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A FREUDIAN APPROACH TO THE SPATIAL ALIENATION IN DORIS LESSING'S "TO ROOM NINETEEN"

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Abstract

Doris Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen" (1963) owes its popularity to its depiction of search for female self-assertion, relevant to contemporary world. Occupying a central place in the story, the theme of female suffering and alienation is associated with the space used in the flow of narration. Taking its cue from Sigmund Freud's theory of topography, the present article aims to offer an alternative reading to the notion of spatial alienation of the protagonist Susan Rawlings in Lessing's "To Room Nineteen". The exemplification of "ego", "id" and "superego" of the human psyche, decoded by Freud, will be presented to understand the spatial shifts of the protagonist Susan, in search of self-assertion in a patriarchal society. Focusing on the psychological upheavals of a woman via spatial analyses, therefore, this article aims to present a dynamic interpretation of the spatial alienation in Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" with regards to Freud's theory of topography for Susan's depression, madness and suicide.

***Keywords**: To Room Nineteen, self-assertion, Sigmund Freud, spatial alienation*

DORIS LESSING'İN "ON DOKUZ NUMARALI ODA" ESERİNDEKİ MEKANSAL YABANCILIK ÜZERİNE FREUDYAN BİR YAKLAŞIM

Öz

Doris Lessing'in "To Room Nineteen" (On Dokuz Numaralı Oda) (1963) adlı kısa öyküsü, popülaritesini çağdaş dünyaya uygun, kadının kendini ortaya koyma arayışını

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tasvir etmesine borçludur. Hikayede merkezi bir yer tutan kadının acıları ve yabancılaşması teması, anlatımın akışında kullanılan mekanla ilişkilendirilir. Sigmund Freud'un topografya teorisinden ilham alan bu makale, "Ondokuz Numaralı Oda" eserindeki ana kahraman Susan Rawlings'in mekansal yabancılaşması kavramına alternatif bir okuma sunmayı amaçlıyor. Freud tarafından kodu çözülen insan ruhunun "ego", "id" ve "süperego" örneklendirmesi, ataerkil bir toplumda kendini ortaya koyma arayışındaki başkahraman Susan'ın mekânsal değişimlerini anlamak için sunulacaktır. Bir kadının psikolojik çalkantılarına mekânsal analizler yoluyla odaklanan bu makale, Lessing'in "On Dokuz Numaralı Oda" adlı eserindeki mekânsal yabancılaşmanın, Freud'un topografya teorisi üzerinden Susan'ın depresyon, delilik ve intiharına bir yorum sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

***Anahtar Sözcükler**: Ondokuz Numaralı Oda, özbenlik, Sigmund Freud, mekânsal yabancılaşma*

1. Introduction

The bond between human beings and space has been exquisite since the beginning of settled lives when people attributed their identities, values and emotions (Tuan, 1977: 34) to "space". Carrying the traces of external and internal selves, spaces are the indispensable part of individualistic lives. As "a human invention, constricted by ritual markings that invest it and attach to it functions and values" (Garcia, 2015: 20), space both provides a secure zone, safety and personality for people. As while making assumptions on the personality of individuals, interpreting the space they inhabit would be sufficient and beneficial because the notion of space has a proceeding impact on a person's life. Space, in other words, is "both human product and consumption" (Narain, 2014: 21). The need for belonging also leads to the relation or devotion to a "spatial sphere" (Lotman, 2005: 203), which enhances all the aspects of man and environment bond. It is no doubt that space shapes the lives of individuals that both create and live in spatial representations, apart from the outer world.

Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space* states that humans create and shape the spaces by their interests, and hence, space is a living thing:

> . . . . each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space. This is a truly remarkable relationship: the body with the energies at its disposal, the living body, creates or produces its own space; conversely, the laws of space, which is to say the laws of discrimination in space,

> also govern the living body and the deployment of its energies. (Lefebvre, 1991: 170)

Hence, Lefebvre demonstrates that space is dynamic and subject to changing formulations and interpretations depending on how the body and space interact. Consequently, he presents the body as the intermediary between the three dimensions of space: "perceived", "conceived" or "lived". Lefebvre indicated that space plays a variety of functions in our daily lives and it not only relates to the physical space that our senses perceive, but also acts as a foundation upon which we construct our understanding of the outside world, other people, and our surroundings (Tuan, 1977: 34). Similar to Lefebvre, Soja (1989: 79) agrees that "space in itself may be primordially given, but the organisation, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience".

