

# Replaceable Women in Patriarchy: A Reason for Susan's Suicide in Doris Lessing's *To Room Nineteen*

Xiaojing Gao \*

College of Arts, Shantou University, Shantou, China

\* Corresponding Author Email: 21xjgao1@stu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** As an outstanding short story demonstrating female plights, *To Room Nineteen* of Doris Lessing discloses the oppression patriarchy exerts on women by describing the tragedy of a middle-aged female Susan restricted by patriarchal norms, owing to which the story is valuable for research. To have a deeper insight into the reasons for Susan's suicide and more comprehensive understanding of the oppressive mechanism that male-dominant culture exercises on females, based on the focus of previous studies on Susan's identity crisis, this paper attempts to supplement them by delving into four peripheral female characters who are short of attention yet: Mrs Parkes, Sophie Traub, Myra Jenkins and Phil Hunt, and through the analysis of their words and actions, this paper argues that they replace the patriarchy-constructed identities of Susan (a homemaker, a mother, a mistress and a sexual partner), which is an important contributor to Susan's identity problems and subsequently her tragic ending. Regarding this phenomenon, this paper proposes a concept called replaceability, which means that the patriarchy-manufactured identities of females are replaceable, and finds that replaceability is an oppressive manoeuvre that patriarchy utilizes to govern women and guarantee the supremacy of males. Finally, this paper draws a conclusion that replaceability is a crucial factor resulting in Susan's suicide.

**Keywords:** Doris Lessing; *To Room Nineteen*; Identity; Patriarchy; Replaceability.

## 1. Introduction

*To Room Nineteen*, a short story written by Doris Lessing and published in 1963, depicts a middle-aged woman Susan's process of self-discovery [1, 2] and revolt against patriarchal constraints imposed on females [3, 4], from which the living hardships of women brought by patriarchy are demonstrated. Therefore, to analyze how patriarchy results in Susan's suicide in *To Room Nineteen* is significant because it can give us an insight into the severe oppression male-dominant culture inflicts on women.

Existing studies deemed that patriarchy was the major cause of Susan's suicide and its main approach was to control her self-identity, which included stifling her personal identity [5, 6] and threatening her to align with patriarchy-constructed identities [5]. Simultaneously, other reasons for the inevitability of Susan's suicide were pointed out: subjectively, her urgent desire for freedom and personal identity [1, 3, 5]; objectively, the absence of financial independence to support her in shaking off constraints on the cognition of her identities, while these two aspects were ultimately attributed to patriarchy [6]. Thus, previous studies have incisively noticed the important roles patriarchy and identity problems played in Susan's tragedy and gave direction to future studies of *To Room Nineteen*.

Moreover, though many characters have already been analyzed to different degrees: Susan, Matthew, Mr Fred and Miss Townsend, some peripheral characters still lacked the attention of researchers, such as the housemaid Mrs Parkes, the au pair girl Sophie Traub, and the partners Matthew cheated with – Myra Jenkins and Phil Hunt [1, 2]. Despite their marginal situation in the story and relevant studies, the analysis of them is still noteworthy for its value in understanding the identity crisis Susan is confronting, the reasons Susan commits suicide and the way patriarchy oppresses women more comprehensively. In *To Room Nineteen*, Susan's patriarchy-imposed identities which are primarily composed of a homemaker, a mother and a mistress of a house, and a sexual partner, are respectively replaced by Mrs Parkes, Sophie Traub, and Myra Jenkins and Phil Hunt, the awareness of which pushes Susan to the verge of collapse and contributes to her loss of hope of living in the disappointing society where females have no voice. Given this, this paper puts

forward a concept of replaceability which means that a female is replaceable on her patriarchy-constructed identities, by doing which patriarchy intimidates females to succumb and obey (if not she would become worthless in a patriarchal society), rendering females in a passive position and finally maintains its mechanism to ensure the supremacy of males.

This thesis, on the one hand, based on previous studies, comprehends *To Room Nineteen* from the perspective of identity; on the other hand, to supplement existing studies, this paper focuses on the actions and words of four peripheral female characters: Mrs Parkes, Sophie Traub, Myra Jenkins and Phil Hunt, who have close relationships with Susan and Matthew, the hostess and the host. Then, the objectives of this essay can be achieved: to understand the torment Susan sustains and the reasons for her suicide in terms of replaceability, and to reveal that replaceability is a latent way patriarchy controls females so as to guarantee the superior status of males.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Susan and Female Identity Crisis in Patriarchy

From the perspective of post-structuralism, Quawas indicates that the individual is a subject culturally constructed by the common principles of a particular society [1]. Similarly, when the scope is narrowed down to the females in a patriarchal society, as Simone de Beauvoir claims in *The Second Sex*: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, patriarchal culture defines “womanhood” to construct female identity [6, 7]. With *To Room Nineteen* as the text for analysis, scholars find two approaches patriarchy utilizes to construct female identity. First, women are constrained from their personal identities [2, 8]. Specifically, Gugliara points out that Susan’s resignation from an advertising firm is a typical example of the restriction of females’ personal identities, for it causes the loss of independence, individual achievement and opportunities to socialize [6]. Second, for the sake of male interests, patriarchy manufactures various identities and compels females to observe [1, 3]. Those gender roles generally include mother, homemaker, sexual partner/object and reproducer [1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8]. For instance, Huang argues that Susan’s pregnancy deprives her of the autonomy of her feminine organ, which signifies her submission to patriarchal gender expectations [2]. Moreover, Halisky demonstrates that to ensure women conform to patriarchy-constructed identities, male-dominant culture establishes the criteria of reasonable behaviors to intimidate females: if a female violates against the social norms, she will be debased as mad and scorned by the public [5].

