

In Room Nineteen Why Did Susan Commit Suicide? Reconsidering Gender Relations from a Doris Lessing's Novel

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Abstract

Based on the discourses of Marxist feminism and Psychoanalysis, the paper attempts to reconsider gender relations via a feminist novel "*To Room Nineteen*", written by Doris Lessing(1919-), a Nobel Prize winner. Analyzed through the theory of *self* both by Karen Horney and Lacan, it focuses on the heroine, Susan's suicidal process, aiming to study the relation between *self* and *ego*--in relation to the "self" and "others". Phenomenologically, the suicide was caused by the psychological conflicts in her inner *self* owing to her embarrassing social status. Ontologically, it reveals the disparity and contradiction between her ideal, gender identity (the given nature) and patriarchy (the dominant ideology). It also helps to explain the tension between feminism and patriarchy--why feminists have been scrambling for getting rid of diverse patriarchal suppressions but failing to subvert.

Key words: Doris Lessing; *To Room Nineteen*; Gender Relations; Marxist Feminism; Psychoanalysis

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INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing, a Nobel Prize winner, has been noted for "only the 11 women to have won in the prize's 104 years."¹ The *Noble Prize Press Release* describes "the epicist of the female experience, who with skepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny".² She has also been known as an author with "strong sense of feminism"³, owing to her concern with the plight of women and the "cultural inequities of her native land."⁴ Her maiden works, *The Grass is Singing* (1950), established her as "one of Britain's most promising young writer."⁵ And her most widely-read work, *The Golden Notebook*, was proclaimed as "a feminist bible" in 1962.⁶

Indeed, her cosmology seems more inclined to preferring the ideas that "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is" and "I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute (Rebecca West 1913) "⁷; and (the term "feminism" is) hard to define, something arcane, mysterious and rather

¹ Lisa Allardice. (2007, October 13). I Have an Impressive List. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/oct/13/books.nobelprize>

² Motoko Rich, Sarah Lyall (2007, October 11). *New York Times*. Retrieved from

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/11/world/11cnd-nobel.html?ex=1349841600&en=fe6db48996e06f03&ei=5124&partner=permalink&exprod=permalink>

³ Thomson Corporation. (2005-2006). *Encyclopedia of World Biography on Doris Lessing*. Retrieved from

<http://www.bookrags.com/biography/doris-lessing>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Amy Witherbee. The property of Great Neck Publishing

⁶ Ibid.

forbidding “as a derogatory designation for the partisans of sexual equality.”⁸ That is, she doesn’t regard herself as a feminist, and the term “feminism” in her view is no more than a confusing derogatory word as well.

However, the paper doesn’t discuss whether or not she is a feminist, but her gyno-centric perspective, reflecting female inner struggle over sexism and patriarchy. In Lessing’s works, she always depicts the heroines’ internal struggles on the journey to their self-actualization. However, some could fulfill it, others failed. As for the heroine in the novel “*To Room Nineteen*”, Susan failed her self-actualization and finally committed suicide. Phenomenologically, from Marxist feminism, the suicide was caused by the psychological conflicts in her inner *self* because she was ensnared in and could not emancipate herself from an embarrassing social status. Nevertheless, from psychoanalysis, *self* by Horney and Lacan to study the relation between *self* and *ego*--in relation to the “self” and “others”, the suicidal process could reveal the disparity and contradiction between her ideal, gender identity (the given nature) and patriarchy (the dominant ideology). Ontologically, it also helps to explain the tension between feminism and patriarchy--why feminists have been scrambling for getting ride of diverse patriarchal suppressions but failing to subvert.

1. BEING TIGHT ON PURSE: WHY SUSAN BECAME A POOR HOUSEWIFE

1.1 Marxist Feminist Approach to the Fate of the Heroine

“Socialist/Marxist feminism is a powerful strand of the second wave during the late 1960s and 1970s, in Britain particular. It sought to extend Marxism’s analysis of class into a women’s history of their material and economic oppression.”⁹ And the theory also probed into “how the family and women’s domestic labor are constructed by and reproduce the sexual division of labour.”¹⁰ The primary task of Marxist feminism’s was to “open up the complex relations between gender and the economy.”¹¹ As Heidi Hartmann writes in his *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*:

The “woman question” has never been the “feminist question.”

