

LESSING'S 'TO ROOM NINETEEN': SUSAN'S VOYAGE INTO THE
INNER SPACE OF 'ELSEWHERE'

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For there is never anywhere to go but in.

Doris Lessing, Epigraph to
*Briefing for a Descent into
Hell*

She must learn again to
speak
starting with I
starting with We
starting as the infant does
with her own hunger
and pleasure
and rage.

Marge Piercy, 'Unlearning
to not Speak'

Doris Lessing draws extensively on women's inner, private experiences and on their departure from the unsatisfactory reality of life in an alienated and alienating society. In 'To Room Nineteen' (1978), she depicts a woman who wearies of the role of sustainer and comforter, and having had her fill of everything, resists the culturally stultifying enclosures and constraints, discards the various garments and social roles she has worn and adopted, retreats into her own room and experiences her own 'elsewhere', that consciousness that she retreats to for renewal, which bespeaks a world of potential actions and possibilities for human renewal. Her self-willed death is not a defeat. Rather than regressing back to the old self and abdicating self-knowledge and self-rule, she decides to remain true to the authentic self that she has discovered. Her death is a means of resisting the crushing, culturally enforced image of woman, and of positing a new politics of identity, as a first step toward bringing into the culture new formulations, new cultural alternatives, new language, for experiences which patriarchy has forced into repression.

Key words: Alienated and alienating society; social roles and masks; inner space; feminine consciousness; realm of 'elsewhere'; authentic self

Doris Lessing is a supremely gifted, enigmatic and diverse writer, never wasting a word, and equally at home presenting precisely crafted plot, incident, meditative or reflective description that suggests the workings of deep layers of the psyche, and so may powerfully engage the reader. Patrick Parrinder sums up the diversity and plurality of Lessing's fields in her works and points out: "Readers throughout the world have followed her progress, in the last three decades, from orthodox Communism towards feminism, irrationalism, Sufism, anti-psychiatry and – most recently – cosmic mysticism" (1980: 5). Truly, Lessing's fiction, which is inclusive, spiritual and intricately woven, embodies and displays a spacious panoply of themes specific to late-twentieth-century consciousness: race; the conflict of the generations; the psychological dimensions of male-female relationships; women and women's experiences; politics; philosophical questions about life; the nature and planes of reality; the labyrinths of the human mind; explorations of madness; and mystical forms and modes of consciousness.

It is important to remember that Lessing is a seeker who is not afraid to question the status quo and to try out new ways of communicating to her audience. An "alchemical writer", (Kaplan and Rose 1988: 5) Lessing challenges her readers and changes them; she alters their consciousness, educates their human hearts and radicalizes their sexual and personal politics. Margaret Drabble describes her as a writer who "changes tense, tone, place, . . . skips decades, moves from the past to the future, documents, speculates, describes, with relentless urgency" (1972: 52). She characterizes Lessing as one of the few writers who insists on deciphering our world, and she also asserts that "for a writer who consistently foresees and confronts the worst, [Lessing] is neither depressing nor apparently depressed" (1972: 50). Indeed, Lessing neither escapes into "simple statements of faith" nor submits to the "pleasurable luxury of despair" (Lessing 1957: 194). As an "architect of the soul" (Lessing 1957: 190), she assists us in achieving the precarious balance between a "vision of a good which may defeat the evil" and an unflinching recognition and a deepening understanding of "the nature of the world we live in" (Lessing 1957: 190). She shows, for example, the harm done by racism, capitalism and communism in *Children of Violence* (1952-1969), the repercussions of male hegemony in *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), and the outcome of religious and scientific bigotry and materialistic greed in *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979-1983).

While Lessing consistently refuses to align herself with any kind of movement or any traditional label or any form of *ism*, it is possible to see her humanistic commitment to the liberation of women and men in this world and her engagement with women's search for identity. Not a collective, imposed identity, however, but personal identities painfully sought out and worked for through the gradual shedding of social trappings and the stripping off of masks, disguises, roles, attitudes and customs. Over the course of her fictional works, Lessing draws extensively on women's inner, private experiences and on their departure from the unsatisfactory reality of life in an alienated and alienating society. Her heroines, like Martha Quest in *Children of Violence*, from the very first volume to the last, act out their lives in roles proffered them by society, roles they consciously or unconsciously assume, until through painful growth, or through the rejection of certain roles, they come to awareness of who they are. Not until the final volume when Martha is to achieve wholeness and to bring the

fragments of her life together, does she finally realize the difference between what is essentially her true role and that which was a reflection of others.

Clearly, post-structuralism has brought into question the humanist belief in the autonomous self. Post-structuralist theories of subjectivity set up a much more complex problem by recognizing the influence of economic, historical and social constructs which not only affect but also work to construct the individual. For a post-structuralist, the individual is no longer *the Individual*, but rather a subject constructed by cultural codes and belief systems. At this time, the question at issue for some feminist theorists attempting to formulate a theory of female subjectivity is the question of the relationship between contemporary feminist theory and the humanist tradition whose 'crisis' might be called post-structuralism. The question of defining the inner world of the 'self' has become problematic for feminist theory since the late twentieth century, and perhaps it is no coincidence that just as the feminist theorist begins to address the issue of the politics of women's experiences and women's identity, the male theorists argue that there is in fact no self free of cultural ideology, no autonomous identity free of social encoding.

