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The Power Of Language Over The Subject In Doris Lessing's Short Story "To Room Nineteen"

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the predominant role of language in the subjectivization of the female protagonist in Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" within the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis and relevant terminology. Published in her collection of short stories titled A Man and Two Women (1963), the story relates the failure of Susan Rawlings to fulfil her desire to be a 'subject' in the French philosopher, Jacques Lacan's terms. Having been disillusioned in her quest for solitude in her personal space called "Mother's Room" and later on in a downtown hotel, she is finally drawn into a hideous hotel room, Room 19, with which she is obsessed to the point of bringing her life to an end. Throughout the narrative, there is a prevailing claustrophobic atmosphere in which she feels as if she was caged, or imprisoned within the borderlines of an empty life. However, the ambivalence of the ending with regard to Susan's suicidal cause has been an intriguing situation. Thus, the aim of this paper is to account for the protagonist's lasting death-wish by adopting a Lacanian perspective. In line with the protagonist's final breakdown, the narrative is manifested as liable for a psychoanalytical reading that will draw on the process of becoming a 'speaking subject' as well as other Lacanian terminology, including the conceptions of desire/lack, subject's relation to language, distinction between 'ideal ego' and 'ego ideal', and the displacement from the Symbolic or linguistic realm.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, Lacan, language, subject, psychoanalytic literary criticism

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Doris Lessing'in "19 Numaralı Oda'ya" Öyküsünde Dilin Özne Üzerindeki Gücü

Öz

Bu çalışma, Lacancı psikanaliz ve ilgili terminoloji çerçevesinde, Doris Lessing'in "19 Numaralı Oda'ya" adlı öyküsünde yer alan kadın kahramanın özne olma süreci üzerinde dilin baskın rolünü incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Lessing'in *A Man and Two Women* (1963) başlığıyla yayınlanan öykü kitabında yer alan hikayede, Susan Rawlings'in, Fransız filozof Jacques Lacan'ın terminolojisiyle, 'özne' olma arzusunu gerçekleştirmedeki başarısızlığını ele almaktadır. Kendi kişisel alanı olarak adlandırılan "Anne Odası", ve sonrasında bir şehir merkezi otelinde, tek başına olma arayışında hayal kırıklığına uğramış olarak, en sonunda korkunç bir otelin 19 Numaralı odasına çekilmiş, ve kendi yaşamını sona erdirme derecesinde buraya saplantılı hale gelmiştir. Anlatı boyunca hüküm süren, ana karakterin içinde kendini boş bir yaşamın sınırlarında kafeslenmiş, hapsedilmiş gibi hissettiği klostrofobik bir atmosfer vardır. Öte yandan, Susan'ın ölüm nedeniyle ilgili sonun belirsizliği ilgi çekici bir durumdur. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma, Lacancı bir bakış açısı benimseyerek, başkahramanın süregelen ölüm arzusuna açıklama getirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Başkahramanın son psikolojik parçalanmasıyla bağlantılı olarak anlatının, 'konuşan özne' ol(ama)ma kavramının yanısıra, arzu/mahrumiyet, öznenin dil ile bağlantısı, 'ideal ego' ve 'ego ideali' arasındaki ayrım ile Simgesel ya da dilsel dünyada yerdeğiştirme kavramlarını da içeren Lacancı bir terminolojiden yararlanarak, psikanalitik bir okumaya elverişli olduğu açıkta ortaya konmaktadır.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, Lacan, dil, özne, psikanalitik edebi eleştiri

Introduction

Before embarking on an analysis of the narrative based on Lacanian epistemology, it is significant to take a brief look at what some scholars and critics have written regarding Susan's predicament in "To Room Nineteen". Jansen analyses Susan's confinement to an isolated room with reference to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) by asserting "occupying a single room isn't the same as having a room of one's own" (163). She also, in the light of *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), inquires: "Is it possible for woman to avoid becoming a madwoman in an attic? Or, rather, is it possible for a wife and a mother to escape this fate?" (183). Wang Ningchuan and Wen Yiping adopt a Marxist feminist point of view to explicate her situation: "According to Marxist feminism, the tragedy began with her renouncement of material or economic independence. Marriage for her became a turning point from equality to subordination." (67). Kun Zhao views Susan's suicidal end as her salvation from the patriarchal power: "Finally, she found a good place for her freedom – Room nineteen. … Only in room nineteen could she feel she was a complete, happy and confident individual" (1654). Finally, Rula Quawas' reading of the story is principally based on the idea of female subjectivity as a construct: "[T]he processes of its construction and deconstruction, the roles of others in its definition, […] and the inscription of female subjectivity are certainly the most central and urgent themes of 'To Room Nineteen'" (110).

