

I dentity Formation and the Clash between Individual Identity and Multiple Social Roles in Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen”

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Abstract

It is not easy to make a certain definition of identity because it is a complex and ambiguous concept. In a broad sense, it is the combination of all integral agents that make up the self. These agents consist of gender, nationality, race, culture, social status, age, religion, and so on. In their struggle to discover their self-identity, people may regard some of these elements as more important and distinctive than others. Therefore, some differences are tolerated while some others are marked by people and it is this everlasting classification process that constitutes their identity. In this paper, Lessing’s short story “To Room Nineteen” is analyzed in terms of the identity problems of the protagonist who clearly has difficulty in defining her place in life as an individual. The ongoing identity formation process of the protagonist and the events and developments that influence this process are analyzed.

Keywords

Identity, individual identity, identity clash, social roles.

There are two basic contrasting theories which describe the formation of identity: essentialist and non-essentialist views. Essentialist theory regards identity as something internal, so it is stable and has certain characteristics which do not change throughout time; it is “a product of minds, cognition, the psyche, or socialization practices” (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, 9). Non-essentialist theory, which is also known as social constructionism, defines identity as a socially constructed and ongoing process so identity is not fixed; rather it is flexible, fluid and subjected to change throughout time. It points out that identity is relational and takes form through its relation to ‘the others’ (Woodward 1997, 26). Recent postmodernist theories favour non-essentialist understanding of identity (Cerulo 1997, 391). Therefore in this paper identity is analyzed considering the non-essentialist perspectives on identity. With regard to these views, identity is taken as a process which is incessantly changing and is being shaped both by internal and external factors. People assume multiple identities simultaneously accordingly with their status in life or their world-views, accordingly with their benefits or sometimes those identities are just attributed to them by others. Identity issue has always been a matter of concern but especially in modern times, because of the changing life styles, it has been a much more important topic that is extensively studied in literature. It is an important concern in Lessing’s story, as well, along with the other issues it deals with such as marriage, gender roles and psychology. Lessing presents the identity formation process of a woman by depicting her inner conflicts as a result of the changes she is subjected to after her marriage.

“To Room Nineteen” follows the story of a self-accomplished woman, Susan Rawlings, from her marriage to her suicide. It is narrated from Susan’s point of view but in third person in order to stress her self-alienated state. It begins with a stress on the ‘intelligence’ in her marriage as it is based on not only mutual love but also reason, yet it is “a failure in intelligence” (Lessing 1963, 267). There is every reason for Susan and her husband Mathew to have a happy relationship that would last for a life time: both of them have well-paid jobs

and are well-educated, intelligent, sensible people. In the first two years of their marriage, they have a splendid life. Later, Susan gives up her career to take care of the four children they have over the years. The narrator describes their life: “they lived with their four children in their gardened house in Richmond and were happy. They had everything they had wanted and had planned for” (Lessing 1963, 268). However, throughout time Susan starts feeling trapped in a domestic life which leaves no space for her individual identity. She is well aware of the fact that she has everything to be happy, yet she feels overwhelmed by her responsibilities and finds no escape other than death in the end.

Identity formation is described as “a complex and dynamic process; answers to the question ‘Who am I?’ evolve from diverse relationships, exposures, education, and other defining experiences throughout an individual’s life” (Jackson 2010, 235). Hence, every single change in one’s life has direct influences on his or her identity and leads to constant questioning of one’s own station in life. Susan’s life is introduced with many changes by the marriage and the children. When they first get married, they mutually decide not to make one of them move in to the other’s bachelor flat and they move in to a new place just in order to avoid a kind of personality submission. Hence, the changes first start with a new place to live, yet it is tolerable for her at the beginning as a total submission of personality is not required. However, with the birth of children, she feels that she has to leave her job in order to take care of them better. As a result, she gives up her economic independency which has been a part of her identity for a very long time. Susan blames nobody for this situation; she and Mathew “knew of the hidden resentments and deprivations of the woman who has lived her own life – and above all, has earned her own living – and is now dependent on a husband for outside interests and mores” (Lessing 1963, 270). Therefore, they are both obliged to assume the socially ascribed roles as a man and a woman. Gilman explains these roles attributed by the society and defines them: “Men and women have different spheres in life. To men belong the creation and management of the state, and the financial