We must then ask the following questions: If the concept of the unitary self is no longer historically feasible for some theorists, is it possible then to formulate a theory of female subjectivity and female agency? How can a feminist theorist acknowledge the crisis of the theory of identity and at the same time formulate a theory for female subjectivity? What are the advantages for a feminist theorist today if she repositions herself in relation to the male discourse surrounding the theories of subjectivity which never included the issue of female subjectivity to begin with? Could repositioning ourselves in relation to these two historical discourses lead the feminist theorist to recognize that she inhabits a position that is both 'inside' and simultaneously 'outside' the male discourse? Could this recognition allow a feminist theorist to read feminist narratives in such a way that she could identify in those narratives what Elaine Showalter calls a "double-voiced discourse" of women's writing (1985: 263), or what Teresa de Lauretis calls the "view from 'elsewhere'" (1987: 25).

Showalter bases her theory of the double-voiced discourse of women's writing on a cultural model of female experience which explains that there is a "complex and perpetual negotiation taking place between women's culture and the general culture" leading to "women liv[ing] a duality – as members of the general culture and as partakers of women's culture"; that is, women "constitute a muted group" within the "dominant (male) group" (1985: 261). Recognizing that "women live a duality", we can begin to recognize "that women's fiction can be read as a double-voiced discourse, containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story, what Gilbert and Gubar call a 'palimpsest'" (1985: 266). If we can name and describe the double-voiced discourse of feminist narratives, we should be able to formulate a theory of female subjectivity that does not succumb to privileging the feminine and, at the same time, does not create a "generic human subject . . . which turns out to be genderless" (Alcoff 1988: 424).

While Showalter talks about the double-voiced discourse of feminist narratives based on a cultural model of female experience, Teresa de Lauretis uses the language of film theory to describe what she calls the "view from elsewhere". De Lauretis argues that the "view from elsewhere" is a "movement in and out of ideology, [a] crossing back and forth of the boundaries . . . of sexual difference(s)", and of course she very carefully

explains that this is not to say there is ever any movement that goes beyond or outside the socially constructed sex-gender system of a particular society (1987: 25-26). Rather, de Lauretis's 'elsewhere' is the movement which the female subject constantly makes between her experience of herself as Other in the dominant discourse and her experience of herself as Subject in the muted discourse or the 'space-off' of her own position which is invisible but nonetheless present.

Teresa de Lauretis argues that women are both inside and outside male discourse, and Elaine Showalter states that women writers are "inside two traditions simultaneously" (1985: 264). The double experience of female subjectivity addressed by these two theorists derives from the fact that historically the female subject has entered the dominant discourse as objectified 'Woman', as 'Other'. However, the representation of women as Other is not simply discarded as women writers attempt to find a voice for female subjectivity. The muted discourse of female subjectivity is not a discourse in simple, direct opposition to the dominant discourse, for the problem of women's Otherness also enters the muted discourse and becomes a complex issue of representation even for the feminist writer. The contradictory experience of female subjectivity derives not only from being "inside two traditions simultaneously", but also from the contradictions of the muted discourse, since it is in the muted discourse that we encounter the feminist's writer's internalization of the historical representation of Woman.

In her fiction, Lessing pushes the boundaries of realistic fiction beyond its limits and allows us to see that indeed there is no Other but rather a subject-as-other perceived and defined simply as Other. She comes to explore the dis-integration (between body and self, image and identity and woman and society) at various points in her characters' lives and to examine the development of female identity and the characters' struggle to come into being. As Elizabeth Wilson has observed, Lessing stands as a "Cassandra of women's experience that was everywhere silenced, concealed and denied" (1982: 57). Lessing is an author who has spent her life writing about the subject of women and their inner voyage into the self and psyche. Her preoccupation with the dimensions of the female mind, which are not part of our shared, socially acknowledged experience: the mind's soliloquy in solitude "rather than the psychology of personal intercourse" (Woolf 1966: 225) is surely a remarkable manifestation of her feminist tendencies.

It can be said that identity – the processes of its construction and deconstruction, the roles of others in its definition, the necessity of growth through continual redefinition, its enabling and crippling properties – and the inscription of female subjectivity are certainly the most central and urgent themes of 'To Room Nineteen', a story which has been the site of two critical studies, one by Eva Hunter (1987) and another by Linda H. Halisky (1990). In this long story, Lessing appears to be testing the angst of identity or what might happen in the new feminist era to a woman of the old dispensation who is not only enwebbed in the image of the cultural construct of Woman but who has also accepted her traditional roles of mothering and nurturing and of what has become too often a part of the territory – the role of the betrayed wife. Susan Rawlings, who feels locked into her own cocoon of stereotypical roles and who is seen through her various collectively imposed identities – the suburban, understanding wife, the ever-available mother and good time party girl – wearies of the role of sustainer and comforter, and having experienced a psychic death and a state of

catatonia, resists the culturally stultifying enclosures and constraints, discards the various garments and social roles she has worn and adopted, and retreats into her own room. Through her over-a-year daily visits to room nineteen in Fred's Hotel near Paddington Station and through her own self-communings, she battles to wake up out of the web of 'non-being' or nothingness and begins slowly to strip away the masks of social roles and to search for her autonomous self, which is now a persistent pattern of female heroism in literature. She confronts the fact that she has been virtually a non-person all her life and comes to know that there is a core of genuine identity which can only be confronted if she chooses to live outside the cocoon of social approbation.