Upon a revision of these diverse approaches to Lessing's story, one aspect that remains underemphasized needs to be brought to the foreground: Susan's linguistic construction of subjectivity, namely her process of becoming a subject and the difficulties involved in this process due to her problematic relationship to language. Lacan's contention that "the unconscious is structured in the most radical way like a language" (Lacan, 1977, 234) can be taken as a foundation upon which the idea of female subjectivity is built. Thus, it can be confidently claimed that a Lacanian perspective to shed light upon the predicament of the female protagonist can prove to be a fruitful and in-depth analysis, which is the aim of this paper.

As stated at the very outset of the story, "[t]his is a story … about a failure in intelligence" (Lessing, 253), and Susan Rawlings' marriage is grounded in intelligence; however, this presumably perfect marriage turns out to be a "prison" (ibid., 265) for her upon assuming a familial role that confines her into the domestic sphere together with her four children. To get rid of her sense of "emptiness" (ibid., 259, 262, 263) and "restlessness" (ibid., 260, 262, 263) as well as to evade confronting "the enemy" (ibid., 262, 263), she is in an interminable search for an "empty" (ibid., 265), "anonymous" (ibid., 270) room, or a place where she can be "free" (ibid., 277). However, this personal space turns out to be the bearer of Susan's eventual psychic breakdown. All these reiterative words reflect Susan's sense of entrapment not only within the confines of her female subjectivity but also by the laws of the Symbolic or linguistic realm.

Lacanian Conceptions to Account for the Protagonist's Breakdown

Lacan's distinction with regard to the concepts of need, demand and desire can be drawn on to explicate the prevailing sense of emptiness in Susan. Lacan puts this distinction in this way:

> Desire is situated in dependence on demand – which, by being articulated in signifiers, leaves a metonymic remainder that runs under it, an element that is not indeterminate, which is a condition both, absolute and unapprehensible, an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued, (*méconnu*), an element that is called desire. (Seminar XI, 154)

In other words, desire can never be satisfied since it corresponds to a primordial absence, or a lack that is persistent. For Lacan, "[d]esire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need" (1977a, 311). To put it more clearly, "[d]esire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the second from the first, the very phenomenon of their splitting (Spaltung)" (1977b, 286-7). In Susan's case, her desire is both insatiable and impossible to articulate. In fact, what she yearns for is transitive; the moment she feels an illusory sense of fulfilment, she is confronted with another lack. Her progress in life seems satisfactory

as it is in line with "what everyone would wish for": Having left their "pleasant flats", Susan and Matthew start to live in a "charming flat" together, and as "a popular young married couple" they often give and attend parties (Lessing, 254). Then, after having four children –one son, one daughter and twins- they move to the house of their dreams, a large house with a garden in Richmond suburb. Despite having realized their aspirations in life, the sense of lack haunting her can neither be named nor fulfilled:

> 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. (ibid., 254)

The narrator obviously adopting Susan's focal position or point of view reflects this sense of lack as "flatness" (ibid.), but later on fails to verbalize it within a state of a self-inquiry: "Like what?" (ibid.), which turns out to be a question that perpetually remains unanswerable. In this sense, she is inflicted with this desire that can never be satisfied. Another important issue that draws attention to the gaps, fragments and silences in language is the use –or in fact overuse – of ellipses. Just as the quotation above displays, language resists an unproblematic correspondence to a meaning.