In actual life, space ensures the personality, thoughts, emotions and lifestyle of an individual and similarly, in literary texts, space functions as an agent to both reflect the characters' inner worlds and provide readers insight for interpretation. In fiction, setting and objects in spaces are used by authors both to objectify the political, historical, economic and social dynamics and convey the messages to their readers. Academics, geographers and feminist geographers (Nigel Thrift, Derek Gregory, Michel Foucault, Paul Cloke and Ron Johnston, David Harvey, Edward Soja, Rob Shields, Doreen Massey, Linda McDowell, Gillian Rose) attempted to define literary space, yet, in general, space refers to the descriptions of places in a literary work, which could be personally experienced or imagined by the author himself.

Michel Foucault (1980: 70) in his article "Questions on Geography", asserted that space is not considered to "the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile" because it is a product of societal relations, which transforms and varies due to the individuals' social relations. Similarly, Edward Soja (1996: 8) underscored the dialectical relationship between the spatial and the social aspects of individuals' lives, illustrating "social and historical significance of human spatiality and the particular powers of the spatial imagination". For Soja (1996: 76-77), "human spatiality continues to be defined primarily by and in its material configurations, but explanation shifts away from these surface plottings themselves to an inquiry into how they are socially produced". Hence, the shifts in space complement individuals' mind, body and soul. Another researcher, Robert Tally, in his book, *Spatiality* (2013), exemplified the constructivist relation between space and individuals by referring to the impacts of imaginary places on readers' perception of the actual world and experiences of the author.

The construction of space in a literary text clarifies the aim of the author who tends to aid hidden messages via symbols and motives used in the setting of the story: "spatial setting is –in addition to temporal setting, narrator, literary characters, and literary events- a fundamental component of narration" (Hess-Lüttich, 2012: 5). Space, thus, provides the readers not only the content of fictional

worlds but also a concrete picture of the feelings and thoughts of the characters. Thus, "spatial dimension is essential to fiction" (Reuschel and Hurni, 2011: 293) while establishing a relationship between the characters and the events. The concept of space has various functions in a literary work. First, it has an aesthetic function to serve as a decoration for the events. Secondly, writers convey social problems, political and economic changes, social and cultural movements to their readers, thanks to their descriptions of places, which are the "language of events" (Kolcu, 2006: 23). Third, through the interpretation of space, readers could understand the inner worlds, experiences, mental states, feelings and thoughts, social conditions and psychological situations of characters. In addition, writers could convey their messages to the reader through setting and objects: "The place affects the other elements of the literary work, adds strength to them, and reveals the intention and purpose of the author" (Gümüş, 1989: 7). In this context, space has an important role in character analysis and character has an important role in space analysis. For the aforementioned reasons, for centuries, writers and poets in world literatures have established a special bond between character and place and have built their messages on this relationship.

In literature, the stylistic analysis involves the examination of characters, events and space, which is considered to be an essential fundamental component of narration. Therefore, the space where the characters live, and action takes place involves both concrete and abstract meanings to assist the messages of the authors. Also, space provides readers information about the traits, feelings and thoughts of characters (Mucignat, 2013: 5). Moreover, space defines the economic, social and psychological conditions of the fictional characters. Thus, space helps the flow of events within a story (Garcia, 2015: 18). In other words, because the acts occurring and the deeds the protagonists accomplish, that is, the moral of the story, are the only significant aspects of these literary works, spaces serve just as a setting for the characters to carry out their duties. Literary texts reflect the inner world of the characters by relocating the area that makes mental processes more intelligible thanks to the contribution of psychoanalytic theory, as is seen in Doris Lessing's short story, "To Room Nineteen". Focusing on the psychological upheavals of a woman via spatial analyses, therefore, this article aims to present a dynamic interpretation of the spatial alienation in Lessing's story with regards to Freud's theory of topography for Susan's depression, madness and suicide.