Susan's reclusive stay in room nineteen serves a healing, redemptive function enabling her to break down her emotional sterility and isolation and find more satisfying ways of being-becoming. Her inner voyage into the psyche delivers her into autonomy and into another region of being, perception and experience, and her retreat into the space of the 'elsewhere' of consciousness is a liberation, a release from the cage of labels and culturally defined roles and expectations or what one can call the *represented consciousness* of the collective society that would fix her identity. Lessing's representation of Susan's statement about herself, that suicide to sustain and preserve her autonomous self, amounts to a rejection of the classic female condition of acquiescence. Like Nora in *A Doll's House*, Susan is not prepared to return to children and husband. When Matthew's enquiries intrude on her precious solitude, she prefers to die than to capitulate to conventionality. Rather than continue to live in a radically alienated position, she chooses the only healing she can find through death. She chooses death over compromise with the crushing image of the ideal Woman, the monolithic scripted self which patriarchy has called upon women to produce and create. She remains true to herself, which she discovers and creates through her introspection, the "real" authentic self that has been in "cold storage" (Lessing 1978: 311) during her married life.

As a series of fragmented commentaries, in the traditional discourse of sexual power politics, Lessing's story engages in a recognizably feminist dialogue, speaking back to the patriarchal order in a way that resembles Luce Irigaray's feminist critique of Freud. In 'Speculum de l'autre femme' (1982), Irigaray speaks back to Freud's 1933 essay on 'Femininity'. Indeed, in her deliberately non-theoretical way Lessing explores the same territory that contemporary feminist theorists arrived at fifty years later. Through her stories of doomed dissenting women, she exposes the interests at stake in male centered psychoanalytic constructs of the feminine, just as she explores collaborative sexual fantasies where women are perceived and perceive themselves as objects of the male gaze, which is nothing more or less than scopophilia. Not only does her fiction represent women's attempts at intervention into patriarchal discourse, but this is itself a form of *écriture féminine* in her writing of the female body as, quite literally, *le corps souffrant*. Lessing offers alternative versions to traditional stories of patriarchy which are ignored or unheard within the fictions themselves because they are unspoken, for as she shows, her female protagonists are silenced by the very orders of that discourse. In ways that are again very similar to Irigaray's encounter with Freud's master text on woman, Lessing questions patriarchal pronouncements and offers a radical investigation of the social and psychological constructions of gender. She writes in suppressed female narratives which not only deconstruct ready-made definitions of Woman in favor of

representations of individual women but also investigate into the split between Woman as object of representation and the representation of 'women' as historically defined speaking subjects. It is in this invention of a dialogue situation that her fictions are so innovatory and avant-garde.

It is worth saying that Lessing has always been interested in space and foreign territories: from the vastness of the African veld to the female spaces of rooms, houses and flats. Her interest in psychopolitics and in mental landscapes or mind-spaces with their own invented territories is therefore not an altogether unexpected matter. The unbounded realm of psychic space encloses and encodes the 'elsewhere' of consciousness, which is described by Teresa de Lauretis as "the spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus" (1987: 25). De Lauretis was perhaps the first to develop an exploration of 'somewhere else' by showing us how the space of 'elsewhere' is not some 'real place' beyond or outside of discourse, but "a movement from the space represented by/in a representation, by/in a discourse, by/in a sex-gender system, to the space not represented yet implied (unseen) in them" (1987: 26). She attests that it is not that 'elsewhere' does not exist, but that it is as yet unrecognized:

For, if that view is nowhere to be seen, not given in a single text, not recognizable as a representation, it is not that we – feminists, women – have not yet succeeded in producing it. It is, rather, that what we have produced is not recognizable, precisely, as a representation. For that 'elsewhere' is not some mythic distant past or some utopian future history: it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations. (1987: 25)

We can find in the 'elsewhere', to literalize a metaphor of Adrienne Rich, "a whole new psychic geography to be explored" (1971: 35). In 'To Room Nineteen', Susan enters the 'elsewhere' of consciousness, the primary place of identity and enunciation of female experience and subjectivity rather than the socially produced ego with all its negative defenses; it is a psychological state of being in that it provides an alternate ground for subjectivity, and it is a mode of consciousness that helps women to enter an imaginable, yet inhabitable, universe where they can review their lives and seek self-knowledge and from that vantage point come to understand the wider world. Lessing makes it clear that Susan's quest involves ontological space, *who* she is rather than *where* she is. She strongly suggests that in order to survive we must find the presence of 'elsewhere' by exploring human consciousness beyond the cultural constructs of gender, class and race. This is exactly what Susan does. As she becomes someone else, she comes to respond to the change by placing herself somewhere else. Betrayed by her husband, she cannot place herself among her family and friends. She resorts to a trick of her own imagination, recreating and replacing herself. In this trick, she opens a door onto 'somewhere else', that consciousness that she retreats to for renewal, which bespeaks a world of potential actions and possibilities for human renewal, a world that is considerably more diverse than our present, dulling reality. Susan's ability to be elsewhere gives her voice a formal power in the story even as she becomes most socially powerless.