In later phases of Susan's life, desire comes to be associated with other indefinable things or places. In search of avoidance from anything that imprisons her, she goes to a hotel owned by Miss Townsend, a lonely woman of fifty, to spend a few hours of escape in solitude. In response to the hotel owner's worrying looks over her, she ponders without articulating her real thoughts:

> Miss Townsend, my four children and my husband are driving me insane, do you understand that? Yes, I can see from the gleam of hysteria in your eyes that comes from loneliness controlled but only just contained that I've got everything in the world you've ever longed for. Well, Miss Townsend, I don't want any of it. You can have it, Miss Townsend. I wish I was absolutely alone in the world, like you. (ibid., 270)

In this inner speech, it is manifested that what Susan thinks she desires is "absolute solitude," (ibid.) which she can never attain: "She was determined to arrange her life, no matter what it cost, so that she could have that solitude more often. An absolute solitude, where no one knew her or cared about her" (ibid., 271). Even though she manages to split her demand from need as well as to confront her desire, she nevertheless cannot be introduced into the discourse as she cannot accept, in her reality, the lack of the object upon which her desire relies, which causes her exclusion from the Symbolic register. Her dislocation from this register is also due to the fact that she refuses to submit to the role of the ideal wife, one foisted upon her by the Symbolic/patriarchal discourse ruled by the Law and patriarchal commands.

Language is an indispensable tool in the construction of human subjectivity. In fact, according to Lacan, language precedes the subject, which means it is with the passage to the Symbolic or the realm of language that a subject becomes "subject" to the ruling mechanism of society, rather than a "subject" implying a being in full control of his/her actions (Lacan, 1977c, 148). Sarup puts this Lacanian view explicitly: "The subject is seen as constituted by language and it appropriates the world through language" (Sarup, 46). In this process, an individual acquires subjectivity insofar as s/he can properly be positioned within the Symbolic register; however, a failure in recognition of the Father's name and his Law correlating with overall social norms and rules poses a psychological developmental problem on the side of the subject who is excluded, in this case, from the Symbolic. Drawing on Saussure's idea of 'the speaking subject', Jacques Derrida similarly views subject as an inscription of language:

> [W]hat was it that Saussure in particular reminded us of? That 'language [which consists only of differences] is not a function of the speaking subject'. This implies that the subject (self-identical or even conscious of self-identity, self-conscious) is inscribed in the language, that he is a 'function' of the language. He becomes a *speaking* subject only by conforming his speech […] to the system of linguistic prescriptions taken as the system of differences, or at least to the general law of differance, by conforming to that law of language […]. (Derrida, 145-6)

This is actually what Susan experiences as her subjectivity formation becomes stuck in a linguistic process where she is unable to achieve acculturation.

With her rejection of conventional female roles dictated by patriarchy, and in an utter wish to escape from them all, she cannot become a socialized, acculturated being, nor a speaking subject. Because Susan cannot be culturally positioned, her access to the Symbolic register is problematized. Susan focalizes her own exclusion from her social and matrimonial roles as a withdrawal "in spirit from her responsibilities" (Lessing, 271), and a relationship with her husband in which they live "side by side in this house like two tolerably friendly strangers" (ibid., 272). She longs for what society (or Law of the Father) wishes to deprive her of: her freedom, a "slow emancipation away from the role of hub-of-the-family into woman-with-her-own-life" (ibid., 260). This reminds one of Althusser's emphasis on ideology as constitutive of subjectivity when he asserts:

> I say: the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that *the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects*. (Althusser, 160)

In this sense, Susan's sense of subjectivity does not only rest on language but also ideology. Through her escape, Susan seems to resists the role or the identification that ideology –patriarchal ideology, in particular – and language impose upon her.

Susan is alienated both from her familial position and fragmented ego, and this is in fact an alienation that takes place through her problematic relationship to language that imprisons her. According to Lacan, it is language itself that speaks a subject, rather than vice versa primarily because human being is born into language that pre-exists before her/him (Lacan, 1977c, 148). As Sarup makes clear this fundamental element of Lacanian theory, "[h]uman subjects are caught, grasped, by the signifier" and **"**[t]he speaking being is poisoned by language" (45). This explicates Susan's position in relation to language that has an alienating effect, rather than being a communicative tool. In the same vein, the professions of the couple emphasize their linguistic positioning where Matthew is a subeditor of a big London newspaper, hence in a strong interaction with language whereas Susan has a talent for drawing humorous visuals for advertisements. Her occupation involves merely visual forms of communication. Therefore, she is engaged in non-linguistic processes of

symbolization both professionally and psychologically, rejecting verbal tools as her primary means for inter-subjectivity and communication.

