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Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen": A Feminist Parody

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Abstract: *Diversity of perspectives is one essential practice that has characterised feminism from its inception. Intra-waves critiques abound, drawing in even reluctant feminists, those who reject the limitations of pigeonholing, like Doris Lessing. This article examines Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen" (1978) in the context of another short story, Virginia Woolf's "The Legacy" (1940), as a case of parody. Conducting a textual analysis, the study aims to reveal a parallel thematic structure in the two texts, deliberately managed by Lessing for the purpose of parodying Woolf. A comparative examination reveals an aspect of the paradoxical relationship Lessing has established between herself as woman and writer and her precursor Woolf; a relationship simultaneously connoting influence, similarity, difference, and subversion. With suicide featuring in both texts, the study also addresses Lessing's handling of the question and how such a drastic choice serves or subverts the cause of women at large; for it has to be interpreted, as presented in both short stories, in a way to fit in the framework of the familiar feminist discourse of victimization and empowerment.*

Keywords: *Doris Lessing, Virginia Woolf, parody, feminism, influence*

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) is known for her rebellious spirit, defying and breaking conventions and even undermining values normally deemed universal, such as the value and concept of motherhood. Confessedly influenced by another innovative spirit in the modern British world of letters, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Lessing sometimes identifies with her, and in other times challenges that influence and subvertes certain aspects of Woolf's legacy. "With Woolf," Lessing writes, "we are up against a knot, a tangle of unlikeable prejudices, some of her time, some personal;" adding, "She is a writer some people love to hate" ("Sketches, 2003, para. 9) Lessing throws light on certain 'negative' aspects in Woolf's writings, both private or public, such as the latter's anti-Semitism, undermining its seriousness by comparing her presentation of an admirable Jewess as one of the characters in her novel *Between the Acts* (Lessing, 2003, para. 2). Lessing seems to invoke an image of Woolf as idiosyncratic; an image that she herself can identify with. There is, for instance, her own quarrel with the Swedish Academy, the Nobel Prize supervising institution, which waited till her eighty-eighth birthday to grant her the honour; an incident that somehow indicates how anti-establishment (in a universal sense) she was. On the other hand, in her writings, Lessing pays tribute to Woolf in many ways; she "does deliberately invoke Woolf in *The Golden Notebook* (1962) by naming her woman artist Anna Wulf (Scott, 1997, para. 1).

Taking into consideration this special tie, an amalgam of sisterhood and self-hatred, one may search for the possible forms it manifests itself into in Lessing's literary works in particular. In this article two short stories are juxtaposed: "The Legacy" (1940) by Woolf and "To Room Nineteen" (1978) by Lessing. Although several critics discuss similarities and analyse the connections between the two writers, this article will approach its subject differently. The two works are examined with an eye on Lessing's text as a kind of a 'rejoinder' written in response to the Woolfian text. And while one should resist the tempting notions of

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biographical interpretation, for both writers are famous for mingling fact with fiction, the main argument here is that Lessing's short story constitutes a parody of Woolf's. However, both texts present microcosms with female protagonists who share many things.

Events in "The Legacy" are mainly narrated as seen through the eyes of a husband who reflects on the strange circumstances of his wife's death in a road accident. As if she anticipated her death, she left souvenirs tagged with her friends' names; for him she left her diary of fifteen volumes, coinciding with the fifteen years of their marriage. Through this diary, the wife is brought to life, given a voice, and subsequently controls the action. The short story is a gemlike microcosm of Woolf's world. There is politics and ideology: communism, revolution, class consciousness, criticism of capitalism; also there is marriage and its social obligations, the husband-wife relationship, and woman's position and its limitations; with plenty of ambiguity concerning issues, such as the wife's fidelity, the possible cause(s) of the her suicide, and whether it was to save her husband's reputation or to "join" a radical "lover" in death. Was there really a lover? Or a political agitator? Uncertainty also surrounds the purpose(s) of her posthumous confession in her legacy, the memoirs. This is a modernist text full of gaps, deletions, and questions with no possibility of detecting answers from within it. Yet, the narrator satirises and ridicules the husband in a Browningesque manner; a Victorian touch suiting the husband's mentality.