maintenance of the home and family: To women belong the physical burden of maternity, and the industrial management of the home and family; these duties require all their time and strength” (Gilman 2005, 98). Hence, it is not only Susan who takes over responsibility but also Mathew as the husband and the father of the family. When Susan complains about her having many duties at home, Mathew reminds this fact to her: “I go to the office, and I have to be there at ten-all right, half past ten, sometimes. And I have to do this or that, don’t I? Then I’ve got to come home at a certain time – I don’t mean it, you know I don’t– but if I’m not going to be back home at six I telephone you’- When can I ever say to myself: I have nothing to be responsible for in the next six hours?” (Lessing 1963, 281). Susan feels that he is right and wonders why he is not as much disturbed by the situation as her. As the reader does not have an access to Mathew’s thoughts, this curiosity is invoked in the reader’s mind, as well. However, with the revealment of his affairs later on, it may be assumed that his way of dealing with an overwhelming life has been sexual satisfaction or different sexual excitements like having a group sex which he demands from his wife, as well.

Susan feels trapped in a life to which she feels alien and questions herself about the reasons of her and her husband’s insistence to hold on to their current station in life. First thing that occurs to her is their children but then she decides “children can’t be a centre of life and a reason for being. They can be a thousand things that are delightful, interesting, satisfying, but they can’t be a wellspring to live from. Or they shouldn’t be” (Lessing 1963, 269). Her final decision is that the reason of their struggle is their love for each other although she hesitates a bit at first:

Their love for each other? Well, that was nearest it. If this wasn’t a centre, what was? Yes, it was around this point, their love, that the whole extraordinary structure revolved. For extraordinary it

certainly was. Both Susan and Matthew had moments of thinking so, of looking in secret disbelief at this thing they had created: marriage, four children, big house, garden, charwomen, friends, cars ... and this thing, this entity of it had come into existence, been blown into being out of nowhere, because Susan loved Matthew and Matthew loved Susan. Extraordinary. So that was the central point, the wellspring. (Lessing 1963, 269)

As the above quotation clearly exhibits, she regards their love for each other as the centre of their life. Hence, an emotional trauma is inevitable when she learns about her husband's unfaithfulness to their marriage. Mathew confesses to her that he has had a sexual relationship with a girl. Hearing about this deceit at the very time when she is materially and spiritually dependent on her husband, Susan is paralyzed emotionally. The narrator explains Susan's reaction and feelings upon the confession of her husband simply as: "Susan forgave him, of course. Except that forgiveness is hardly the word. Understanding, yes. But if you understand something, you don't forgive it" (Lessing 1963, 271). As it is clear, although Susan seems to have accepted the situation easily and does not let this affair ruin her and her marriage, she actually is deeply affected. Here, the narrator is in her psyche: he reflects her inner conflicts about the situation. Susan, after dwelling on the matter for a while, appears to be convinced that his one night affair means nothing for both Susan and Mathew; after all they are married and his 'body and soul' belongs to her. Nevertheless the narrator puts a question mark here by asking: "In that case why did Susan feel (though luckily not for longer than a few seconds at a time) as if life had become a desert, and that nothing mattered, and that her children were not her own?" (Lessing 1963, 272). Although here it is claimed that these feelings have disappeared in seconds, they are actually only repressed temporarily. Susan often experiences these kinds of inner anxieties later on that occasion. All these changes in her life shape her identity: she starts out her married life as a

totally independent and sensible individual and as the time passes she becomes economically dependent on her husband and begins to act more frequently from intuition than from reason.

Susan is surrounded by different social roles as a wife, mother, and mistress of the house and all the duties she assumes with these different identities overwhelm her. She wants to have some time for herself; she is unable to claim a place for her individual identity. However, when the little children start school and she becomes able to spare more time for herself, her anxieties grow worse. Woodward suggests that in these types of socially constructed identities representation is the key factor and identifies its significance: "Representations produce meanings through which we can make sense of our experience and of who we are" (Woodward 1997, 14). Along with the same line with what Woodward suggests Susan has unconsciously defined herself only through these representations of herself: she has been the wife and the mother of her children. Now that the children are not home during the day, she feels lonely and empty because her relation to the world has long been through her motherhood although it has been exceedingly overwhelming. Her inner conflicts combined with the feeling of loneliness are embodied in the external world as the 'enemy'. She claims that she feels the presence of it in the garden when the children are not there with her: "When I go into the garden, that is, if the children are not there, I feel as if there is an enemy there waiting to invade me" (Lessing 1963, 276). The problem is that she has been having difficulties in adjusting herself to the changes that has been taking in her life since her marriage. However, she is quite capable of comprehending her problems and analyzing the underlying reasons of her anxieties: "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. So now I have to learn to be myself again" (Lessing 1963, 275).