The primacy of language over the subject is rendered manifest as Susan seems not to be in control of the words that she happens to use as they sound "banal", "ridiculous", "stupid" (Lessing, 257), and "absurd" (ibid., 258) to her. When her husband confesses that he has had an affair with a young girl after a party, she forgives him; however, she knows instinctively that the words *forgive* and *confess* are signifiers that limit her linguistic freedom: "Susan forgave him, of course. Except that forgiveness is hardly the word. Understanding, yes. But if you understand something, you don't forgive it, you are the thing itself: forgiveness is what you *don't* understand. Nor had he *confessed* – what sort of a word is that?" (ibid., 257). She appears not to have any power over language; on the contrary, it is language that overwhelms, reigns, or grasps her. She is interminably in an act of self-questioning as to the nature or meaning of the words. In fact, this language she is entrapped in cannot express her actual thoughts and emotions. Similarly, the word *faithful* seems meaningless to her while she is speculating about the joke they have made before: "I'm not going to be faithful to you, no one can be faithful to one other person for a whole life-time. (And there was the word *faithful* – stupid, all these words, stupid, belonging to a savage old world.)" (ibid., 257). She defies the language that she uses since it does not really belong to her, but to "a savage old world" (ibid.); thus, it is evinced that language is a pre-constituted, self-referential sphere whose function is only to catch, torture and prison the subject.

Lacan's one of the most significant contributions to the poststructuralist thought is his idea that "the unconscious is structured in the most radical way like a language" (Lacan, 1977, 234). The unconscious is "censored", yet able to be "rediscovered" with an insight into the individual's verbal mistakes or slips of tongue, body language and "idiosyncratic" choices of words or structures. (Lacan, 1977d, 50). Susan's preoccupation with language inevitably results in her act of self-censorship; the words she selects are determined by what she calls "intelligence" that is actually the inevitable control of language by the unconscious: "There was no need to use the dramatic words, unfaithful, forgive, and the rest: intelligence forbade them" (Lessing, 259). In this respect, language speaks her,

limiting her into a chain of signifiers. In Lacanian terms, 'the signifying chain' restricts the speaker's freedom (Sarup, 47). Her being possessed or tortured by 'the signifying chain' is also evinced in her another inner speech: "It is not even a year since the twins went to school, since *they were off my hands* (what on earth did I think I meant when I used that stupid phrase?) and yet I'm a different person. I'm simply not myself. I don't understand it" (Lessing, 265). Her linguistic limitation culminates in the demise of her authentic self; she acknowledges that she is no longer herself, but someone else. In Lacan's theory, "the domination of the signifier – the external, material letter of language – over any individual speaking subject is critical, oppressive and even deadly. The signifier has 'being', is materially present and enduring, whereas the subject 'disappears', lacks being" (Gallop, 19). In line with this viewpoint, Susan as a speaking subject "lacks being" due to "the domination of the signifier [which is] oppressive and even deadly" (ibid.). In fact, she is self-conscious about her powerless position with respect to language. Although she does not mean to use a specific word, she ends up articulating that same word without any reason: "And that word *bondage* – why had she used it? She had never felt marriage, or children, as bondage" (Lessing, 266). In fact, one is intrigued by the question why the words chosen by her are beyond rationality. Gallop explicates this as "the unreasonable, disproportionate rule of the signifier (the dead, alien, stubborn material which is the necessary and inevitable support for a concrete discourse, an act of speaking) over the subject" (21). Her linguistic practice is fluctuating, indecisive, and undetermined in that she cannot figure out the stimulating force behind her choice of words. These words come to be spoken without her consent and approval since she is captivated by language.