The feminist question is directed at the causes of sexual inequality between women and men, of male dominance over women. Most Marxist analyses of women’s position take as their question the relationship of women to the economic system, rather than that of women to men, apparently assuming the latter will be explained in their discussion of the former.¹²

According to Hartmann, Marxist analysis of the woman question has taken three main forms, which could be divided as follows: First, the early Marxists, including Marx, Engels, Kautsky, and Lenin, saw capitalism drawing all women into the wage labor force. Second, the contemporary Marxists have incorporated women into an analysis of “everyday life” in capitalism. And third, Marxist-feminists have focused on housework and its relation to capital.¹³ Marxist feminism states that private property, which gives rise to economic inequality, dependence, political confusion and ultimately unhealthy social relations between men and women. And it is also the root of oppression of women. The way it looks at the family is negative. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), Engels said that:

to emancipate woman and make her the equal of the man is and remains an impossibility so long as the woman is shut out from social productive labor and restricted to private domestic labor. The emancipation of woman will only be possible when woman can take part in production on a large, social scale, and domestic work no longer claims anything but an insignificant amount of her time. And only now it has that become possible through modern large-scale industry, which does not merely permit the employment of female labor over a wide range, but positively demands it, while it also tends toward ending private domestic labor by changing it more and more into a public industry.¹⁴

1.2 Economic Impact on Susan’s Suicide

The novel *To Room Nineteen* begins its story like this, “This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence: the Rawlingses’ marriage was grounded in intelligence”.¹⁵ When they get married in their late twenties, all of their friends feel that they are *well matched*. Matthew is a subeditor on a large London newspaper, and Susan works in an advertising firm. Before they’ve married, they both possess a pleasant flat of their own. So they decide to buy a new flat in South Kensington. Two years later, Susan is pregnant. However, they feel it is “a kind of submission to personality on the

⁷ Margaret Walters. (2005). *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press. ⁸ Danielle Haase Dubosc. (2003). *French feminism: an Indian Anthology*. New Delhi: Sage Publications Inc.

⁹ Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson. (1993). *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. University Press of Kentucky. pp.217

¹⁰ Ibid., Raman Selden. pp.217

¹¹ Ibid., Raman Selden. pp.217

¹² Heidi Hartmann. “*The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*”, in *Education and the State: Politics, patriarchy and practice, Politics and Education* series, Volume 2 of *Education and the State*, Open University set book, ed. by Roger Dale (Taylor and Francis publisher, 1981) pp.191

¹³ Ibid., Heidi Hartmann. pp.192

¹⁴ Friedrich Engels, Eleanor Burke Leacock. (1972). *The origin of the family, private property, and the state, in the light of the researches of Lewis H. Morgan*, *New world Paperbacks, Volume 359*, ed. by Eleanor Burke Leacock (International Publishers Co). pp.221.

part of the one whose flat it is not.”¹⁶ Thus, she gives up her job, and lives in Richmond. Just as the author reveals that “it was typical of this couple that they had a son first, then a daughter, then twins, son and daughter.”¹⁷

From then on, Susan voluntarily shut herself out from public sphere and was restricted to private sphere, which was the root cause of sexual inequality between man and woman. 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. The first fault that Susan made after marriage was her voluntary dispossession of her private property, the flat. And then she renounced her job for being expectant. The both symbolized her unintelligent relinquish of material or economic independence, withdrawing her into an inferior or subordinate social position. Nominally, it is due to Susan’s reconciliation toward marriage. Ontologically, the reconciliation was surrender to her gender identity that it was natural for a marital woman not being individual. Indeed, the unequal social practice was also deep-rooted in her unconsciousness, of which she wasn’t aware. Therefore, at that time, she couldn’t be aware of the fact that it was more prone to ensnare her in a perilous state for future’s material and economic reliance on her husband. The more reliant she was, the more inferior to her husband, who could be regarded as a symbol of patriarchy. Rather than those tragic female characters who were passive recipients in economic oppression, she did it voluntarily, rendering her independence to male dominance unconsciously, which became the first step inevitably leading to her economic embarrassment after marriage.

And next, what happened? For the next several years, Susan just has been staying at home, taking care of her children without having any jobs. “And Susan’s practical intelligence for the sake of Matthew, the children, the house and the garden—which unit would have collapsed in week without her.”¹⁸

Though Susan played a cohesive role in uniting the nucleus family, yet she was deeply involved in the housework, bored. It was the only “*job*” depriving of her economic independence, contributive to the dominance of male over female in the family. The labor division constructed by the gender role reflecting the unequal social practice, which led to Susan’s inevitable economic reliance on her husband, even if she was unwilling to accept that at heart. The economic embarrassment, on one hand, resonated with Marxist

feminist cosmology that economic impact would cause the social inequity; on the other, later became one of significant motives leading to her suicide. It was the Marxist’s root cause of sexual discrimination. The description of Susan’s housewife’s status echoes the Marxist’s incorporation of woman into an analysis of “everyday life” in capitalism and Engel’s assertion that domestic labor shut women out of the possibility being equal of men because as to women, it seemed impossible that domestic work no longer claimed anything but an insignificant amount in their life time.

