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Houses in the Lives of Doris Lessing's Heroines

November 2013 marked the passing of a great British novelist, a Nobel laureate Doris Lessing (1919-2013). Lessing grew up in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, and had a first-hand experience of an apartheid system on the continent. Lessing's first hand knowledge of living on a farm in South Africa provided the background of the first book she ever published: the land, the characters, the farming are all colorfully described and readers can vividly see the images that influenced the writer in her formative years.

Following Roberta Rubinstein, we might say that Doris Lessing was always interested in space: from the vastness of the African veldt to the bounded female spaces of rooms, houses, and flats[1]. In her first novel, *The Grass is Singing* (published in 1950), Doris Lessing established herself as a superb psychologist of a female mentality and a social critic of a society calcified in time. After that, she wrote a lot of books that were well received by reading public and widely discussed by critics, but her debut book is worth mentioning both as an example of colonial and post-colonial literature and the first text where her preoccupation with houses and other living spaces and their influence on characters' mentality plays a significant role.

The plot of *The Grass is Singing* is not complicated. We are told at the beginning that Mary Turner, the wife of a farmer, has been killed by a black houseboy called Moses, that the murderer is caught, and that he admitted the crime. After extensively describing the distress, even nervous breakdown, of the husband, Dick Turner, Lessing stresses the responses of two others, Charlie Slatter, a neighboring farmer, and Tony Marston, a twenty-year-old farm hand and recent newcomer from England. What adds to the interest from the start is that it isn't the police that have taken over the investigation but Charlie Slatter and Tony Marston. The main question they both try to answer concerns Moses, the houseboy: Even if he has admitted

[1] R. Rubinstein, *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness*, Urbana 1979, p. 123.

to the murder what led him to committing it, and what was the relationship between Moses and Mrs Turner?:

> The newspaper did not say much. People all over the country must have glanced at the paragraph with its sensational heading and felt a little spurt of anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction, as if some belief had been confirmed, as if something had happened which could only have been expected. When natives steal, murder or rape, that is the feeling white people have. And then they turned the page to something else. But the people in 'the district' who knew the Turners, either by sight ,or about them for so many years, did not turn the page so quickly[2].

Being relatively small at 206 pages, the novel contains a lot of themes, profound feelings and emotions which are admirable for the author who was only 25 when she wrote the book. The main theme which is at the core of the novel is the one about race and racist attitudes of society in what is now known as Zimbabwe of the 1940s. The way that 'natives', as they were called, are treated is horrendous and we get to see this as we follow Mary once she marries Dick and joins him on his ramshackle farm. The Turners' misery leads us to another subject - the white poverty, depression and mental breakdown of the main heroine.

Mary, whose story we follow as a flashback, is seen as the victim of the novel. As a young girl, she grew up on the farms in Southern Rhodesia and hated it. Mary's childhood was largely unhappy. She disliked the way her father drank and behaved, she hated her mother's shrill voice and low tolerance of the staff and after the bliss of boarding school she gets away to a town as fast as she can. Mary was delighted to leave home and get a job in the city. Once alone she blossoms through her late teens and early twenties yet by thirty she is still unmarried. Mary sees nothing wrong with this until, by coincidence, she overhears some of so called friends laughing and gossiping about her. Mary is upset and she looks for a husband to escape the life she loved and avoid the rumors of spinsterhood. She decides that she doesn't want to be alone her whole life. To get married seems to be a good idea, even though she hates sex. She cannot imagine how completely miserable her escape is. First she meets a fifty-five year old man with children. He kisses her, and immediately she feels repulsed. Later Mary meets Dick, a farmer, in the local cinema. Once in a while he comes to the city to buy things he needs for his farm. Mary decides to marry him although he never makes a secret of being poor and explains his relative

[2] D. Lessing , *The Grass is Singing*, London 1994, p. 9. All further references to this book as *GS* and page number are given in the text after the quotation.

poverty and the primitive conditions in which he lives. However the reality is a shock to Mary who is used to the normal comforts of town life. When she arrives at the farm, she is even more disappointed: the house she sees is even worse than that where she was brought up. Everything is dirty and looks very cheap, quite different from her luxurious life in the town. Mary finds that his three-roomed house with its corrugated iron roof has no ceilings, so that it turns into an oven in the summer. The curtains are made of grain sacks and there is no mosquito netting on the windows. From her small savings she buys material, makes curtains, and does her best to improve her home. Later she whitewashes the walls herself, an activity almost unthinkable for a white Rhodesian woman.