Recently, a questioning of the agreement about reality which we call reality or about one special type of consciousness has become fairly widely acceptable. Individual psychologists like R. D. Laing and Robert Ornstein have shared similar views on the nature of human consciousness. They maintain that beyond our culture's 'normal' consciousness, which they call *egoic* or *rational-analytic*, there is a different mode of cognition, which they term *non-egoic* or *intuitive*.¹ For them, the *rational* or *egoic* mode, which dominates our civilization, is characterized by the sense of "a consistent identity, a me-here over against a you-there, within a framework of certain ground structures of space and time" (Laing 1967: 113). It is "outward-oriented, involving action for the most part. It seems to have been evolved for the primary purpose of ensuring individual biological survival, for which active manipulation of discrete objects, . . . separation of oneself from others, are very useful" (Ornstein 1972: 17) and its essence are "the concepts of causality, linear time and language" (Ornstein 1972: 46). In contrast to this, the 'other' mode of consciousness is receptive rather than active; it reveals "patterned wholes" rather than the linear sequences of causally connected events; it does not operate in terms of linear time and it is essentially non-verbal (Ornstein 1972: 17). Clearly, in her attempt to locate the gap between the culturally produced norm Woman and the specific historical subject, Lessing goes beyond our culture's 'normal' consciousness and locates 'elsewhere' for women in order to explore the 'other' mode of consciousness that points to the place of female subjectivity.

In response to the traditional social dictates of Woman, Susan turns away from the social prescriptions for her or from her egoic identity and embarks on a journey toward self-discovery, for the first time leaving her family and marriage – her identity – behind. She begins to ask Woolf's questions: "Who am I?" and "How can I tell the truth about myself, my body?" In her internal quest for authentic selfhood, she finds a gap between the dominant cultural ideology or her social role as Woman and her own lived experience as a woman. She slips into de Lauretis's "chinks and cracks", into the other consciousness which she finally recognizes the culture would consider mad. Because the masculinist point of view is by definition the rational and intelligible one, anyone occupying the cultural position of Woman and expressing another point of view is to utter truths by convention so unimaginable that they are likely to be dismissed as gibberish, mere symptoms of hysteria.

Although Susan tries to search for words to express the place of 'elsewhere' and to claim it as a foundation for a new identity, a provisional definition of a self authorized and validated by the historical female in the moment, as opposed to a monolith, 'universal' self manufactured and imposed by the phallogocentric society, she is unable to articulate her subjectivity from this place and to integrate it in any significant way with her culturally produced self and identity. She, however, becomes absorbed in the other reality and becomes conscious of the collapse and disintegration of her egoic identity (culturally produced ego) which to her is now like a dress off the rack which she can choose to put on or not. Understandably, Susan cannot numb herself and live a lie for the rest of her life, and she cannot find a compromise she can accept with the figure Woman. Her greatest forte is not only her dis(un)covering of the deep

¹ Laing uses the terms *egoic* and *non-egoic*, while Ornstein speaks of the *rational-analytic* and the *intuitive* modes of consciousness.

ramifications of the split between Woman and women, but also her passionate desire for freedom, self-determination and self-satisfaction. Rather than be annihilated, Susan annihilates herself. She moves progressively away from the cultural and social trappings that have defined her life and enters the realm of death willingly.

On the surface, Susan has had a good life: a successful marriage by most standards; the successful raising of four children; and friends. It is a life characterized by intelligence, humanity and love, which are usually considered the highest attributes of mankind, but in the story they are displayed as superficial and ineffective. Apparently happy, married to Matthew who works on a newspaper, and mother of four children, Susan seems to have no aspirations beyond the roles of wife and mother she more than competently fulfills. She has lived for twelve years as a wife and mother; this is how she defines herself, how she feels she must define herself, how everyone else defines her. One comes to understand why one day after twelve years of contended yet complacent marriage, Susan feels pangs of “bitterness” (309) and is “more and more often threatened by emptiness” (311). The situation that causes her severe psychic disruption is her husband’s infidelity. For ten years, Susan, as Woman, has functioned to bolster her husband’s sense of himself, as the looking glass of *A Room of One’s Own* “possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (1929: 35). He, in the meantime, dallies in sexual liaisons but with a discretion based on guilt; in him fidelity is hypocrisy and self-indulgence. Lessing portrays Susan’s husband as a dependent baby, demanding emotional support from others while remaining blissfully ignorant of those others’ emotional needs.