"To Room Nineteen" also ends in the wife's suicide, but the intriguing ambiguity in Woolf's text is gone and replaced with nothingness, emptiness. The total disintegration of causality subverts the assertive beginning about the "intelligent" nature of this marriage. So goes the whole narrative: every good thing, like having lovely children, and the freedom the wife enjoys to choose to stay with them or go back to work, leaving them with a governess. She is even given the choice of divorce, unlike Angela in "The Legacy" who is married to a prominent politician to whose career a divorce can do a lot of damage. Infidelity in "To Room Nineteen" is certain but on the husband's side; yet it is made little of because of the "intelligent" and modern nature of the couple; the husband confesses a one-night tryst and the wife forgives.

The sheer irrationality of Susan, in Lessing's short story, having chosen and built a sort of life full in every sense, yet throwing it away bit by bit for no obvious, logical reason, although we the readers see inside her mind and are aware of every whim or sensation she experiences. The author shows no sympathy, and expects no sympathy from the reader for her heroine; in fact, the appeal is to the reader's sense of disapproval, or even disgust. The readers' impatience and frustration with this character grow as they reach the scene when Susan stands outside her own house watching her sick child whom she left in the care of strangers:

> But then, just as 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: […] she walked, or rather skipped, over to the child, swung her up, and let her fall into her lap at the same moment she sat herself. She said "Hopla! Hopla! Molly . . ." and began stroking the dark untidy young head that Molly laid on her shoulder for comfort.
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> *WelI.* … Susan blinked the tears of farewell out of her eyes, and went quietly up through the house to her bedroom. (n.d. 712)

The totally unexplained negativity creates an inferior image of women; feminists cannot blame society in this case: what prevents Susan from assuming charge of her own household, of her sick child instead of shedding tears like a helpless oppressed person? After all, she is the mistress of the house and those strangers work for her; she gives the orders. Suicide seems here an anti-feminist move: it is the escapism of a woman who has made good and successful choices in life, but we see her throw them all away. It is significant that as she commits suicide by gas she dreams of drowning in the river. One cannot help thinking of Woolf's own suicide.

A comparative reading starting with the assumption that "The Legacy" is the hypotext is bound to reveal Lessing's attempt to re-construct its plot in a grotesque-mirror image. Opting for parody as the strategy of analysis can be justified in two ways: the first has to do with the parallel structures of the texts and the many obvious echoes and similarities included in Lessing's. The second is the striking absence of logic, depth, and causality in the behaviour of Lessing's heroine. One may argue that this is only to be expected in an early postmodernist text; one that may be regarded as of those defining texts of what postmodernism in literature is like. Parody, intertextual by nature, is a definitive feature of postmodernism; employing foregrounding, ridicule, and 'travesty' – a term favoured by Bakhtin, who postulates that parody sets up relationships to the other's words, and transforms these relationships "from reverence to merciless ridicule" (Bakhtin, 1981, 113); exactly what Lessing does to Woolf's text. Of the many examples Bakhtin chooses to illustrate his idea is Pushkin's description of Onegin: "'A Muscovite in the cloak of a Childe Harold', … 'Is he not really a parody?'" (ibid., 80), in which one discerns the elements of intertextuality, similarity, opposition, and hierarchy. Parody is like satire where a hierarchy is established and where the later text is positioned vis a vis its precursor, not as equal, rather as critique coming from an authoritative place. Ridicule and travesty also bear the stamp of an attitude of superiority. Lessing finds a lot to criticise in Woolf; she paradoxically writes, "We all wish our idols and exemplars were perfect; a pity she was such a wasp, such a snob - and all the rest of it, but love has to be warts and all" (2003, para. 12).