This study aims at the investigation of spatial alienation of Susan Rawlings in regard to Freud's categorization of the human unconscious part (the ego, the id and the superego) within a theoretical framework to understand alienation, madness and suicide of Susan. The Rawlings big house with a garden in Richmond represents "the superego". The house is a civilized space, but it becomes a prison for Susan who is restricted with the societal roles of motherhood and wifehood. As the Rawlings children start school and she is left alone at home, Susan begins to spend time in the garden of the house, which

is the representation of "the id". Susan's repressed fears and emotions are revealed in the garden where she sees a "demon" that invades her mind and soul. As Susan decides to find her real identity as an individual, she begins to rent a hotel room at Fred's Hotel. The room turns out to be Susan's only freedom because she could get rid of her familial bonds and social roles. Thus, the room represents "the ego" of the suffering protagonist. However, after her secret is discovered by Matthew, Susan realizes that it is impossible for her to hide from the society: the superego. Hence, Susan, with her suicide, reacts and rejects a world where she has no self-assertion and liberty.

2. Freudian Reading of "To Room Nineteen"

Lessing's story highlights the psychological upheavals of Susan Rawlings and her marriage, caused by "a failure in intelligence" (Lessing, 1978: 300). The narrative presents women's place in marriage, their role as mother and wife, psychological disorders, emotional abuse and search for identity. Space emerges as a central theme in the story, which is also indicative in the title. The whole story, in the psychological sense, depicts a young woman, suffering in search of her actual self. Rawlings performs her conventional role as a wife and mother after abandoning her professional life in an advertisement company after having four children. Although her life seems perfect on the surface, she challenges the boundaries around her to find an alternative shelter to find her self-identity, apart from being a mother and wife.

In order to present a theoretical framework to understand the alienation, insanity and eventual suicide of Susan, this study aims to explain the spatial alienation of Susan with Sigmund Freud's topographical model in *The Ego and The Id* (1923). Freud proposed that the unconscious part of human psyche comprises three components: the id, the ego, and the superego (Freud, 1989). According to his theory, Freud clarified that the ego (the self) is the "part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world through the medium of the perceptual consciousness; in a sense it is an extension of the surface differentiation" (Freud, 1989: 15). The ego (the self) represses and controls the id (desires and instincts) to avoid alienation and isolation from the superego (the society). Hence, the main function of the ego is to control the repressed feelings of the id into socially acceptable demands of the superego (Freud, 1989: 15). On the other hand, it is striking that the id, the ego and the superego are in relation in the unconscious part of the individual: "in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harboured residues of the existences of countless egos; and, when the ego forms its superego out of id, it may perhaps only be reviving shapes of former egos and be bringing them to resurrection" (Freud, 1989: 28).

Hence, the struggle of Susan's ego with her hidden feelings and the society could be associated with the spatial shifts that indicate her desire to align self-assertion. At the beginning of the story, although Susan and Matthew were both satisfied with their flats, they leave their old flat and move to a

new flat in South Kensington after marriage. Susan's moving to another space initiates her loss of subjective individuality. After Susan gets pregnant, as they need a bigger house, the couple moves to a house which has a big garden in Richmond. The house is far from the city centre, which leads to the isolation of Susan who feels herself as "a prisoner" (Lessing, 1978: 317). The Rawlings big house in Richmond is the superego, recalling societal expectations, traditional values, and ideals because it represents "the ideal" (Freud, 1989: 15) for the ego. The house is civilized, when compared to her flat, yet she is repressed by the patriarchal codes and guided by the societal roles imposed upon her as a mother of four and wife of Matthew: "They had everything they wanted and had planned for. And yet... Well, even this was expected, that there must be a certain flatness... Yes, yes, of course, it was natural they sometimes felt like this. Like what? Their life seemed to be like a snake biting its tail" (Lessing, 1978: 254).