Speech ceases to be a truly communicative device in the verbal interaction between Susan and her husband. Lacan defines speech as "an inter-subjective pack" (Lacan, 1977d, 61): "speech is not simply a conveyor of information, but establishes a relation between speaker and hearer" (Sarup, 46). Therefore, the language used by Susan and her husband characterizes the relationship between the spouses: a form of communication that is elusive and lacking in ultimate and finalized meaning. Lacan's definition of language as a metaphorical process "to signify *something quite other* than what it says" (Lacan, 1977c, 155) is typical of

Susan's case. Susan's speech, in line with this description, is metaphorical in that there is always a distinction between what she says and what she means, making her a split subject. She avoids direct speech to others by rendering her meaning vague, ambivalent and even contradictory. In all of her conversations with her husband, she evades telling the truth about her real feelings, her motives and her fears. She admits that "their mutual language" is "a lie" because she has hidden her real fears from him (Lessing, 263). As Lacan maintains, "[b]ehind what discourse says, there is what it means (wants to say), and behind what it wants to say there is another meaning and this process is never exhausted" (Lacan, 1977c, 155). Her self-questioning reveals that there is always another meaning beyond the words she articulates: "Why is it I can't tell him? Why not?"; "And what is it I have to say?" (ibid., 266). In the narrative, Susan's inner thoughts and the truth concealed beneath the metaphorical language are inscribed preceding her verbal articulations:

> She knew that he wished she had [a lover]. She sat wondering how to say: 'For a year now I've been spending all my days in a very sordid hotel room. It's the place where I'm happy. In fact without it I don't exist.' She heard herself saying this, and understood how terrified he was that she might. So instead she said: 'Well, perhaps you're not far wrong.' (ibid., 284)

Evidently, she avoids telling the truth about her escape to the hotel room because her husband would be terrified with the idea, so she makes up an imaginary lover, a Michael Plant, although she suffers from an utter sense of loneliness. She actually knows that her husband wants this to be the reason of her daily disappearance because it reasonably explains everything. In fact, "[o]ne of the most important functions of speech is that a subject uses it to signify something quite other than what s/he says. The meaning is always veering off, or being displaced. … Truth resides, as it were, in the spaces between one signifier and another, in the holes of the chain" (Sarup, 90-1). In this respect, in Susan's speech, one must look for meaning not in what she says, but in what she does not say, "in the holes of the chain". Therefore, she ends up in a sense of alienation that is brought about by the deprivation of language. The split personality is structured through a desire for what she utterly lacks: "In another decade, she would turn herself into a

woman with a life of her own" (Lessing, 259). However, her urge for authenticity is ultimately overthrown.

Lacanian poststructuralist theory views the subject as split precisely because the position implied by the grammatical category of "I" can never be fixed; thus it is impossible for the subject to assume this I position confidently. Catherine Belsey summarizes this split position in terms of a distinction between the subject of enunciation, the speaker, and the subject of the é*noncé*, the utterance, which can never overlap (53). This is one of the most noteworthy ideas in "The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis" (Lacan, 1977d). By referring to this part of Écrits, Lee avers: "Lacan has now enriched the je/moi distinction, understanding the je in terms of symbolic narrative and the moi in terms of imaginary identification. […] [T]he human subject is essentially a place of conflict between the je and the moi, between the symbolic and the imaginary" (Lee, 47). This split identity results from the distinction between the I that is viewed in the mirror and the I that looks in it, which culminates in a lack of a unique or unified identity. This absence of junction between the two spheres can be observed when Susan fails to position herself to the unique, fixed "I" subject, so her subjectivity constitution is undermined. In her assertion that "I have to learn to be myself again" (Lessing, 261), it is evident that the subject of this statement does not overlap with its articulator; that is Susan as a speaker admits that this "I" is not the authentic subject she wants to retrieve, or identify with. Moreover, she "did [smile at Matthew] from the self she liked, she respected. But at the same time, something inside her howled with impatience, with rage …" (ibid., 268). This also manifests the gap between her real and constructed subjectivity. Furthermore, she begins to view herself as an object, as "this woman" and third-person "she/her" rather than first-person "I": "She felt as if Susan had been spirited away. She disliked very much this woman, who lay here …, but she could not change her" (ibid., 275). She even sees herself as "the being who answered so readily and improbably the name of Susan", acknowledging the position of the object again. (ibid., 279). She also separates from her authentic self when she adopts the pseudo name Mrs Jones in order to avoid being found out by her husband during her visits to Fred's hotel in search of solitude. As either Mrs Rawlings or Mrs Jones, her identity is ambivalent.