In his comprehensive study of parody, Simon Dentith illustrates these principles in the following example he sights from *Middlemarch*: "By the mere repetition of another's words, their intonation exaggerated but their substance remaining the same, one utterance, Brooke's, is transformed by another, held up to public gaze, and subjected to ridicule" (2000, 1). In "To Room Nineteen" the substance seems similar to that in "The Legacy", but certain acts are pushed to the extreme, exaggerated, unhinged, having lost meaningfulness and logicality and turned into grotesque, absurd gestures. The ridicule is sensed from the first sentence:

> This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence: the Rawlings' marriage was grounded in intelligence […] It was typical of this couple that they had a son first, then a daughter, then twins, son and daughter. Everything right, appropriate, and what everyone would wish for, if they could choose. (n.d. 657)

The ironic description of this family at the beginning gives prominence to their being "balanced and sensible" with an "infallible sense of *choosing* right" (Italics original; ibid., 659). They were happy. "They had everything they had wanted and had planned for" (ibid., 660). Nevertheless, intelligence is one major thing lacking in the case of Susan; her lack of self-knowledge evidences that; as well as her refusal to take control of her life, or her inability to confront her demons. Gilbert Clandon, the husband in Woolf's short

story, does not show signs of much intelligence either, especially when it come to understanding his wife. The fact that the latter, who died in 'an accident', had left "some little token of her affection" (1943, 107), a ring or necklace tagged for each of her friends, does not tell him anything. "Yet how strange it was" is all that comes to his mind, "that she had left everything in such order – a little gift of some sort for every one of her friends" (ibid., 107).

In an article in *The Guardian*, Lessing throws more light on her attitude towards Woolf, who, she admits has had such an influence on her and on other women writers as well. She thinks it is hard for her as a writer to be objective about Woolf because of that influence (2003, para. 10). The problem is to find out what can be the opposite of 'objective' used here: a biased critic, a resentful colleague, an admirer, or a willful interpreter? Is Lessing suffering from a complex mother-daughter relationship? Harold Bloom's psychoanalytical construct in his *Anxiety of Influence* may well provide an answer to the question, and throw some light on the phases an ephebe, in this case Lessing, may go through before he/she can confront their precursor. It may take a long time before the ephebe grows out of that 'influence' and becomes able to speak about it; as Lessing does here.

Helpful indeed would be Bloom's theory of influence and the many transformations such an anxiety assumes following an Oedipal (or Elektral?) pattern, in which the ephebe struggles to overcome his strong precursor. At one stage Lessing might have assimilated the elements of Woolf's work which have been "central to feminist theory and politics: her explorations of the gendered relationship between the private and the public sphere; her model of the mother– daughter relationship as a paradigm for a female literary tradition; and her accounts of men's and women's different relationships to their culture" (Marcus, 2004, 1). The mother-daughter paradigm is of special interest here as it may indicate another dimension in rewriting the short story; namely, the intent to parody Virginia Woolf herself, leading to self-parody; thus Lessing confirms to some extent Woolf's belief that we think back through our mothers if we are women" (Rubenstein, 1994, 16).

Lessing's self-perception is as paradoxical as her opinion of Woolf, discerned especially in the former's cache of private letters posthumously published. In Bloomian terms, she could be deprecating her idol and precursor, by stressing the negative aspects Woolf herself has been careful to hide from public eye, for the purpose of making it easier (for Lessing herself) to identify with her precursor. Thus, Lessing, who has never been inhibited by society or convention, confirms her own choices in life in an article entitled "Sketches from Bohemia" (2003), referring to fresh, previously unpublished notes by Woolf. Lessing writes, "So this writing [Woolf's] here is often unregenerate Woolf, early work pieces, and some might argue they would have been better left undiscovered. Not I: it is always instructive to see what early crudities a writer has refined into balance - into maturity" (2003, para. 2).