Even worse, they both were tired of their jobs. As to Matthew, not only was he unconscious of his wife’s sacrifice, but also unsatisfactory with his job, which to him seemed totally ridiculous. “It was an interesting job, but scarcely a reason for living. Matthew took pride in doing it well; but he could hardly be expected to be proud of the newspaper: the newspaper he read, his newspaper, was not the one he worked for.”¹⁹ Before marriage, he is much more than a “subeditor,” being one of the essential background people who can inspire and make possible the people in the limelight. However, quite on the contrary, as for Susan before marriage, “she had a talent for commercial drawing. She was humorous about the Advertisements she was responsible for, but she did not feel strongly about them one way or the other.”²⁰

Indeed, the both were all entrapped in a state that work for the work’s sake, the goal of which was not for interest but for supporting the family. Their sense of belonging and fulfillment in work was dislocated, and even lost because their jobs seemed more of a boring drudgery than a duty which had to be performed, much less of enjoyment.

Matthew’s dissatisfaction toward his job partly originated from an innate pride of male’s gender role in social labor division, as Nancy C. Morse and Robert S. Weiss mentions in their article *The function and meaning of work and the job*, that working should be more than a means for economic support.

And the finding result of a their national sample study on the meaning of working are:(1)that working is more than a means to an end for the vast majority of employed man;(2)that a man does not have to be at the age of retirement or be immediately threatened by unemployment to be able to imagine what not working would mean to him; and (3)that working serves other functions than an economic one for men in both middle class and working class occupations, but that the non-monetary functions served by working are somewhat different in these two broad classifications of occupations.²¹

¹⁵ Doris Lessing, *To Room Nineteen, Women and Fiction*, ed. by Susan Cahill (Signet Classic,2002) pp.251

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.252

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.252

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.253

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.253

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.252

²¹ Nancy C. Morse and Robert S. Weiss. (1955). *The Function and Meaning of Work and the Job*, American Sociological Association.

Obviously, the significance and joy of job were totally lost for Matthew since he worked only for his family, without any satisfactoriness in his work. As Miriam Erez points out in the book of *Values and work: A Special Issue of the Journal Applied Psychology* that the meaning of work as an arena in which valued goals are pursued, expressed, and attained. Harding, Phillips, and Fogarty(1986) identified three main dimensions of work values or goals: personal development, pleasant climate, and security and material rewards.²²

For Matthew, there is no personal development, no pleasant climate and so on. All he did was for the sake of his wife, his children, his house and his garden. He was the pillar of the earth in this family. Though he was considerate enough, yet the communion between the couple seemed just becoming the bland routines at the bedtime, as was described in the novel:

“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 whom he had met; and she told him about her day (not as interesting, but that was not her fault).”²³

The last sentence reflected that domestic labor suppressed Susan's happiness and individuality. She was numbed by, as well as enough of it and her enthusiasm to be a full-time housewife was gradually dampened because she had come to realize that it was a fault to renounce her independence, but indeed, that was not her fault. That is, Susan's dissatisfaction was mostly due to the dull life of being a full-time housewife, which was quite different from those colorful and inspirational days in office. Therefore, at times Susan would be in the dilemma--whether or not going back to work. At least, there was an excuse for her psychological struggle that her old colleagues missed her humor.

Children needed their mother to a certain age, that both parents knew and agreed on; and when these four healthy wisely brought-up children were of the right age, Susan would work again, because she knew, and so did he, what happened to women of fifty at the height of their energy and ability, with grown-up children were no longer needed their full devotion.²⁴

Since children need both of their parents' full devotion, why should women be the one who stays at home to take care? Susan's psychic was tortured by her housework but she found the unit would have collapsed in a week without

her, which trammled her tightly in the family. When they were both fortyish, the elder children, were ten and eight, at school. The twins, six, were still at home. Again, she was dreaming that she would turn herself back into being a woman with a life of her own in another decade. She dreamed every time after children went to school. Did Susan's dream really relieve her from the bondage of her family?

The answer seemed “no”. The next day Susan took them, dropped them, came back, and found “her herself reluctant to enter her big and beautiful home because it was as if something was waiting for her there that she did not wish to confront.”²⁵

What was wrong with her? The explanation could be found in Jahoda, who launched another five latent functions of work in 1981: “to structure time, provide shared experiences and social contact, promote social goals, grant status and identity, and provide regular activities. People may or may not be aware of the importance of these latent functions in their own work”.²⁶

After a decade of being a housewife, Susan felt confused and suppressed because she could hardly find her own social status in society. That is, the social identity she had been aspiring was lost. For more than a decade, she had been fully occupied by a great number of domestic trivialities, even with no time or chance to gain access to outside, much less of fulfilling the above latent functions.