> Five years earlier she would have dragged herself by the reading of romantic novels. In towns women like her live vicariously through the lives of film stars. Or they take up religion, preferably one of the more sensuous Eastern religions. Better educated, living in the town with access to books, she would have found Tagore perhaps, and gone into a sweet dream of words. Instead, she thought, vaguely that she must get herself something to do. Should she increase the number of chickens? Should she take in sewing? But she felt tired, without interest (*GS,* p. 123-33).

Mary is simply bored and feels imprisoned in the shabby house which is impossible to improve or redecorate. Although she likes her husband, Dick, she also understands his failure to be successful. She tries to participate in some of his attempts to make money, first with bees, then pigs, then turkeys, then bicycles. The couple live in extreme poverty, which even their neighbors – the vile Slatters – can't bear to see: there is nothing worse than seeing poor white people living in the squalor black people do. The situation is extremely depressing for Mary and she longs for town or just escape. Instead she becomes angry and embittered, hating the landscape (which Lessing gives a wonderful sense of menace) and the weather (Lessing's descriptions of heat are utterly oppressive) and going slowly mad. Her anger needs a focus point to be unleashed on and soon Mary lets her emotional tension out with her husband and her servants. As Mary has been brought up to look down on the natives, her relationship with them is very stilted and her constant proximity to the servants puts her in a real dilemma. Mary's tragedy ends as it should – with a murder which is a consequence of her encounter with a male servant, Moses, brought over into the house by Dick as a final replacement of a series of unsatisfactory servants, fired by her. Mary's first encounter with Moses occurs when she takes charge of the farm while Dick is suffering a bout of malaria. Moses, at that time one of the farm workers, is challeng-

ing towards Mary, and, imbued with conventional hatred towards the natives, her response is fury and vengeance: she whips him across the face with a lash, leaving a permanent scar. Later he becomes the houseboy, and finding her broken down and weeping, he brings her a drink of water. Mary thus turns to Moses, the black cook, for kindness and understanding. She also acutely feels the irony of his attitude towards her – Moses' apparent kindness is fraught with irony: the initial incident that had resulted in her whipping him had concerned his request for a drink of water which Mary had refused, and although we can infer that Mary is now touched by his attention, there is something of pressure in the way he makes her drink, and of a conscious demonstration of a shifting of power, which leaves her fearful and resentful. Mary's attitude to Moses continues to be ambivalent, and Moses' towards her seems contradictory, both solicitous and resentful. Finally, the day before the murder, Tony Marston discovers them in a situation of physical intimacy – Moses is dressing Mary and Mary's gestures are those of a woman either flattered or sexually satisfied. It remains unclear whether they were in sexual contact – we see it only through Marston's shocked and wondering perspective. Mary, trying in the corrective presence of the white man 'to get back the command she had lost', uses Marston to expel Moses (now standing with 'malevolent stare') from the house. It is presumably this betrayal that prompts Moses to murder Mary in the early hours of the next day, in revenge. What is most important in the psychological state of Mary and which is so difficult to understand for all who watch her relationship with Moses, is her knowledge that Moses should actually murder her and he will inevitably come back to do so. She does not look for the protection from anybody or the ways to escape. She waits, frightened but eventually passively resigned, for her fate. Mary's death is thus symbolic – both Mary and Moses disrupt and threaten the status quo by their misfit status and their behavior. Although the readers are left with the sense of not knowing the precise nature of the relationship of the two, we are sure that they both must be destroyed for the preservation of the status quo which they disrupt and threaten with their so called love affair.

The whole book of *The Grass is Singing* might be treated as crime fiction although this is not really the case because we know right from the beginning of the book who killed Mary, and there are few doubts that the black houseboy, Moses, is responsible. The mystery lies in finding out why the murder took place and how Mary turned from being a fun-loving woman into a cynical, over-bearing tyrant. Being the focus of the story, the character of Mary is particularly well drawn and, what is more, she is put into the settings, the living spaces, that are of great influence in her development as a character.

The importance of setting is signified at the beginning of the novel through the title "…the grass is singing" which is part of the epigraph to the novel taken by Lessing from T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*:

> In this decayed hole among the mountains
> In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
> Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
> There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
> It has no windows, and the door swings,
> Dry bones can harm no one.
> Only a cock stood on the rooftree
> Co co rico, co co rico
> In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust
> Bringing rain (…) . (*GS,* p.7).