In order to account for Susan's state of hysterical neurosis, it is vital to take into consideration the gap between her imaginary and symbolic identification, her ideal ego and the ego ideal. According to Lacan, "the difference between how we see ourselves and the point from which we are being observed is the difference between imaginary and symbolic identification" (Sarup, 103). According to Rabate, "the imaginary realm [is] dominated by the interaction between the ego and the objects of desire" (24). The ideal ego, in the case of Susan, is represented in her identification with the German au-pair girl, Sophie Traub, who is her ideal ego as she is an idealized form of Susan herself: she is "healthy", "laughing" and "a success with everyone", with the children, her husband and the maid, Mrs Parkes (Lessing, 275). As she is "an intelligent girl", she understands her position as "some person to play mistress of the house" (ibid., 275). In fact, Sophie acts as Susan's alter ego, beginning gradually to replace or substitute Susan, taking her position as the mistress and the mother. This replacement is initially foreshadowed when Susan's Mother's Room is turned into Sophie's bedroom. She positions herself perfectly into Susan's place in the house, leaving Susan on her own only to imagine herself in the position that is supposed to be her own: "Susan imagined herself going in, picking up the little girl, and sitting in an armchair with her, stroking her probably heated forehead, Sophie did just that" (ibid., 282-3). Sophie acts the role of the mother flawlessly; when the little daughter is sick, she takes care of her as "the mother of those children" (ibid., 288), reminding Susan of what she herself fails to do. Even when Susan learns about her husband's affair with a Phil Hunt, who is "too neurotic and difficult", she thinks that "[Phil has] never been happy yet. Sophie's much better" (ibid., 284). In this inner speech, it is obvious that Phil overlaps with Susan herself as a "neurotic" and unhappy woman while Sophie is idealized as an image she wants to identify with, as someone that would be a perfect match for her husband. On the other hand, her symbolic identification, or ego ideal as a position from which she looks at herself does not overlap with her narcissistic identification, putting her into a state of neurosis: "The hysterical neurotic is experiencing her- or himself as somebody who is enacting a role for the other" (Sarup, 103). In other words, there is a huge gap between the imago she identifies with and what she sees of herself when she observes herself from

an outside viewpoint. Jansen states that "she begins to experience her life from a changed perspective, to stand apart from her life as wife and mother" (182). As a result of this change in her self-perception, the gap between her self-image and the reality she discovers broadens. She adopts this position in a moment of self-encounter in the mirror. When confronted with her self-reflection in the mirror, she realizes that the demon that terrifies her is in fact her own authentic self:

> Meanwhile, she examined a round, candid, pleasant face with clear dark brows and clear grey eyes. A sensible face. She brushed thick healthy black hair and thought: Yet that is the reflection of a mad woman. How very strange! Much more to the point if what looked back at me was the gingery green-eyed demon with his dry meagre smile … (Lessing, 274)

Within this self-identification, her position as the subject is undermined, and she is reduced to the position of a madwoman. Thus, her Ideal-I cannot be achieved within her process of inter-subjectivity, a process based on her linguistic interaction with the Other. This reflection in the mirror emerges just in the course of her short conversation with her husband, which implies that her constitution of subjectivity as a deranged woman is a culmination of language; in other words, she is defined and constituted within, and by, language.

Susan's linguistic incompetence, or failure in the domain of language, hence dislocation from the Symbolic register, and interminable oscillation between the three registers all culminate in her self-destructive mental state. Lacan problematizes the assumptions of linearity in language: "The sense is always moving towards something, towards another meaning, towards the closure of meaning. It always refers to something that is out ahead or that turns back on itself" (Lacan, Seminar III, 137). In this sense, signification process is nothing more than a chain of signifiers. This chain of signifiers is made visible in her obsession with certain words that reiterate in the narrative. Throughout the story, she is depicted in an everlasting state of "emptiness", "restlessness", "irritation" (Lessing, 262), "tension" and "panic" (ibid., 261). Evidently, she is dislocated from the Symbolic Register as she cannot acquire the Law of the Father as well as the law of the language system, causing her inability to live in accordance with the rules of the society, and she ends up in an isolated room. In other words, as a result of