Even though Susan tries to deny the painfulness of her husband’s betrayal and to treat it as “banal”, “not important”, and resort to her props of “education . . . discrimination . . . and judgment”, (308) she is left feeling “irritable”, “bad-tempered, annoyed”; there is, she finds, “something unassimilable” about Matthew’s infidelity and confession (309). She cautiously allows herself “understanding” but not “forgiveness”, since forgiveness belongs to the “savage old world” of wickedness and brute passion (308). But her misguided behavior wears her out and her traditional feminine virtues of endurance, renunciation and compassion which uphold the patriarchal status quo weigh her down. As time goes by, Susan begins to feel confined to her home in Richmond, burdened by intense feelings of hurt, anger and jealousy. Having denied validity and expression to her intensely felt emotions and having turned solely to her reason, for her marriage was “grounded in intelligence” (305), Susan begins to feel “arid”, living in a state of exilic consciousness (borrowing the term from Ibrahim Huma 1996) which in this case involves an unfixed identity, and to her everything seems “absurd” (309). She capitulates to housewifery, and de facto if not de jure matrimony, and submerges her subjectivity in the patriarchal paradigm.

Susan’s effacement into the household as general factotum, child superintendent, counselor and sometime sexual counselor of the male head of the house exemplify the transpersonal selves that Susan lives and leads. To accept such a role, as Simone de Beauvoir and the existentialists have pointed out is to accept being an object; it is to deny the subject-self that is autonomous and creative. The denial of the subject-self necessarily means a fundamental falseness. It means engaging in a perpetual lie. But Susan must move beyond these socially determined, limiting personas into a sense of self which is both wholly her own and thoroughly disconnected from everything she

believes unique to Susan Rawlings. She must separate what she really feels from the socially fabricated and break the vicious circle of convention that defines and determines women and reinforces the conventional notion that a wife and mother should be self-sacrificing, dutiful, good, kind and above all, calm and controlled. She must assert herself and stop assuming the self-sacrificing role which she had previously felt she must assume, even when she herself had felt oppressed by it.

Yet, for now, all Susan knows is that she is trapped in her own house and feels like a long-term prisoner, living out a "prison sentence" (316).² Her sense of identity has been lost in the *Sturm and Drang* of her marriage and her life has been a masquerade and a performance to gratify other people. She is constantly tethered to her family, weighed down by their demands and the "pressure of time" (315). When she takes a holiday alone, she desires to move beyond the isolated world of her familial duty, reinforcing her individual network of identity, but as she prowls "over wild country" (322), she begins to see how her job as the hub of the family or the Angel in the House has occupied and consumed ten years of her life. After all, she has been at everybody's beck and call, always available, always the supplier of love and food, always held to her "duty like a leash" (322). Susan herself acknowledges that she is no longer sure that the "marriage, four children, big house, garden, charwoman, friends, cars . . . and this *thing*, this entity" (307) revolve around her. She feels that she is no longer herself, that she is no longer anybody. The "essential Susan", she feels, is "in abeyance, as if she were in cold storage" (311). Boredom and weariness are made tolerable only by her belief that "in another decade, she would turn herself back into being a woman with a life of her own" (311), but after having looked forward to when "the children would be 'off her hand'" (311), Susan is unable to go back to her earlier self. She feels tense and jittery, busying herself with unnecessary work. She used to feel that her soul belonged to her children, conceding however that her children "can't be a center of life and a reason for being" (306). Now she is alienated from them that she no longer regards them as her own. She experiences a "human cage of loving limbs" when her twins hug her and feels that her husband is more absent to her than ever (318). Surely, Lessing refuses the conventional wisdom that marriage and family will remain the automatic equivalent of feminine self-fulfillment.

Lessing wants us to see Susan not only as a woman who has been caught up in the enmeshing web of the social roles of her community but also as a woman who tries to step out of a constrictive world into another world of her own making. She uses the third-person narrator, who could be described as omniscient, using panoramic sweeps as well as the detailed presentation of specific scenes, and switching freely from summary to direct speech, from objective description to the subjective perspective of the protagonist, from mere factual reporting to analysis and commentary. The text not only draws attention to Susan's stress and distress, to her loss of faith in love, to her self-sacrifice and self-denial, to her detachment from her own feelings and self-division, to her social roles and inner conflict, but it also invokes an atmosphere of protest against the world as it is and depicts the creation of an alternative reality that is unacknowledged in our world. As Susan sees herself entombed in her own world, she contemplates what she is feeling, what she is becoming, what she wants. Her double-

² Elaine Showalter (1977) raises the question of the "family home . . . as a prison house" (168).

voiced discourse, represented by her interior and intervening discourse and by her asides, hedges and negations, begins to question the validity of the words that Susan speaks and those she hears in conversations around her. Remembering the first time she had sex with Matthew, Susan describes their “delight” parenthetically as “a very long shadow at sundown”, then muses, “(why did I say sundown?) (309). “And that word *bondage* – why had she used it?” she wonders when contemplating her good marriage, the house, the children (317). Susan’s italicized musings throughout the story are significant, for they hint at or suggest a growing newly found self that attempts to find an alternative reality, a new way of fitting into the world. Even though Susan’s bracketed or parenthetical thoughts are placed on a retrospective level, they themselves maintain the immediacy of the present tense, and thus the reader retains the impression of having direct access to them. Certainly, Lessing is convinced that the only hope for securing our life does not only lie in unspeaking the already spoken and unlearning the already learned but also in the individual’s journey ‘back and in’ to his self.