In this poem, Eliot blends antique myths and representations of contemporary society, which finally result in a somber and pessimistic vision. In the above cited passage which is Lessing's epigraph to the novel, the poet establishes a juxtaposition between the arid landscape and an enclosed space which will become the main motif of the novel *The Grass is Singing*. The futility and eventual death of Western myths is obvious in the poem by T. S. Eliot, but also the hopelessness of ever changing for the better[3].

Lessing uses a technique similar to Eliot's: parallel to the African space, she also presents the main characters' cottage as the central place of events and the setting of the tragedy. Mary, who grew up and has lived her whole life in the town, marries Dick Turner, a farmer who is in perpetual combat with nature, so she is automatically put into an alien space that makes her existence quite different and almost impossible. She moves into Dick's cottage which is situated in the middle of the savage terrain. The life of the couple is miserable without any hopes of improvement and any promise of redemption, and the Turners' house is seen from the very beginning of the novel as part of the circumstances that resulted in the tragedy.

Long before the murder marked them out, people spoke of the Turners in the hard, careless voices reserved for misfits, outlaws and self-exiled. The Turners were disliked, though few of their neighbors had ever met them, or even seen them in the distance. People were sure the Turners must have had something to be ashamed of, that was the feeling. Their white neighbors were ready to forgive the Turners' strange behavior and explain it through a very simple reason that "they simply kept themselves to themselves; that was all", but their house was something unforgivable. This is the

[3] M. Thorpe, *Doris Lessing's Africa* , London 1978, p. 17.

way Charlie Slatter reflects on the causes of the murder, making the Turners' house the main focus of the tragedy:

> It was not right to seclude themselves like that; it was a slap in the face of everyone else; what have they got to be so stuck up about? What, indeed! Living the way they did! **That little box of a house** – it was forgivable as a temporary dwelling, but not to live in permanently. Why, some natives (though not many, thank heavens) had houses as good; and it would give them a bad impression to see white people living in such a way (*GS*, p. 10).

Tony Marston, the fresh young Englishman whom Slatter employs as a manager for the Turners' farm, has similar feelings about the Turners' house when he is considering the situation sitting in the now empty cottage, after Mary's body has been removed from the place where she has been found dead. Tony is looking up "the bare crackling tin of the roof, that was warped with the sun", at the "faded gimcrack furniture, at the dusty brick floors covered with ragged animal skins", and he wonders how those two, Mary and Dick Turner could have borne to live in such a place, year in and year out, for so long. Being a farm hand, Tony lives in a little thatched hut at the back of the Turners' house, but he considers his own small hut to be better than their house because of the ceiling it possesses, so he wonders: "Why did they go on without even so much as putting in ceilings? It was enough to drive anyone mad, the heat in this place!"(*GS*, p.27). Tony clearly associates the Turners' house with the tragedy of Mary's murder, feeling the atmosphere of fear and horror inside it, which makes it difficult to stay inside any longer:

> He went inside, slowly ,obsessed with one clear image that remained to him after the events of the morning, and which seemed to him the key to the whole thing: the look on the Sergeant's and Slatter's faces when they looked down at the body; that almost hysterical look of hate and fear. He sat down, his hand to his head, which ached badly; then got up again and fetched from a dusty shelf in the kitchen a medicine bottle marked 'Brandy'. He drank it off. He felt shaky in the knees and in the thighs. He was weak, too, with repugnance against **this ugly little house** which seemed to hold within its walls, even in its very brick and cement, the fears and horror of the murder. He felt suddenly as if he could not bear to stay in it, not for another moment (*GS*, p.28).

It is true that the Turners share the suffering of all African farmers but since they belong to the "poor whites", they are forced to feel it even more profoundly. When Mary arrives at the farm for the first time, she is stupe-

fied to discover their standards of living but she stays optimistic for a long while trying to improve the house:

> It was several days before a new cook offered himself for work, and Mary did the house herself. She found it unexpectedly heavy, although there were not, really, so much to do. Yet she liked the feeling of being alone there all day, responsible for it. She scrubbed and swept and polished; housework was quite a new thing to her; all her life natives had done the work for her, as silently and as unobtrusively as fairies. Because it was new, she really enjoyed it. But when everything was clean and polished, and the pantry was full of food, she used to sit on it as if her legs had been drained of strength (*GS*, p.65-66).