this dislocation, she seeks a personal space of subjectivity in the room 19, with which she is utterly obsessed, rejecting any other room in the hotel, insisting on "her room" till it becomes available. Her obsessive relation to the room can be explained as an urge for subjectivity as this is the only place where she can get away from the identity imposed on her. Quawas relates this room to Susan's ontological yearning: "Lessing makes it clear that Susan's quest involves ontological space, who she is rather than where she is" (112).

Unable to be posited in the Symbolic, Susan is also disturbed by ruptures evoked by her occasional interaction with the Real in a hallucinatory confrontation with a vision that she calls her "demon": "She imagined him, or it, as a youngish man" (Lessing, 268); "she recognized the man around whom her terrors had crystallized. As she did so, he vanished" (ibid, 269). She thinks "he wants *to get into me and take me over*" (ibid., 269). This hallucinatory being turns out to be the image she sees when she looks at herself in the mirror. Therefore, what she wants to elude is, in Lacanian terms, her disintegrated ego or her alienated relationship to her own image that brings about her ultimate breakdown. In fact, this explains Susan's catastrophic and fatal end when she commits suicide in the room 19. While her death-wish is being satisfied, she is "quite content lying there, listening to the faint soft hiss of the gas that poured into the room, into her lungs, into her brain" (Lessing, 288). Zhao emphasizes Susan's deadly end as a result of a longing for subjectivity: "Lessing described Susan's searching for an authentic self which led to her madness and ultimate suicide" (1654). Quawas, in a similar manner, regards death as an outcome of a failure in ego formation due to her problematic status within the system of inter-subjectivity: "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" (111). Catherine Belsey points to women's displacement from multiple and contradictory subject-positions enforced on them, and from language consequently:

> The attempt to locate a single and coherent subject-position within […] conflicting models, and in consequence to find a non-contradictory pattern of behavior, can create intolerable pressures. One way of responding to this situation is to retreat from the contradictions, and from the language that defines the conflicting ideals, to become 'sick'. (Belsey, 55)

Susan's death can be explicated in line with this retreatment from language and the idealized role of woman due to the impossibility to adopt a coherent subject-position, and the resulting pressure placed upon her.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, throughout the story, the female protagonist is unable to posit her subjectivity within the dominant discourse of patriarchy which is predominantly epitomized, and in fact, shaped by language. Her limited access to means to construct a unified identity leads to her failure to become a 'speaking subject', which in turn, culminates in her self-destructive urge. Furthermore, she cannot come to terms with her self-image that is imposed upon her by the linguistic discourse, and eventually, chooses to opt out of this discourse altogether.

In the same vein, a contradictory relationship between what is sensible and what is absurd is emphasized. The overabundant use of the words "intelligence" Lessing, 253), "*reasonable*" (ibid., 273), "sensible" (ibid., 258) in contrast to "nonsense" (ibid., 271), "absurd" (ibid., 258), "stupid" (ibid., 265), "irrational" (ibid., 267) "irrelevance" (ibid., 286), "ridiculous" (ibid., 257), "insane" (ibid., 271) and "*unreasonable*" (ibid., 272) in the narrative evinces this preoccupation with this conflicting dichotomy. In spite of her wishes to place herself in the realm of reason, she is ironically placed within the territory of madness. Elaine Showalter sees madness as "a way of labeling deviance from the feminine role" (167). Upon her pursuit of rationality, which is a male-identified territory, and subsequent deviance from it as well as from her imposed femininity, Susan finds her way into this mental state which in turn leads to her ultimate self-deconstruction. To sum up, in the light of Lacanian epistemology, it is evident, as in Susan's case, that female subjectivity predominantly depends on, and is structured within, a discourse ruled by linguistic and cultural laws. To put it more precisely, the protagonist refuses to assume a subjectivity constructed and shaped by the law of language and ideology, instead preferring to be posited out of the Symbolic by her ultimate retreat from the mainstream discourse of the patriarchy.

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