Lessing’s critique of the cult of domesticity is a forceful attack on the virtues of the Victorian ideal of womanhood which has been dubbed the *Angel in the House* by feminist writers and literary critics. Virginia Woolf, in fact, appropriated the term for feminism in a speech, in 1931, before the National Society for Women’s Service. Speaking on professions for women, Woolf blamed her inertia on a creature whom she named “a villain”, who was, she said, not a man, but a woman. She was a “phantom”, an “ideal”, who dictated to Woolf that she be, always charming, available, ready to sacrifice herself to the demands of others. Woolf’s response was to get rid of her:

I now record the one act for which I take some credit to myself. . . . I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. (1979: 59)

Interestingly enough, in 1963, Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, also examined the figure of the Angel of the House and the behavior it demands. Using her forceful voice, she attacked, with pity and anger, the ideals of the cult of domesticity. She showed the way American society, along with its consumerist tendencies, seduced women into tailoring their inner and outer reality to a fluffy image of femininity. The happy suburban wife was, according to Friedan, miserable, frequently neurotic, condemned to live an emotional and intellectual death.

From a loving wife who feels bound to her family, content with being nothing except the roles that went with being Mrs. Matthew Rawlings, Susan gradually changes into a woman imbued with a sense of spiritual sterility and despair. She sits in the garden and confronts what she calls the “enemy” (312) who represents, quite simply, her introjected, conditioned weaknesses and her strongest feelings or impulses of restlessness, rage, irritation and resentment that she projects or externalizes. An intelligent and introspective woman, Susan is intellectually and emotionally aware of her crisis and feels depressed. She begins to look on her mothering skills and her years of household management as a form of dementia rather than a virtue and becomes increasingly aware of something in herself that has remained unfulfilled. Manifestations of hollowness in herself drive her to the point where she can no longer stay in her

house, having lost touch with her inner self. Instead, she rents a cheap room in Fred's hotel, and, in solitude and isolation, through self-analysis and fertile meditation, she confronts her 'essential' self, a daring act which shows an evidence of the subtext to the scripted self.

Like Virginia Woolf, Lessing believes that a woman, particularly at middle-age, must find a room of her own and spend some time discovering who she really is. No longer mistress, wife, mother, organizer, Susan is free of the restraints of being Mrs. Rawlings. For the first time in her life, she negates her negations and escapes her social role and the strangling formalities that gird her spirit by changing her name and paying off the hotel owner. Since names both identify and constitute identity, the act of giving up the name under which one has known and been known is in many respects an act of consenting to become someone else. Now, Susan has the time for self-reflection; she is alone and moves beyond what is expected of her, the prepackaged set of Woman. She retreats from outward-oriented activity, through abandoning herself to receptivity and discovers that she has been playing a role, wearing a set of masks that had received her family's approval but limiting her life and existence and inspiring only ennui. She comes to break out of the cultural construct Woman and to grow out of the nannying role, whether in relation to her own children or to her husband. She sheds the ideology of Otherness she has internalized and forges her identity in terms of her own needs, experiences and perceptions. She engages an *au pair* girl who takes over this role and experiences the collapse of the social mask, the role, the persona. Lessing makes it clear that Susan's marriage is an episode in her continuous growth rather than the *raison d'être* for her entire existence.

Buildings and rooms have a special meaning for Doris Lessing. They are a running motif in her work as she, in 1980, acknowledged to Minda Bikman, an interviewer. Anna Wulf's room in *The Golden Notebook*, the various rooms and houses Martha Quest inhabits in *Children of Violence*, Kate Brown's hotel room and Maureen's flat in *The Summer Before the Dark*, the rooms behind the wall in *Memoirs of a Survivor* – all these offer women an opportunity and a space to explore possibilities for growth within and beyond the perimeters of their social identity. In 'To Room Nineteen', Susan's self-imposed, utterly necessary exile from her home and family and former identity offers her time and space to review her life and to explore what it is like not to be a Woman or a self-in-society. By refusing to obey assigned roles and rules, Susan is free of her family's hold, free of the will to please, free of appearances, free of an identity based on self-abnegation. Her struggle against the mental entrapment of traditional female roles and her desire to satisfy her own needs, to minimize her parental obligations and to seek her freedom, independence and old self are a lucid rebellion against adherence to defined orders, to socialized sanity.