Margaret Walters wrote in *Feminism*, in the 1870s, that a group of socialist students and workers, who called themselves the Tchaikowsky circle, included many women, arguing that it was only when capitalist exploitation was at an end that women would escape the “double oppression” of housework and factory work.²⁷ “For Engels then, women's participation in the labor force was the key to their emancipation. Capitalism would abolish sex differences and treat all workers equally. Women would become economically independent of men and would participate on equal footing with men in bringing about the proletarian revolution...Marxists were aware of the hardships women's labor participation meant for women and families, which resulted in women having two jobs, housework and wage work.”²⁸

What else, many Marxist feminist also believed that the oppression of woman in the history and at the present days was the direct result of the private ownership. So only when the private ownership withered away could

²² Miriam Erez, Robert A.Roe, Peter Ester. (1999). *Values and Work: A Special Issue of the Journal Applied Psychology, Applied Psychology: an International Review, Volume 48,1.* (Taylor and Francis) pp.61

²³ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.254

²⁴ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.254

²⁵ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.259

²⁶ op.cit, Miriam Erez, Robert A.Roe and Peter Ester. pp.61

²⁷ op.cit, Margaret Walters, pp.132

²⁸ op.cit, Heidi Hartmann, pp.192

there be an end to the oppression of woman. Another other issue that concerned feminists was the unpaid domestic labor did by women and many thought that such kind of unpaid domestic labor was the outcome of the patriarchal system and the production mode of capitalism, which would give the right for man to overtake women through gender division of labour.²⁹ In the year of 1972, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James argued that women's unpaid domestic labor was crucial to capitalism since it created surplus value. As unpaid worker at home, women were exploited by capitalism and thus they had to shoulder all of the domestic labor, to take care of their family and children. So they believed that to pay for women's domestic labor was the way to solve this problem.

As for Susan, it was not only a matter of money, but of emotion, whose nature for delights and adventures was imprisoned in the domestic labor. It is tragic for her that the practical intelligence was all for the sake of Matthew, the children, the house and the garden, which unit will have collapsed in a week without her. "She felt that in the nature things that the adventures and delights could no longer be hers, because of the four children and the big house that needed so much attention."³⁰

Soon the twins would go to school, and they would be away from home from nine until four. These hours in Susan's eye, would be the preparation of her own slow emancipation away from the role of hub-of-the-family into woman-with-her-own-life. She was already planning for the hours of freedom when all the children would be 'off her hands', for the moment when the youngest child had gone off to school." They will be off your hands, darling Susan, and you will have time to yourself." So said Matthew the intelligent husband who had often enough commended and consoled Susan, standing by her in spirit during the years when her soul was not her own, as she said, but her children's."³¹

The moderate console what her husband supplied seemed rather considerate, but indeed she was fed on fancies. Meanwhile it also revealed that he had known the Susan's mindset. However, his comfort for Susan was not relief but a confirmation for spiritual confinement. It was also a confirmation for gender role in social labor division, originating from the long-term male dominance, deep-seated in the nadir of Mathew's mind. It echoes Zaretsky's argument "why did it happen that women work there, and men in the labor force? Surely this can not be explained without reference to patriarchy, the systemic dominance

of men over women."³²

And Heidi Hartmann also asserts that the problem in family, labor market, economy, and society is not simply a division of labor between men and women, but a division that places men in a superior, and women in a subordinate position.³³ Even when Susan feel exhausted towards her housework and go to Wash to relax herself, she "prowled over the telephone wire holding her to her duty like a leash. The next time she must telephone, or wait to be telephoned, nailed her to her cross. The mountains themselves seemed trammled by her unfreedom."³⁴ When her husband asks her: "Are you thinking of going back to work?" "No," she says, "No, not really." She made herself sound vague rather stupid.³⁵

Indeed, the well-matched marriage was not as happy as in the outsiders' eye. Susan's could not receive any relief from her husband. Rather the ambiguous comfort intensified her psychic plight. The husband pretended to be her soul mate, politely console disguising his naturalized prejudice over his wife at heart. It was socially based on the sexist labor division, ingrained in her husband's mind. And it was the Susan's unintelligent renouncement of her independence resulting in the subordinated economic embarrassment, the failure in communication with her husband and descending into the psychic abyss. That is, her unintelligence in economic ownership together with long-held social prejudice finally turned her into a poor housewife in psychological plight.