Hence, as Susan is stripped of her personal identity and coerced to serve the patriarchy-produced identities, her subjectivity fails to survive under the existence of the culturally constructed identities [1] and an identity crisis is consequently raised, which mentally tortures Susan. Additionally, the gradually intense desire to retrieve her subjectivity drives Susan to commit suicide to regain freedom and to resist the patriarchal norms [3, 9, 10].

### 2.2 The Marginal Characters in *To Room Nineteen* and Patriarchal Gender Ideology

Currently, the analytical degrees of different characters in *To Room Nineteen* vary: besides the protagonist Susan, three marginal characters Matthew, Mr Fred and Miss Townsend have been studied comparatively deeper from the perspective of patriarchal “gender ideology [11]”.

As Susan’s husband, Matthew is mainly interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, Huang deems that Matthew is a representative and beneficiary of male-dominated society, for he exploits Susan to achieve his own desire [2]. On the other hand, Rosenberg argues that like Susan, Matthew is also restricted by patriarchal gender expectations of men, and the extramarital affairs are his rebellion which nonetheless shows his cowardice [11].

Miss Townsend and Mr Fred are the hotel owners who Susan encounters in the course of finding a room. According to Huang, they are the embodiment of the prejudice against recalcitrant females violating the patriarchal gender ideology of females [2].

Despite the existing analysis of the above characters, some peripheral characters are still short of attention: Mrs Parkes, Sophie Traub, Myra Jenkins and Phil Hunt.

### 3. Text Analysis

After synthesizing the above two sections, four marginal female characters are found lacking research, which indicates a research gap in their relations with the patriarchy-constructed identities of females, Susan's identity crisis and her suicide. Hence, via text analysis, this paper attempts to argue that four peripheral females (Mrs Parkes, Sophie Traub, Myra Jenkins and Phil Hunt) in *To Room Nineteen* contribute to the final collapse of Susan by gradually replacing her identities which patriarchy imposes on her.

#### 3.1 Mrs Parkes: A Homemaker

Mrs Parkes is the daily woman employed by the Rawlings to clean and cook by day. Keeping the house neat and cooking for the whole family are the compulsory responsibilities of a woman, while due to the financial abundance of the Rawlings, Susan can hire a maidservant to spare herself from those chores in the day time. However, since the youngest child is sent to school, Susan often finds herself with a sense of emptiness. Thus, she endeavours to be buried in whatever she can do in the house to keep herself "restless," like "[going] indoors to help Mrs Parkes cook and clean and [finding] some sewing to do for the children". Confusedly, Mrs Parkes complains to Susan: "what's the need for it? I can do that, it's what you pay me for". Also, Susan herself can feel that the kitchen is a place "where Mrs Parkes was making cake and did not need her". Though Susan still shoulders the responsibilities of a homemaker at night: "she was back home in time to cook supper [and] to cook a second supper for her husband and herself later", being needless in the housework during the day, Susan's identity as a homemaker is partly replaced by Mrs Parkes.

Nonetheless, Mrs Parkes "need[s] someone to serve" and she cannot handle the children and the telephones from children's teachers. Therefore, the replaceability of Mrs Pakes does not lead Susan to further worry until the arrival of Sophie Traub.

#### 3.2 Sophie Traub: A Mother and a Mistress of a House

Sophie Traub is an *au pair* girl from Germany, whom Susan offers to employ possibly intending to break away from the disturbance of the children and Mrs Parkes in the course of seeking freedom and tranquility, yet she has not been aware of what harm this decision would do to her.

First, Sophie substitutes Susan's identity as a mother, which is implicitly and explicitly demonstrated in the story. Indirectly, the plot that the Rawlings offers the "Mother's Room", which Matthew and the children have designed for Susan, to Sophie foreshadows that Sophie will replace Susan's role as a mother. Moreover, many descriptions of Sophie directly show her mother-like care and concern over the children. For example, when Molly, one of Susan's twins, is sick, Sophie "[sings] a couple of lines in German" to pacify Molly, and then "strok[es] the dark untidy young head that Molly [lays] on her shoulder for comfort". Additionally, when the children's teachers ring up, Sophie "answer[s] them sensibly". Attending the children appropriately, Sophie gets along with the children and receives love from them, and the children even cannot notice the existence of Susan when she returns home. In the end, before Susan commits suicide, she thinks that Sophie "[is] already the mother of those children", which proves the fact that Susan's identity as mother is replaced.