Room nineteen gives Susan a reassuring presence. In it, she finds peace and knows that it is here she belongs:

What did she *do* in the room? Why, nothing at all. 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 Mrs. Jones, and she was alone, and she had no past and no future. . . . And she leaned on the sill, and looked into the street, loving the men and women who passed, because she did not know them. She looked at the downtrodden buildings over

the street, and at the sky, wet and dingy, or sometimes blue, and she felt she had never seen buildings or sky before. And then she went back to the chair, empty, her mind a blank. . . . For the most part, she wool-gathered – what word is there for it? – brooded, wandered, simply went dark, feeling emptiness run deliciously through her veins like the movement of her blood. (327)

For Lessing, a room can be a sanctuary or a place of love and visionary experience or the site of a mystical journey as well as a prison. For Susan, room nineteen, unlike the spare room in her house which represents limits, acts as a buffer, a place of refuge against the traditional roles of wifehood and motherhood that are characterized by Judith Gardiner as in themselves “existentially dead and death-creating” (1975: 286). It is the symbol of Susan’s nay-saying to the rational, death-creating patterns that seek to contain her. Susan permeates the room with a creative force and endows it with a redemptive, salvational meaning not only through the power of her acuity and honesty but also through the power of imagination, of ‘wool-gathering’, that turns her microcosmic space into a macrocosm that flows with human potential.

Despite the appearance of stalemate, Susan’s inner life becomes as lively as ever. She sits quietly in a meditative position and engages in a reciprocal process of inner questioning, outward activity and inner growth. She spends some time with her thoughts and begins to see that wifehood and motherhood are obsessive fussing rather than a loving concern. She realizes that there is a part of herself that she wanted to nurture but which had been neglected in favor of the social self. As Susan wool-gathers or reflects, she feels she has found her subject-self, an existence behind the surface that others see, “Here I am”, she thinks, “after all these years” (327). Susan begins to achieve freedom, to break from her prescribed role and to establish her core and identity apart from that decreed by others. Since Lessing wishes us to see that someone exists behind the masks, she comes to portray an activity in which the ego is orderer rather than ordered. Susan is much closer to understanding and accepting the creation and emergence of her potential self than she has ever been and is free to reshape her life instead of being shaped herself.

It is important to remember that Susan’s most important experience, wool-gathering, is non-verbal, and the narrator never explains it except that in some way it represents the shedding of the baggage that Susan once saw as her life and the rebirth of her authentic self, a self which has particularized itself against the crowd, which has realized itself. In the story wool-gathering comes to represent the ‘elsewhere’ of female experience, these feelings which are not accounted for or recognized by masculine culture, which are often forbidden, and this takes up a shadowy residence in the unconscious. Its fluffy presence also suggests Kristeva’s semiotic, not conveying abstract, absent, carefully controlled meaning, but a physical, nurturing, accepting presence.³ In a non-verbal way, wool-gathering becomes the home of Susan’s true self, the space of her own authority, prompting the possibility of self-authentication or self-realization toward welding wholeness, a wholeness in which the oppositions between body and soul, nature and spirit or freedom, rationality and emotions are overcome.

³ The term *semiotics* occurs in the work of Julia Kristeva to describe a disposition which is contrasted to the symbolic order identified by Lacan. Kristeva sees the semiotic as a means of undermining the phallogocentrism of the symbolic order.

More importantly, the narration links Susan's sense of authenticity with her experience of observing with her appraising eye a stream of unknown people and merging with them in her mind. Her independent observing eye sees the whole push and thrust and development of the world outside and watches other people in a turmoil of living. The emptiness of peace, which is the state of Susan the observer, makes room for the possibility of new mental constructs of wifedom and motherhood that will be more comprehensive and becomes an invitation to potentially healing new insights: about the right to have greater individual freedom and self-development, about the need to forge a healthy self and social world, about the need for a new organization of consciousness, about the need to speak with an authentic female subjectivity and to communicate it to other women.

After Susan finds her 'real' self, the Other Susan as speaking subject or the consciousness that is 'elsewhere', she begins to speak to Matthew from this new self. When Susan speaks to Matthew from her new self, it is usually with Susan in front of a mirror brushing her hair, quite a provocative position from a psychoanalytic perspective. In the mirror is the self which Matthew recognizes as the 'real' Susan, the prim and proper image of Woman. In the chair looking into the mirror is the Other Susan, who Susan begins to identify more and more as her 'real' self. As an observer of her reflection in the mirror, Susan has the authority of the observer over the observed, of the self-subject over the object-self. She is more the watcher and the observer of herself than she used to be, more the subject than the commodified object she has been. Patricia Meyer Spacks explains how the mirror interested both Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir as "metaphor and reality . . . a key to the feminine condition" (1975: 23). The mirror confronts Susan with the split between what she is and feels and the façade she presents to the world. Susan perceives herself dually: Matthew's wife or her fictive other and her authentic self. For the first time in her life, Susan learns to heed her own perception of herself or the alternative self she has created instead of the internalized patriarchal portrait of femininity that usually dominates the mirror, and she begins to reinscribe her own subject position, to rewrite her reality, and to grow stronger. Lessing suggests the strength to be gained when a woman turns to her own self-portrait or new perspective of self instead of the self within the masculinist framework of femininity.