Susan is invaded by motherhood and wifehood, yet she is aware of the expectations of her superego, the society which imposed roles and duties upon women during the 1960s: "When middle-class housewives raised children as an unpaid full-time role, the work was dignified by the aura of middle-classiness" (Hochshild, 2000: 144). Susan, thus, knows that as an upper-middle-class woman, she has to embrace all the social codes to become an "ideal" woman. On her way for self-assertion, Susan searches for space in the house. Recalling Virginia Woolf's "a room of one's own", Susan transforms a room into the "Mother's Room [which is] a room or a place, anywhere, where she could go and sit, by herself, no one knowing where she was" (Lessing, 1978: 319). In that case, it is reasonable to decode that although the "Mother's Room" is isolated from the children, it is still connected to other spaces in the house, and hence, it still reminds her duties as a mother and wife. Although her children prepare a notice on the Mother's Room as "PRIVATE! DO NOT DISTURB!" (Lessing, 1978: 320), Susan feels "even more caged there than in her bedroom" (Lessing, 1978: 318) because she is disturbed by her children, the maid and her duties as a mother. Feeling more trapped in the house, Susan realizes the fact that she could never solve her problems and release her doubts without a hidden place.

The spatial shift from the house and the "Mother's Room" in the attic of the house occurs when Susan begins to spend time in the garden of the house. The id, acting in accordance with impulses and unconscious desires, is the garden of Susan's house. Since the garden is linked with the house, thus, reminding us of the theory of Freud (1989: 70), the house (super-ego) is closely attached to the garden (id) while "in relation to the ego". The superego, in result, causes guilt for Susan, who is faced with anxieties and fears when "the repressed merges into the id… [and] communicate with the ego through the id" (Freud, 1989: 28). Susan's repressed fears and emotions are revealed in the garden when she begins to see "some sort of demon" (Lessing, 1978: 313). The protagonist, thus, fails to find comfort in the garden as she feels more "trapped" (Quawas, 2007: 115) and horrified from the hallucinations of

demon waiting to invade her mind and soul. Besides, this hallucination captures in the mirror, and eventually, Susan's id alienates both her ego and her environment, the superego. The main cause of Susan's desire for self-assertion is her financial dependence on her husband:

> No, Matthew was a full-time husband, a full-time father, and at nights, in the big married bed in the big married bedroom (which had an attractive view of the river) they lay beside each other talking, and he told her about his day, and what he had done, and who he had met; and she told him about her day (not as interesting, but that was not her fault) for both knew of the hidden resentments and deprivations of the woman who has lived her own life, and above all, has earned her own living, and is now dependent on a husband for outside interests and money. (Lessing, 1978: 256)

Her financial, emotional and spiritual dependence on Matthew enhance the loss of self-identity and emptiness in her spirit; however, she realizes that the failure in her marriage is: "Nobody's fault, nothing to be at fault, no one to blame, no one to offer or to take it... and nothing wrong, either, except that Matthew never was really struck, as he wanted to be, by joy; and that Susan was more and more often threatened by emptiness" (Lessing, 1978: 259). After discovering Matthew's liaison with Myra Jenkins, Susan tends to escape from the domestic seclusion and isolation, which is the main "[R]esentment … [which] was poisoning her" (Lessing, 1978: 264).

To escape from her "prison", Susan achieves to find a peaceful place where nobody could find her: Room 19 at Fred's Hotel, a solace shelter: "The room was ordinary and anonymous, and was just what Susan needed. She put a shilling in the gas fire, and sat, eyes shut, in a dingy armchair with her back to a dingy window. She was alone. She was alone. She was alone. She could feel pressures lifting off her" (Lessing, 1978: 322). During the hours Susan spends in her hotel room, her home becomes smaller and smaller and she is totally alienated from her actual environment. Only in room nineteen could she feel she was a complete and happy woman (Zhao, 2012: 1654). What differentiates this space from other spaces is that the room serves for her solitude and independence, and thus, represents her ego: "[she] was no longer Susan Rawlings, mother of four, wife of Matthew, employer of Mrs Parkers and of Sophie Traub… She was Mrs Jones, and she was alone, and she had no past and no future" (Lessing, 1978: 327). Accordingly, Susan rejects any other room in the hotel by insisting on waiting for "her room" (Lessing, 1978: 330) till it becomes available.