Secondly, Sophie nearly becomes the mistress of the house in place of Susan. As long as Sophie arrives at the Rawlings, she straightforwardly says to Susan: "You want some person to play mistress of the house sometimes, not so?" During her time staying at the Rawlings, Sophie lives together harmoniously with Mrs Parkes and almost likes the employer of her: they are "talking and laughing in the kitchen" and "Mrs Parkes [is] happy in her work under [...] Sophie Traub". Furthermore, Sophie freely invites many friends in her employers' house, such as "a dark foreign girl", which is actually improper because Sophie is merely a guest of the Rawlings, while the right to ask people in is supposed to be belonged to the host and the hostess of the house.

Moreover, not obviously, Sophie is likely to replace the identities of a homemaker and a sexual partner. Regarding the role as a homemaker, the story mentions that Sophie can "undert[ake] to do

some light cooking”. Besides, as for a sexual partner, Matthew appraises Sophie that it is “nice to have [Sophie] around the house” and Susan would rather Sophie have been the girl with whom Matthew had an affair because “Sophie’s much better”.

Hence, Sophie impacts Susan the hardest, for she replaces nearly all the patriarchy-imposed identities of Susan, the consequence of which is that Susan is rendered as a transparent person in a useless and worthless position. To be specific, being replaceable in the patriarchy-constructed identities stresses Susan a lot: with Sophie at the house, Susan feels herself as “an impostor”, “a fake”, and “a visitor,” who is “remote” and “irrelevan[t]” with every member in the house neglecting her. Forgotten by the family Susan once devoted herself to deprives her of hope and pushes her nearer to the edge of desperation.

### 3.3 Myra Jenkins and Phil Hunt: Sexual Partners

Though both Myra Jenkins and Phil Hunt only exist in the dialogues between Susan and Matthew and both of them are the sexual partners of Matthew who substitute Susan’s role as a sexual partner, their functions in contributing to Susan’s identity problems are different.

On the one hand, Myra Jenkins is the first person who causes Susan’s doubt about her marriage with Matthew and arouses a sense of crisis. When Matthew confesses to “tak[ing] a girl home and sle[eping] with her”, Susan pretends to “forgive” him. However, the fact is contrary: she is constantly considering who Myra Jenkins is and worrying whether this “pretty” and “attractive” girl will threaten her marriage (Susan concerns about the girl’s appearance for she is afraid that her decaying beauty is the reason for Matthew’s affair), though Susan finally comes to the conclusion that “because of the handsome Matthew Rawlings’ marriage body and soul to Susan Rawlings”, no girls can “defeat” their marriage, which is more a self-consolation. Despite Susan’s belief in their relationship in the end, she still cannot completely persuade herself to ignore her husband’s infidelity.

On the other hand, at the end of the story, Phil Hunt is the last straw breaking Susan. After Matthew again confesses another affair and Susan makes up a man as her fake lover, Matthew brings up the idea of “foursome”, which is unacceptable for it violates the common morals. So far, Susan desperately realizes that Matthew, whom she has once depended upon and genuinely loved, can make love with anyone and is nothing but a man fooling with females and never giving heart to her.

### 3.4 The Replaceability, Susan’s Suicide and Patriarchal Manoeuvre

In extreme despair, Susan finds that after her withdrawal, the whole family not only does not fall apart, but also functions smoothly and harmoniously as usual, because there are always persons to shoulder the responsibilities of her identities. The shocking fact that Susan is replaceable completely negates her twenty-year dedication to managing the family.

*“It was a sensation that should have been frightening to sit as 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.” [12]*

From the passage above, Susan’s unfortunate and terrible situation is depicted: she is isolated in the house. Worthy noting, Susan’s mental suffering seems to be the “punishment” of her resistance to the patriarchal norms and patriarchy-constructed identities: the patriarchy inflicts upon the recalcitrant females by telling them they are replaceable and dispensable, and they are ultimately worthless once they escape from the patriarchy-manufactured identities in the context of a patriarchal society, especially if they have already given up their jobs [6]. Therefore, the replaceability of the identities patriarchy imposed on females is essentially a manoeuvre to oppress females and compel them to serve the interests of males, and ultimately to maintain its mechanism. Finally, being aware of the underlying rule of patriarchy, Susan clears that the living world has no place for her, a female desiring freedom and personal identity, so suicide is the only save to her for the hardships.

## 4. Conclusion

To understand the reasons for Susan's suicide, and to expose the oppression patriarchy exerts on females, this paper analyzed the actions and words of four peripheral female characters who have close and special relationships with the Rawlings: Mrs Parkes, Sophie Traub, Myra Jenkins and Phil Hunt. By doing so, this thesis found that the above characters replace the patriarchy-manufactured identities of Susan: a homemaker, a mother, a mistress of a house and a sexual partner, a phenomenon which this essay defined as replaceability, and further expounded that the replaceability of the patriarchy-constructed identities is an oppressive manoeuvre of patriarchy to control females and a significant factor contributing to Susan's identity crisis and her suicide. In conclusion, the patriarchy is blameworthy for it manipulates the identities of females and treads on their subjectivity and dignity to exploit its own interests.

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