2. WHY DID THE DEPRESSED SUSAN SUICIDE: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH

Feminism, where women bravely come to stand for any radical force, intends to subvert the concepts, assumptions, and structures of patriarchal discourse, while "Psychoanalysis, both as a theory of individual development and as clinical practice, has frequently been used as part of women's oppression, reinforcing society's definition of them as wives and mothers, and reducing their aspirations to be fully human to individual neuroses."³⁶ Nevertheless, some feminists, such as Jacqueline Rose, Mary Jacobus, and Kaja Silverman, through brilliant re-articulation of psychoanalysis, attempt to explore the complications of the predicament of

²⁹ Alison Jaggar. (1993). *Political Philosophies of Women's Liberation, in the Philosophy: Contemporary Perspectives on Perennial Issues*, ed. by E.D. Klemke, A. David Kline, Robert Hollinger. St.Martin's Press. pp.574-562

³⁰ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.257

³¹ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.258

³² op.cit, Heidi Hartmann, pp.193-194

³³ op.cit, Heidi Hartmann, pp.194

³⁴ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.273

³⁵ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.273

³⁶ Joanna Ryan. (1974). *Book Reviews: Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, by Juliet Mitchell. Allen Lane. pp456+xxiii.Penguin

women. That is, they use part of psychoanalytic theory in its analyses of how and why women are the subordinate sex, and employ psychoanalytic practice as part of its struggles against current oppressions. Meanwhile, they also assert that:

Psychoanalytic theory had an impact on literary studies both as a mode of interpretation and as a theory about language, identity, and the subject. On the one hand, along with Marxism it is the most powerful modern hermeneutic: an authoritative meta-language or technical vocabulary that can be applied to literary works, as to other situations, to understand what is 'really' going on.³⁷

Therefore, the paper would also explore Susan's suicide via the psychoanalytical perspective, Karen Horney and Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of personality. And first, according to Karen Horney, Personality is composed of three elements. These three elements of personality--known as the *actual self*, the *real self* and the *idealized self*, which are distinguished from what Freud points out: id, ego and superego. The real self is the inner strength of individual growth and development which is possessed by all human being. And the real self, "she also calls a 'possible self' and the idealized self that she calls an 'impossible self'. The real self is difficult to actualize because it is a sensitive plant that needs more nurturing than most of us receive and we can easily lose touch with it, but the idealized self can never be actualized because it transcends human possibilities and is full of contradictions."³⁸

And then, "the failure in Self-idealization could give rise to yet a third self, the '*despised self*,' which is what we feel ourselves to be when we fail to live up to the unrealistic demands we make upon ourselves, which Horney calls our 'should'. Horney also posits an 'actual self,' which is who we really are at any given time. The actual self is a mixture of the strengths and weakness, defensive strategies and strivings for health that have been produced by the interaction between our given nature and our environment. When there has a good fit, there will be little disparity between our given nature and our environment, and we will have a clear sense of who we are. When the fit has been poor, the disparity will be great, and we will be confused about our identity."³⁹

In the novel, the *real self* of Susan was a woman "who fed on hundred books (psychological, anthropological, sociological)"⁴⁰, and her colleagues miss her qualities of humor, balance and sense. That is, she would not regard herself as the chattel of her husband and the family. She

would not accept the subordinate position and take her fate lying down as merely being a housewife. Indeed, she was capable of seeking after her idealized self, though it was an impossible one to be realized. However, unfortunately, Susan's submission to marriage led to her entrapment at home for years, oppressed by the trivial stuff of her family. It meant that her actual self (much depending on her given nature and social environment) could not help her actualize the real self. On the contrary, even if the real self were a possible self, it could not be actualized because she now was restricted both by her "given nature" as well as her "environment", as Lessing described "She was possessed with resentment that the seven hours of freedom in every day (during weekdays in the school term) were not free, that never not for one second, ever, was she free from the pressure of time, from having to remember this or that. She could never forget herself; never really let her herself go into forgetfulness."⁴¹

Now, for Susan, the big white house was a prison. She wanted to be free: "There's nothing I have to remind myself about, nothing I have to remind myself about, nothing I have to do in half an hour, or an hour, or two hours..."⁴² She wanted to be alone more than she was. From the perspective of Horney, now there was a great disparity between Susan's given nature and her environment, so she was confused with her identity and did not know where her belonging was in life. She felt that she was a different person and simply not herself. And the following description excerpted from the novel would reveal the Susan's schizophrenic mindset:

"She sat on a bench and tried to calm herself, looking at trees, at a brown glimpse of the river. But she was filled with tension like a panic: as if an enemy was in the garden with her. She spoke to herself severely, thus: All this is quite natural. First, I spent twelve years of my adult life working, living my own life. Then I married, and from the moment I became pregnant for the first time I signed myself over, so to speak, to other people. To the children, not for one moment in twelve years have I been alone, had time to myself."⁴³

In the novel, the long-term suffocating domestic life led to Susan's split personality, ontologically symbolizing her misconception to distinguish his ego and self—confusing her inner self and given nature. It also reflected that she was confused with her identity, whether or not there would be a real self belonging to her herself independently. The failure in self-actualization, could naturally give rise to a third self, the '*despised self*'. Even if she was aware that her real self had been

³⁷Jonathan Culler. (1997). *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press. pp.128

³⁸Bernard J. Paris. (1999). *Karen Horney's Visions of the Self*, *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Althea J. Horner June, International Karen Horney Society Essays & Excerpts.

³⁹Ibid., Bernard J Paris

⁴⁰op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.255

⁴¹op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.263

⁴²op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.265

⁴³op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.259-260

imprisoned in the domestic trivialities, her struggle for an independent life would be in vain, because the voluntary renouncement of her economic independence resulted in not only her subordinate position, but also her failure in self-actualization. In her husband's eye, there existed just a despised self. And even worse, the confusion in identity led to her maniac delusion of no safety and pressing hanger for being alone.

That is, in an environment where patriarchy prevailed, she lived a life just like a puppet harnessed by the invisible hand (patriarchy), not knowing who she was. However, unlike many other women who yielded to the social injustice, she had been struggling for freedom over the past decade. Or else, she might whole-heartedly act her role as wife, mother and housewife, enjoying her happiness in organic climax, caretaking and housework. At least it was another kind of self-actualization for women whose social position would be taken as the *secondary sex*, whether they were glad to acknowledge it or not. That is, if a woman acknowledged the social practice, her actual self could overlap with the real self, and even, if she gladly accepted her subordinate fate, the idealized self might be realized to some extent.

However, she was not the person who'd like to do that, so she psychologically rebelled. Those domestic trivialities brought her no enjoyment but imprisonment. And her disconsolate just arose from the failure of self-actualization for the physical and spiritual freedom. Though the *despised self* had emerged in other eyes, yet she didn't want to despise herself. The contrast between her inner self and social ecology led to her identity confusion. Her body was entrapped in family trivialities but her mind was dislocated and lost in self-indulgence, envisioning a Utopian freedom in social manacle. The situation also strikingly resonated with the idea of "*subject*". It is as what Jonathan Culler says "The question of the subject is 'what am I'?...And to what extent is the 'I' that I am, the 'subject', an agent who makes choices rather than has choices imposed on him or her? The English word subject already encapsulates this key theoretical problem: the subject is an actor or agent, a free subjectivity that does things, as in the 'subject of a sentence'"⁴⁴

What else, Lacan also theorizes it that the ego originates through the process wherein the infant visually recognizes its reflection in a mirror and responds to it with evident delight. In this archetypal moment the experience of visual self-recognition positively charged for the infant—that is, not trivial; the essential structure of this experience is identification, wherein the assumption of an image has transformative

impact on the subject; and this identification, which will be called 'ego', will go on to have primarily self-serving, defensive, and alienating functions."⁴⁵

For Lacan, it is the ego that makes people accept as true that I am myself and the other is other. While compared with Descartes' conclusion in the *Meditations*, which explains that madness consists in believing oneself to be other than one is ('they think they are kings when they are really quite poor, or that they are clothed in purple when they are really with covering'), Lacan indeed undermines this argument on its own grounds by asserting that it is no more crazy to believe oneself to be a king when one is not than it is to believe oneself to be oneself.⁴⁶

According to Lacan, Susan's spiritual failure to distinguish the "ego" and "other" resulted in psychological conflicts between diverse "self". In the mirror of domestic life, Susan could not find the image of herself with evident delight. That is, she found no visual self-recognition or identification. The transformative impact on Susan's mind was that the identity as a housewife was not her real self, but the *other*, while her real identity should be a happy, carefree, and independent career woman. The disparity between her current situation and ideal made her doubt whether or not it was her real self imprisoned in the boring domestic life. Since the ego didn't accept or acknowledge her current social status, or the image of self in the mirror of domestic life, the self-serving ego would unconsciously be on the defensive by means of spiritually alienating herself from the living environment. Indulgent in the delusion, what it would brought, on one hand, was consolation; on the other, apprehension to reality. The conflicts acted as the determining factor leading to her psychological collapse.