Susan's behaviors which have become incomprehensible to Mathew anymore harm their relationship. Mathew starts having an affair with a woman whom they both have known prior to their marriage. Susan gradually withdraws herself from her family. First, they decide to make her a room, Mother's room, where she would be allowed to have some privacy but she cannot find peace there as she is still a wife and a mother there. Hence, she starts spending her free time regularly at a cheap hotel room, Room 19, on her own and keeps this fact from her family. Being almost sure that her husband has been having a serious affair for a while, Susan feels like a stranger to him. She unconsciously regards both the marriage and the children as 'bondage' (Lessing 1963, 281). The narrator passes on her confession about how happy and relieved she feels when she is alone in that hotel room:

She was no longer Susan Rawlings, mother of four, wife of Matthew, employer of Mrs. Parkes and of Sophie Traub; with these and those relations with friends, school-teachers, tradesmen. She no longer was mistress of the big white house and garden, owning clothes suitable for this and that activity or occasion. She was Mrs Jones, and she was alone, and she had no past and no future. Here I am, she thought, after all these years of being married and having children and playing those roles of responsibility – and I'm just the same. Yet there have been times I thought that nothing existed of me except the roles that went with being Mrs. Matthew Rawlings. Yes, here I am, and if I never saw any of my family again, here I would still be. (Lessing 1963, 293)

The above paragraph illustrates how much she is tired of her social roles. She can neither give up any of them nor submit herself to these identities totally. Woodward's suggestion explains the conflict Susan experiences: "The complexity of modern life requires us to assume different identities – but these different identities may conflict. In our personal lives we may experience

tensions between our different identities when what is required by one may infringe upon the demands of another” (Woodward 1997, 23). Susan suffers from the clash of her identities. On the one hand she is a mother and a wife and has responsibilities towards her family; on the other hand she is an individual and has feelings. When she learns about her husband’s deceit, she is deeply affected, yet she pretends as though she has forgiven him because of her responsibilities as a wife and a mother. She wants to act reasonably to save her marriage disregarding her inner feelings: “There was no need to use the dramatic words ‘unfaithful,’ ‘forgive,’ and the rest: intelligence forbade them. Intelligence barred, too, quarrelling, sulking, anger, silences of withdrawal, accusations and tears. Above all, intelligence forbids tears” (Lessing 1963, 273). It is actually not intelligence that keeps her from emotional outbursts but her duties towards her family. She represses her feelings in order not to sacrifice her marriage: “A high price has to be paid for the happy marriage with four healthy children in the large white gardened house” (Lessing 1963, 273).

She seems to lead two different lives with different identities: one is fake and full of her social identities; and the other is real with her individual self in it. At home, she is mere representations of her roles: “answering to Mummy, Mother, Susan, Mrs. Rawlings” (Lessing 1963, 294). In ‘Room Nineteen’, she is no more than herself and does not have to act some roles. As a result, she feels like an ‘imposter’. Even when she is at home lying in her bed with her husband, she feels that her real self is actually not there: “Susan, or the being who readily and improbably to the name Susan, was not there: she was in Fred’s Hotel, in Paddington, waiting for the easing hours of solitude to begin” (Lessing 1963, 294). As it is clear from these remarks, she does not feel present in her action; moreover she feels alien even to her own name. She experiences a kind of self-alienation which is described as “an inadequate power and a lack of presence in what one does, a failure to identify with one’s own actions and desires and to take part in one’s own life” (Jaeggi 2014 [2005], 155).

Susan's inner problems do not only derive from the conflict between her individual identity and her social identities; it also derives from her failure in self-discovery. She does not know herself and what she exactly wants from life and other people. For example, she complains about the multitude of her responsibilities in the house and how much the family is dependent on her and she claims that she wants to enjoy some solitude: "an absolute solitude, where no one knew her or cared about her" (Lessing 1963, 286). However, when her husband suggests her to have a holiday alone, she is startled by the idea of having a holiday without him. Moreover, when she comes back home from that hotel room and sees everybody in the house doing well without her she does not feel happy for that they do not need her anymore, instead she even becomes a bit gloomy: "It was a sensation that should have been frightening: to sit at her own bedroom window, listening to Sophie's rich young voice sing German nursery songs to her child, listening to Mrs. Parkes clatter and move below, and to know that all this had nothing to do with her: she was already out of it" (Lessing 1963, 298-299). As it can be inferred from her remarks, she actually wants to be needed and her desire for solitude is an unconscious reaction both to the deceit of her husband and to the separation from her kids.