If we accept the postulate that Lessing's 1978 text is a postmodern commentary on Woolf's modernist urtext, then we can see in it what Terry Eagleton explicates in his discussion of postmodernism: It caricatures, and rewrites tragedies into farces; its depthless, styleless, dehistoricised surfaces

> are not meant to signify alienation, for the very concept of alienation must secretly posit a dream of authenticity which postmodernism finds quite unintelligible. Those flattened surfaces and hollowed interiors are not 'alienated' because there is no longer any subject to be alienated and nothing to be

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> alienated from, 'authenticity' having been less rejected than merely forgotten. (Eagleton, 2000, 361)

In some ways, this is exactly what Lessing does to Woolf's modernist text: she flattens it, hollows its structure, and makes it quite stubborn in its resistance to interpretation. The main character displays no conflict or serious sense of loss. Even concepts with metaphysical connotations, such as 'confession' and 'forgiveness' are rejected. In her article Lessing will not hear of Woolf's aristocratic refinement of high modernism; displaying at the same time the postmodernist taste for pop culture by insisting on foregrounding vulgar and the obscene language coming from the latter's aristocratic lips, not in her published writing, but in real life (2003).

A question presents itself here concerning the ridicule-fun-travesty element that some may expect in parody. In her *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon argues against this belief and postulates that parody is mimicry that does not necessarily have to be toned with laughter and ridicule. What is really essential, according to Hutcheon, is for it to possess a critical edge. Bakhtin, on the other hand, puts so much emphasis on the ridiculing nature: "All these parodies on genres and generic styles ('languages') enter the great and diverse world of verbal forms that ridicule the straightforward, serious word in all its generic guises" (1981, 52). He nevertheless adds a statement that separates ridicule from parody; they are not bound by definition. The forms of ridicule, he opines, are not restricted to parody and travesty; by the same token one may say that parody does not always have to be ridiculing.

Another critic, Simon Dentith, refers to this polymorphic nature of parody, "Parodic imitation of another's words is merely one possibility among the whole range of rejoinders that make up human discourse, and parodic imitation can itself take many forms" (2000, 2) He also sees parody as the creation of a significant dialogue with the past, to be introduced playfully, while keeping a critical distance, into the present world.

> So far I have been stressing the importance of parody as rejoinder, or mocking response to the word of another. But many parodies draw on the authority of precursor texts to attack, satirise, or just playfully to refer to elements of the contemporary world. (Dentith, 2000, 9)

In light of these critical opinions and theorisations, "To Room Nineteen" can be comfortably read as a postmodern rewriting of "The Legacy". The aristocratic happily married couple in the latter have this working-class intruder disrupting their life, like the serpent in paradise. Angela, Woolf's heroine, abides by the demands of her social position and class and rejects the temptation, left undisclosed, but it involves leaving her husband and paradise and joining the radical B.M. or his 'revolution'. On the other hand, Susan Rawlings' imagination in "To Room Nineteen" creates her own devils in her Richmond paradise. Lessing is ridiculing the way her heroine thinks which contradicts the basis on which her seemingly perfect life is established: "This is the story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence: the Rawlings' marriage was grounded in intelligence" (n.d., 657). This is the key element in this sad but not tragic narrative: if intelligence fails, what is left? Stupidity. Lessing gradually introduces the stages of Susan's failure of intelligence: first there is self-deception; she pretends to forgive her husband for having slept with another woman,

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> The whole thing was not important. After all, years ago they had joked: Of course I'm not going to be faithful to you, no one can be faithful to one other person for a whole lifetime. (And there was the word "faithful" –stupid, all these words [including 'forgive' and 'confess'], stupid, belonging to a savage old world.) (Lessing, n.d., 664)

Then, she becomes detached, moving into isolation emotionally and even physically, by spending her days in a dingy hotel room, where, again, she pretends to have peace away from the people in her life, her own family; then she moves on to split mind, to lying, eventually to suicide. All the time the reader witnesses her deterioration into irrationality; all the time the narrator is in Susan's head, watching and describing to us the absurdity of her needs, self-deprivation and self-destruction.