In order not to forget her responsibilities and roles, imposed upon her by the society, Susan longs for freedom and desire to feel her existence as an individual. Isolated in the room, neither the hotel owner nor Matthew had any idea about what was going on in that room: "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" (Lessing, 1978: 327). However, the reader realizes the concrete contribution of the room on Susan. Sitting on the couch in her room until the evening and not noticing how the time passes, Susan questions her life. This obsessive attachment to room 19 could be explained Susan's desire for self-assertion, the ego: "Lessing makes it clear that Susan's quest involves ontological space, who she is rather than where she is" (Quawas, 2007: 12). Susan's need for a room is a behaviour aimed at protecting her own existence. Hence, the image of the room is not a closed empty space, but a space of existence. Although the room is a closed space, for Susan, it is her only freedom. Although she is as far away from home, she feels at "home" rather than her own house because she could get rid of her familial bonds and social roles.

When her secret shelter is discovered by Matthew, Susan's seclusion from the husband and children becomes spoiled and "the peace of the room had gone" (Lessing, 1978: 279). Realizing that she is invaded when Matthew questions her about the hotel room, Susan declares that she has an affair. Hence, the secure aura of her room is destroyed: "She went up to sit in her wicker chair. But it was not the same. Her husband had searched her out (the world had searched her out.) The pressures were on her. She was here with his connivance" (Lessing, 1978: 330). In other words, Susan understands that it would be impossible for her to hide from the society: the superego. This is when the death instinct takes hold of the super-ego and turns on the ego (Freud, 1989: 77) and causes suicide of Susan.

The protagonist of the story realizes that she is both "a different person" (Lessing, 1978: 265) and has no real place to embrace "her freedom" (Lessing, 1978: 335). The critique of Brown (1993: 15) centres on Susan Rawling's death as is "the ultimate removal from, rejection of, a world into which one does not fit". Hence, while "quite content lying there, listening to the dark 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, 1978: 288), Susan commits suicide.

3. Conclusion

Spaces are the indispensable part of individualistic lives, and they are shaped and produced by individuals. Hence, through the interpretation of space, it is possible to comprehend feelings, thoughts, perceptions and experience of people. As space ensures the personality of an individual, in fiction, they provide readers an insight for the characters' inner worlds. Space also mirrors the psychological and emotional state of literary characters, as can be observed in Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen". Lessing portrays the psychological upheavals of Susan who is struggling to control her desires (id) and the expectations of a patriarchal society (superego). This struggle of the protagonist is reflected through the spatial dimensions, which is divided into three: the house of the Rawlings, the garden of the house and Room 19 at Fred's Hotel.

The Rawlings' house in Richmond provides the expectations of her society, and thus, it represents the superego. However, as Susan feels trapped and restricted by the imposed roles upon her, she begins to spend time in the garden, where the demon appears. Since the demon could be interpreted as her repressed fears and emotions, it recalls the id. The only solace shelter for Susan, eventually, is the room at Fred's Hotel, where she is happy, independent and alone. Therefore, the room is the ego. Susan's denial of the superego, as explained in Freud's theory, leads her failure and alienation at the end of the story. Moreover, her desires and hidden feelings, embodied with the demon in the garden, cause madness because Susan is aware that it is impossible for her to lead an independent life via her actual self.

After finishing the novella, it is possible to have the impression that Susan Rawlings is the representation of all the modern women who are trapped in the patriarchy, which ignores female liberation and assertion. The patriarchal restrictions on women have always caused tragic consequences, leading to female alienation, insanity or suicide, as is shown in Lessing's story. The distortion shaped in Susan's alienation from both the family and society plays an effective role in portraying the mental and psychological sufferings, which serve for the thematic connotation of the story. Trying to challenge the boundaries of motherhood and wifehood, Susan rebels against the superego, escapes from the "evil" id and embraces her ego. As illustrated in the ending of the story, the unseen chains and unwritten laws separate women and force them to make a choice: either be an angel in the house or the devil in the garden.

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