Susan always chooses to act how she is supposed to act and say what she is supposed to say; she does not use her free will and claim an individual identity rather she only submits herself to her roles. When Mathew learns about the hotel room where she spends most of her time during the day and asks this to Susan, she again plays her role and tells him that she has an affair which Mathew expects to hear. For a moment she imagines herself telling him the truth: "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" (Lessing 1963, 299). However, she is not strong enough to be herself and pretends to have a totally different identity. Her lie leaves her in a more difficult situation:

while she expects him to propose a divorce, he offers her to ‘make a foursome’. She, not surprisingly, acts her role and accepts his offer. Although even the idea of such a sexual relationship repulses her, she pretends Mathew as though she thinks that it was a great idea and thinks to herself: “So nice she was saddled with a lover, and he had a mistress! How ordinary, how reassuring, how jolly! And now they would make a foursome of it, and go about to theatres and restaurants ... No, there was nothing to stop the four of them developing the most intricate relationship of civilised tolerance” (Lessing 1963, 301). The next morning, Susan makes her decision and chooses to free herself from all the social roles she has assumed: “The demons were not here. They had gone forever, because she was buying her freedom from them” (Lessing 1963, 303). Here, the demons are the embodied forms of her conflicts which derive from her failure in establishing an individual identity for herself.

Susan has been in a search for identity throughout her marriage. Elaine Showalter defines three major phases which subcultures go through in their identity search: imitation, protest and self-discovery. Susan, as a woman dependent on her husband financially, can be regarded to be a member of a subculture and the phases Showalter explains perfectly describes the stages Susan experiences but the last one:

First, there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. (Showalter 2009, 11)

Showalter also explains that women writers go through these phases during their writing process, yet she prefers ‘an appropriate terminology’ to describe

their situation. She calls them as: feminine, feminist and female. In feminine phase, they cannot go beyond imitating the existing models of men. In feminist phase they do not accept the adjusted rules imposed by men and society and seek for something new, creative, and original. Finally, in the female phase, they realize themselves and achieve their goals. In the story, Susan, not as a writer but as a character, goes through these stages although she fails in the last one. At first she accepts her attributed roles and does what she is supposed to do without protesting but later she demands more time for herself and gradually abandons her duties to Mrs. Parkes, the charwoman, and the au pair girl whom they have hired later on to look after the children. Therefore, she starts out as a feminine, becomes a feminist, yet she cannot achieve to be a female. She is unable to accomplish herself in the end; instead she prefers to annihilate herself.

In conclusion, the story reveals the identity formation process of a woman after her marriage and the conflict between her individual identity and her various social roles. She has great difficulty in adapting herself to her new life which requires a total dedication of herself to others. She has internalized her social roles to such an extent that she cannot exist out of these roles; neither can she continue living attached to them. Therefore, she finds no escape but death: she fails to recognize and present herself as an individual apart from everything.

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Öz

Lessing'in "To Room Nineteen" Eserinde Kişilik Yapılanması ve Bireysel Kişilik ile Çoklu Sosyal Rollerin Çatışması

Kişilik karışık ve muğlak bir kavram olduğu için kesin bir tanımlamasını yapmak kolay değildir. Geniş anlamda, benliği oluşturan tüm bütünlüyci faktörlerin birleşimidir. Bu faktörler cinsiyet, milliyet, ırk, kültür, sosyal statü, yaş, din ve benzerlerini içine alır. İnsanlar kişiliklerini bulma çabalarında bahsedilen bazı faktörlerin diğerlerinden daha önemli ve ayırt edici olduğunu düşünebilirler. Bu yüzden, kişiler tarafından, bazı farklılıklar tolere edilirken bazı diğer farklılıklar dikkate alınır ve kişiliği oluşturan da bu bitmek bilmeyen sınıflandırma sürecidir. Bu makalede, Lessing'in kısa hikayesi "To Room Nineteen" (19 Numaralı Oda), birey olarak hayattaki yerini belirlemede zorluk çeken başkarakterin yaşadığı kişilik problemleri açısından incelenmektedir. Başkarakterin devam eden kişilik oluşumu süreci ve bu süreci etkileyen olaylar ve gelişmeler incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Kişilik, bireysel kişilik, kişilik çatışması, sosyal roller.