Lessing takes a conventional image of woman's enclosure and transforms it into an image of empowerment. Room nineteen not only suggests a place that is security and a space that is freedom, but it also represents a symbol of growth and fulfillment rather than a demeaning emblem of a woman's place. Over the course of her sojourn in the hotel room, Susan grows and develops her unique (and uniquely female) self, which she significantly regards as one of her most important possessions. But before Susan has the opportunity to close the gap once and for all between Susan the wife and mother and the Other Susan, she is interrupted. Her tremendous freedom in being anonymous and free is broken, her connection with 'elsewhere' is severed, and her quest for the Other Susan is thwarted when Matthew, believing her to have a lover, has her followed and she is no longer free. After her hideaway is discovered, Susan's peace of mind in the room gives way to a sense of imprisonment, for the room which was once a learning-ground that has fostered her self-discovery now yields only a deep sense of ennui and resentment. Lessing does not underestimate Susan's pain and difficulty in dealing with

her dilemma and her sense of self. Thereafter, “several times she returned to the room, to look for herself there, but instead she found the unnamed spirit of restlessness, prickling fevered hunger for movement, an irritable self-consciousness . . .” (330). Susan feels like “a moth dashing itself against a window-pane, sliding to the bottom, fluttering off on broken wings, then crashing into the invisible barrier again” (330). She also feels exposed like “a snail pecked out of its shell and trying to squirm back” (330).

Confronted with the threat of non-being, Susan feels it is her responsibility to protect her authentic self and deliver it to total emancipation. She must assert a sense of self that must be met and remain in the process of becoming; to remain static would be to return to her previous life and externally imposed sense of self, defined conventionally and unequivocally. It is not surprising then that Susan stays in motion and moves toward a conscious and meaningful choice. She chooses to die rather than lose herself and compromise her reality; she chooses personal truth and personal awakening rather than renunciation and despair. Her final emotions as she drifts off into the “river”, which is an alternative to an imprisoning rigidity, is contentment and tranquility (336).

Susan’s self-willed death is not a defeat. Rather than regressing back to the old self and abdicating self-knowledge and self-rule, Susan decides to remain true to herself – the self she has discovered and created through her wool-gathering or introspection. Significantly, Susan has begun the process of staking out a new place of female enunciation for female subjectivity. She has not only rejected the demands of the image of Woman created by patriarchal culture, but she has also moved beyond her culturally produced sense of self. When the real world becomes uninhabitable, she experiences her own ‘elsewhere’, that consciousness that she has retreated to for renewal, and makes the realm of ‘elsewhere’ inhabitable. Her daring, conscious voyage into the ‘elsewhere’ of consciousness, which is certainly a journey of self-discovery, opens regions beyond culturally prescribed identities and helps Susan to pursue and find what truly counts, which is her true self. As Susan digs under layers of encrustation of stereotypical roles, habit and custom, and as she searches through the emotional debris of a twelve-year marriage to reassess who she is and what she has accomplished for herself, she comes to question rigid social patterns and personal fears, to slay the demons, to create an identifiable self beyond the roles assigned to her by her husband, children and family, and to seek self-rule.

Susan’s death is a means of resisting her culturally conditional roles and the crushing, culturally enforced image of Woman, and of positing a new politics of identity, as a first step toward bringing into the culture new formulations, new cultural alternatives, new language, for experiences which patriarchy has forced into repression. Susan has reached psychic maturity, and her death is a transcendence, a liberating form of self-assertion. She has finally dropped her mask, her fictive other and, rather than being limited to her own social and cultural alienation, she chooses to die in an attempt at completion, at restituting her identity. It is true that Susan does not use her voice or mode of discourse to express values that must be brought before the reader in dialogic exchange, but her rejuvenating efforts to open the gate toward the articulation of authentic female subjectivity is felt by the readers who come to deliver Susan’s pregnant silence into what we can call *everywhere else* and to release feminine consciousness from the bonding forces of society. Susan’s silence, one might add, is not a silence of absence,

of emptiness or of passivity. It is a silence of presence and fullness. Feminine silence is described as absence because one notices only the surface of a gesture, a look or a text, and fails to attend to the language of the interior. One must listen very closely for both the richness and the barrenness of silence, since what appears to be a whisper may be the echo of a laugh, or a scream transformed.

As Kate Millet has perceptively maintained, it is essential to alter "the socialization process of temperament and role differentiation" (1970: 178), and to reshape the most intolerable areas of "basic attitudes, values, [and] emotions" in order to change the formal superstructure (177). Also, feminist critics such as Chris Weedon (1987) and Patricia Waugh (1989) have argued that the female subject is not a static object but rather is always 'in process' as it continuously moves toward a 'becoming-other' than itself. As a lord of consciousness and a prophet of a possible new world, Lessing dismantles the traditional notions of Woman and moves toward the delineation of a new female subject that appeals to our freedom that we should "become what we are capable of being" (Lessing 1957: 17). Women readers of Lessing are faced with the choice of being collaborative critics enjoying the pleasures and pains of recognition, or of being resisting readers or – a third possibility – of oscillating between these two positions as Judith Gardiner suggests in her essay 'On Female Identity and Writing by Women' (1982). But since Lessing has decided that fiction could be a medium for expressing profound truths, perhaps we should listen to what she is saying before it is too late.

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