And then, if combined with Karen Horney, we could give a deeper insight into Susan's psychological plight via his three types of basic conflicts: A. *moving toward people*; B *moving against people*; and C *moving away from people*. Susan's problem belonged to the third type. And it was the third type finally leading to Susan's tragedy. The third type needs neurotic detachment. Certainly for Susan, what she need was not some occasional solitude, but long-time tranquility. Indeed, everyone who takes himself and life seriously wants to be alone at times.⁴⁷

Horney's illustration is a good hermeneutic way from psychological pathology. It's understandable that sometimes people need being alone. However, Susan's situation was far from being occasionally alone. Her hanger for being alone to some extent was the symptom of psychological corruption. When "she returned to the family, wife and mother, smiling and responsible, feeling

⁴⁴ op.cit, Jonathan Culler, pp.109

⁴⁵ Kareen Ror Malone, Stephen R.Friedlander . (2000). *The Subject of Lacan: a Lacanian Reader for Psychologists*. SUNY Press. pp.43

⁴⁶ Lorenzo Chiesa. (2007). *Subjectivity and otherness :a philosophical reading of Lacan*. MIT Press.pp.16

⁴⁷ Karen Horney. (1999). *Our Self Conflict: A Constructive Theory of Neurosis*.Psychoanalysis:17. Routledge. pp.73

as if the pressure of these people—four lively children and her husband—were a painful pressure on the surface of her skin, a hand pressing on her brain....it was like living out a prison sentence⁴⁸ And Susan also says “I need to be alone more than I am.”⁴⁹

The solitude that Susan had been hankering for was also quite different from what Karen Horney referred to, the “*meaningful solitude*”. “A desire for meaningful solitude is by no means neurotic; on the contrary most neurotics shrink from their own inner depths, and an incapacity for constructive solitude is itself a sign of neurosis. Only if there is intolerable strain in associating with people and solitude becomes primarily a means of avoiding it is the wish to be alone an indication of neurotic detachment.”⁵⁰

For Susan, the domestic trivialities had become the intolerable strain, which for most housewives seemed quite unreasonable to some extent. For the latter, even if at times they might also feel bored and suppressed, at least they would seldom be found in such a severe psychological plight. Why could Susan not get out of the plight? Phenomenologically, it was due to her dissatisfaction with boring domestic life, desiring for an escape but failed, which frustrated her psyche very much. Ontologically, the striking contrast between her and other housewives originated from her unconscious resistance or even refusal to patriarchy, especially the sexist gender role in social relations.

For her, the subordination was not accepted as naturalization and normalization; however, she didn't know how to break loose from the oppression. The last resort to her was to make a spare room at the top of the house “Mother's Room”, with a cardboard sign saying on it: PRIVATE! DO NOT DISTURB! The “Mother's Room” was for Susan's privacy.” They drew around themselves a kind of magic circle which no one may penetrate... The compulsive character of the need shows up in their reaction of anxiety when the world intrudes on them.”⁵¹ And when this privacy was invaded by the outsider, it symbolize that the last straw on the camel's back was broken. Susan's contradiction between the inner real self and the actual self would lead to her “irritation, restlessness, emptiness”⁵² And several times when seated in her garden for pursuing her solitude, she always felt that there was an enemy waiting to invade her.

Something inside her howled with impatience, with rage...And she was frightened. One day she found herself kneeling by her bed and praying: ‘Dear God, keep it away from me, keep him

away from me.’ She meant the devil, for she now thought of it, not caring if she were irrational, as some sort of demon...She saw the young-looking face which, when she drew closer, had dry lines about mouth and eyes. He was thinnish, meager in build. And he had a reddish complexion, and ginger hair. That was he—a gingery, energetic man, and he wore a reddish hairy jacket, unpleasant to the touch.”...“He was looking at her, grinning. In his hand was a long crooked stick, which he had picked off the ground, or broken off the tree above him...using the stick to stir around in the coils of blindworm or a grass snake(or some kind of snakelike creature: it was whitish and unhealthy to look at, unpleasant).”⁵³

Obviously now, the illusion symbolized that her schizophrenic psyche had been on the verge of corruption. The image of devil might be a metamorphosis of his husband, vice versa, symbolizing the ubiquitous patriarchy, because she had realized that the console from husband was just a hypocritical apology for disguising his pride in male dominance. He betrayed her faith, and she found nothing on which she could rely, but her forbearance suppressed her volcanic irruption outside.

