end to it all by sending a detective after her" to investigate her activities outside the house (Lessing, 1993: 2319). Moreover, Matthew adds to Susan's pain by offering the ridiculous idea of a "foursome." Susan's frustration gradually intensifies at these silent tortures by Matthew. She understands the absurdity of her apparently "sensible" marriage, and eventually this transforms her frustration into desperation and propels her to committing suicide in Room Nineteen.

This intensely complicated and problematized married life of Susan results in an utter disorientation and forces her to look closely at her self. Susan has not been able to give time to herself after her marriage. So, after being betrayed by Matthew, when her children are all off to school, she takes a spare room in her house where she can enjoy some privacy. Staying in the room is Susan's first visible attempt to start the journey towards self discovery. However, Susan's privacy is intruded on by her demanding children when they return home. And at one time that private room becomes another family room. This eventually leads Susan to find Room Nineteen in Fred's Hotel where she goes everyday and passes some time with a hope to stay away from her frustration and also to jettison her bitter memories. Thus Room Nineteen becomes a symbol of Susan's urge for freedom which resembles Virginia Woolf's *A Room of one's own* and thus focuses on the necessity of a woman's having a personal space in a patriarchal society. But

whereas Woolf emphasizes the vital need for privacy for women in order to create art, Doris Lessing represents Room Nineteen as a shelter for Susan to escape from the hypocrisy of her family life. Lessing carefully portrays the essence of freedom that Susan was looking for while describing Susan's first visit to Room Nineteen:

"It was twelve in the morning. She was free. She sat in the armchair, she simply sat, she closed her eyes and sat and let herself be alone. She was alone and no one knew where she was.She no longer was mistress of the big white house and garden, she was alone and she had no past and no future" (Lessing, 1993: 2316, 2317).

However, it is interesting that Room Nineteen offers a dual signification since both Susan's attempt at self discovery and her self destruction take place here. This equivocal nature of the place is hinted at when we are told that Susan tries "to let go into [a] dark creative trance" in Room Nineteen (Lessing, 1993: 2319). She may enjoy her "creative" impulse but at the same time it is "dark." Furthermore, she is not in her conscious state, rather she is in a "trance." This could imply that the idea of Susan's searching for her own self is problematic. Though Susan eagerly waits for her visit to Room Nineteen, she does not seem to pass a very cheerful time there. Much like her married life, Room Nineteen itself is a void. So, although Room Nineteen connotes the idea of emancipation, it cannot offer a practical solution to Susan's maladies. There is nothing substantial that Susan does in this room. Hence, Room Nineteen cannot be a viable option for Susan to eradicate her suffering. And at the end of the story, it is in this very room where she commits suicide.

The vacuum of Susan Rawling's life can be looked at and interpreted from a feminist perspective. In both of her essays "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1971) and "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," (1980) Adrienne Rich, the American poet and feminist critic, deals with the pitfalls of the socially established institution of marriage and also emphasizes the need for women to exercise their potentiality. Rich does not talk about the abolishment of this age-old institution, rather she opines that marriage should not be regarded as the one and only goal for a woman, since it serves the purpose of patriarchy and robs women of their potentiality. According to Rich, heterosexuality is "a political institution which disempowers women" (Rich 1993: 203). Simone de Beauvoir in her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex* (1949) hammers on this point too. In the chapter called "The Married Woman," Beauvoir elaborates on the nature and the drawbacks of marriage. The first line of the chapter goes: "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by the society" (Beauvoir, 1997: 445). She describes the system by which, reared by women within a feminine world, the women are naturally directed toward marriage that finds its purpose in child bearing, and that practically means subordination to man; because masculinity, resting still upon solid economic and social foundation, is far from becoming subservient. So, both Rich and Beauvoir talk about the amount of energy that women have to give to doing their household works.

Doris Lessing successfully deals with this idea in her story by depicting Susan as a pathetic victim of a maladjusted marriage. It could be opined that Susan's dilemma with her 'self' and her identity crisis have their origin in the fact of Susan's leaving her job. In the story we are told that Susan

"had a talent for commercial drawing." We also know that she was "humorous about the advertisements she was responsible for" (Lessing, 1993: 2302). But Susan had to leave her job for the sake of her responsibility as a mother and a wife. In this regard, we can refer to the term "energy of creation" coined by Adrienne Rich in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision." By "energy of creation" Rich means the potentiality and the creative power of women. Susan has not been able to exercise her talent since she left her job. And in her house Susan is identified by the roles she plays: mother of four children, wife of Matthew, and employer of Mrs. Parkes and Sophie. She seems to have no entity of her own. Her identity is nothing but the sum of the household duties that she has to discharge which according to Rich is the "energy of relation." And understandably, Susan is quite easily substituted by Mrs. Parkes and Sophie, both of whom can do the things as skillfully as Susan. It is probably for this reason that Susan, after twenty two years, at a critical juncture of her conjugal life, finds out that she has not undergone any development "as if the essential Susan were in abeyance, as if she were in cold storage" (Lessing, 1993: 2305). So, the paralysis of time that Susan seems to experience in Room Nineteen is a parallel to Susan's married life itself. And it may be argued that Susan's fate could have been otherwise if she had not given up her job or had tried to find a vocation of her own after being disillusioned about her family.

The story begins with a comment by the narrator: "This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence" (Lessing, 1993: 2301). Susan's marriage, her relationship with her children, her career, and her quest for self-discovery- nothing succeeds in the end. Nevertheless, Susan appears to be glorified; first of all, she is aware of her predicaments. Next, she is never willing to surrender to the patriarchal authority, and when things go beyond any solution she tries to break free. She aspires to rise from the abeyance. She also shows a true love for Matthew and her children, and the tendency to sacrifice for her family.

So, I would conclude by saying that Susan gains our admiration by showing the spirit to embark on a voyage to find "a room of her own." But her failure lies in the fact that she cannot justify her attempt because she misinterprets the ideas of self discovery and freedom. Susan's voyage towards self discovery leads her towards self destruction. And her search for freedom in Room Nineteen turns out to be fatal as she commits suicide in that very place and "[drifts] off into the dark river" (Lessing, 1993: 2323). So, this is a story about a success and a failure. And Room Nineteen stands for both.

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