Why should a woman be so fragile? Why should a husband's wrong (good and loving though he is) derail her life and destroy the precious things she has such as motherhood, children, a beautiful home and rich life both materially and (potentially) emotionally? Angela in Woolf's narrative does not enjoy all these things, which makes her irrational behavior and fragility less shocking; while Susan, the mother of four lovely children, married to an accommodating husband, makes through her illogical erratic behaviour a statement against women which feminists have been working hard to dispel. The binary opposition of rational/irrational, intellectual/emotional, thinking/impulsive, strong/weak, practical/impractical, is confirmed in "The Legacy" and foregrounded and exaggerated in "To Room Nineteen". Yet, through parody, Lessing eschews and ridicules this type. She acts as a critic of feminist trends that blame society and portray woman as the victim of circumstances and even nature. Why suicide? Why the hypocrisy? Why the escapism? The extreme self-centeredness? Cannot a woman be practical? Honest? Responsible? Courageous?

Lessing may also be parodying Woolf herself. One can only think of the title she has chosen for her work, "To Room Nineteen", which echoes the highly significant title by Woolf; namely, *A Room of One's Own*, one of the inauguratory texts of feminism and her strongest plea for women's rights. There she demands a private space and financial independence for women especially those who wish to pursue writing careers. She writes, "I must ask you to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window looking across people's hats and vans and motor-cars to other windows, and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters WOMEN AND FICTION, but no more" (1977, 30). Lessing, by contrast, ridicules the whole idea as a mere insane excuse: she gives her Susan a room of her own in the house, and then another room far from the whole family, and yet she does not know what to do with it. Lessing objects to the idea that a mere place can solve a woman's problems. "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, n.d., 703). Susan must be deceiving herself when she says to her husband, "It's the place where I'm happy. In fact, without it I don't exist." She is actually talking about a sordid hotel room rented by the hour. Room nineteen, dirty, insignificant, ironically replaces the room she has previously prepared for herself in her beautiful house, which the children name "Mother's Room".

It is interesting as well to compare how Lessing introduces the wife's fictitious lover, where the idea of infidelity seems bot to the husband and to Susan herself more natural and less scary than madness.

> But how to leave him believing she was dying because of a man – because of the fascinating publisher Michael Plant? […] If he wanted to believe she had a lover, he would believe it. […] [A]nd what hypocrisy to sit here worrying about the children, when she was going to leave them because she had not got the energy to stay. (ibid., 721)

Woolf's Angela dies and with her dies the truth about her relationship with B.M. who is a real lower-class man. Her husband is left to think that she has actually committed suicide because her lover has. The question remains: What do women really need according to these writers? Freedom? From what? Susan has been totally free, she has already delegated the usual housewives' and mothers' chores to two other helpers. Her husband, realising the mysterious crisis she is going through, suggests that she gives up cooking, the only activity she is hanging to. She refuses to go back to her old job (after children have gone to school) to gain some financial independence, if this is her problem. It is a kind of "crazy", undefined freedom (and Lessing uses plenty of such terms throughout the story); by committing suicide, it becomes freedom from the burden of life itself.

Lessing also parodies herself: looking into her biography, she has made many excuses to people around her for abandoning her own children. But, to be accurate, she has been trying to demonstrate her own existential feminist approach: to have total emancipation, and be non-apologetic about it. To see hypocrisy and weakness where others see respect, morality or consideration for other's feelings and rights. Her ultimate revulsion is at women being victims, "How we do love female victims; oh, how we do love them" (Lessing, 2003, para. 6). Her heroine, Susan, is not portrayed as a real victim; rather a weak and whimsical mind, the Woolfian type, especially her heroine, Angela.

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