When She “forced her mind to think about Susan (for what else did she want to be alone for?)It skipped off to thoughts of butter or school clothes. Or it thought of Mrs.Parkes. She realized that she sat listening for the movements of the cleaning woman, following here every turn, bend, thought. She followed her in her mind from kitchen to bathroom, from table to oven, and it was as if the duster, the cleaning cloth, the saucepan, were in her own hand...”⁵⁴ Susan feels that such emotions are “utterly ridiculous, that she despised, yet that nevertheless she was feeling so strongly she could not shake them off.”⁵⁵

When she began to think of herself and her life, she found it difficult for women shaking off the manacle of domestic labor, that is, the male dominance and female inferiority in labor division. Ontologically, Susan was not an exceptional character fictionalized by Lessing, but a symbol ironically reflecting a paradox in feminist movement—in a world where patriarchy prevails, even if we have won the equity in diverse social discourses, where women are nominally endowed with equal rights in law, politics, economy and culture, etc, but for man, how to get rid of their prejudice ideologically; and for women, how to get rid of the psychological inferiority.

Filled with such ridiculous emotions, Susan was trying to ask for a room in a small quiet hotel of Victoria for a relief and then a room three days a week from ten until six in Fred's Hotel—Room Number 19.”What did she do in the room? Why? Nothing at all. From the chair, when

⁴⁸ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.264

⁴⁹ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.265

⁵⁰ op.cit, Karen Horney, pp.73

⁵¹ op.cit, Karen Horney, pp.75

⁵² op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.260

⁵³ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.267

⁵⁴ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.263

⁵⁵ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.264

it had rested her, she went to the window, stretching her arms, smiling, treasuring her anonymity, to look out. She was no longer ...Susan Rawlings, mother of four, wife of Matthew, employer of Mrs Parkes and Sophie Traub...with these and those relations with friends, schoolteachers, tradesmen.⁵⁶ When Susan's secret solitude is exposed to her husband Matthew, she choose to turn on the gas in Room Number 19,"listening to the faint soft hiss of the gas that poured into the room, into her lungs, into her brain, as she drifted off into the dark river"⁵⁷

Phenomenologically, Susan's suicide suggested her failure in healing the conflict between ego and self, as Jung pointed out "The connection between ego and self is vitally important to psychic health...When the connection is broken, the result is emptiness, despair, meaninglessness and in extreme cases psychosis or suicide."⁵⁸ Ontologically, Susan's rebellion against male dominance went in vain. The suppressed emotion finally exploded in her inner self. She died in despair but accomplished her self actualization at the sacrifice of her actual self. She defended her ego by means of death.

CONCLUSION

Base on the discourses of Marxist feminists, such as Heidi Hartmann, they regard patriarchy and capitalism as the root of women's oppression,⁵⁹ the heroine Susan' death could be attributive to her unintelligent voluntary relinquish of material independence and failure in emancipating herself from the embarrassing economic subordination.

Ontologically, the novel itself through the heroine's suicidal process, investigated the women issues in a broader sense. It is worth calling a reflection on the ideology of feminism. The tensions between gender relations was reviewed and scrutinized again. Though many feminists, such as Kate Millett, hopefully point out patriarchy should be overthrown so that women can enjoy the same rights that men have through the professionalization of the care of young, the abolishment of the ideology of male supremacy and the traditional socialization.⁶⁰ However, in Heidi Hartmann's study of the patriarchy, he also points out that it will be very difficult to eradicate the sexual division of labor and male domination which have been rooted for ages. And if any, "non-ruling-class men are to be free they will have to recognize their co-optation by patriarchal capitalism and relinquish their patriarchal benefits".⁶¹ The heroine's death seemed to be a vivid illustration for the social contradiction.

And then, if Combined with the visions of *self* initiated by Karen Horney and Lacan, nominally the suicide was caused by the psychological conflicts of her inner *self*. At a deeper level, as Karen Horney points out when there is a good fit between the given nature and the environment, one can have a good self-actualization. Susan's suicide reveals how contradictory it is between the environment (social ecology actual self) and her ideological ecology (real self and idealized self). Ontologically, it also reveals the disparity between her given nature and the environment. Meanwhile, the environment imposes on the inner *self*, the given nature, suppressing or even strangling the growth of her real self. And it also helps to explain the tension between feminism and patriarchy--why feminists have been scrambling for getting rid of diverse patriarchal suppressions but failing to subvert.

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⁵⁶ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.278

⁵⁷ op.cit, Doris Lessing, pp.289

⁵⁸ Edward F. Edinger.(1992). *Ego and Archetype: Individuation and the religious function of the Psyche*, C.G.Jung Foundation Bks. Shambhala. pp.43

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⁶¹ op.cit, Kate Millett.

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