Mary is also aware of the difference between her attitudes towards the house and that of her husband's. If Dick had ever really lived in this house, she thought, instead of being down on the lands all day, he would have put in ceilings. Surely they did not cost so much? As the days passed, she found herself thinking fretfully that she had been foolish to spend her little store of money on curtains rather than on ceilings. If she asked Dick again, and explained to him what it meant to her, perhaps he would relent and find the money? But she also knew she could not easily ask, and bring that heavy tormented look on his face. For Dick, the house means almost nothing, just a place to sleep overnight after having spent the whole day in the veldt working in the fields. Moreover, he dislikes the town with "those ugly scattered suburbs that looked as if they come out of housing catalogues; ugly little houses stuck anyhow over the veldt, that had no relationship with the hard brown African soil and the arching blue sky. Dick believes that "cozy little houses meant for cozy little countries", so he feels "ill at ease and uncomfortable and murderous in the town with the shops full of fashions for smart women and extravagant imported food"(*GS*, p.45). Visiting the town, Dick suffers from claustrophobia: he wants to run away or to smash the place up. So he always escapes as soon as possible back to his farm, where he feels at home. Although Dick is not the focus of the novel, his attitude to Mary's problem is clearly expressed through the juxtaposition between the originally vast African space and the small, scattered towns built by the white settlers. Mary's inability to perceive and overcome this contrast and thus go beyond the narrowness of home spaces of "prim little houses" so much hated by Dick is obvious from the very first moments of her presence at the farm. Dick's house is surrounded by trees and bush, and Mary is terrified by the wilderness of the nature threatening the crumbling shanty-like house:

> All around were trees, the squat, flattened trees of the high veldt, which seem as if pressure of sun has distorted them, looking now like vague dark

> presences standing about the small clearing where the car had stopped. There were a small square building whose corrugated roof began to gleam whitely as the moon slowly slid out from behind the cloud and drenched the clearing with brilliance. Mary got out of the car and watched it drive away round the house to the back. She looked round her, shivering a little, for a cold breath blew out of the trees and down in the valley beyond them hung a cold white vapor. Listening in the complete silence, innumerable little noises rose from the bush, as if colonies of strange creatures had become still and watchful at their coming and were now going about their own business. She glanced round the house; it looked shut and dark and stuffy, under the white streaming moonlight. (…) Then a strange bird called, a wild nocturnal sound, and she turned and ran back, suddenly terrified, as if a hostile breath had blown upon her, from another world, from the trees (*GS*, p. 51).

The above passage describes Mary's first encounter with Dick's cottage which takes place at night and terrifies Mary because of the hostile breath of the surrounding trees in the high veldt, but the wretched dwelling which she sees in the morning is even more disappointing. Mary finds herself closed up in a suffocating place where it often becomes unbearable to live, and consequently, she slowly goes paranoiac and eventually mentally disturbed.

This is the way Dick Turner reflects on the contrast between the magnificent nature of South Africa and the houses of white people:

> But there are thousands of people in Africa who could be lifted bodily out of their suburb and put into a town the other side of the world and hardly notice the difference. The suburb is as invincible and fatal as factories, and even beautiful, and fatal as factories, and even beautiful South Africa, whose soil looks outraged by those pretty little suburbs creeping over it like a disease, cannot escape. When Dick Turner saw them, and thought of the way people lived in them, and the way the cautious suburban mind was ruining his country, he wanted to swear and to smash and to murder (*GS*, p. 52).

As can be clearly seen, in Mary's case, it is not the possessiveness, jealousy or cruelty of Dick which is responsible for the tragedy but simple mismatching: after a hurried courtship, before they could understand and know the likes and dislikes of each other, Mary marries Dick who also needs her solely to fight his own loneliness. Loneliness is the only common point between the two, who have otherwise different pasts, experiences and backgrounds. While Mary loved the town and felt safe there, Dick hates the town-culture. The sexual relationship of Mary and Dick is not satisfactory. While Dick unintentionally makes her a sexual object by idealizing

her, Mary can only accept him when he approaches her submissively. Then yielding to him in a martyr-like way expecting outrage and imposition, she was relieved to find she felt nothing. Thus even sex does not bring them any closer, but rather separates them. Mary hopes that motherhood can give her some happiness and fulfillment and at a certain moment she speaks to Dick about having a child, but Dick only has to refuse and the reason is the same – his poverty. Mary tries to find the way out trying to improve the house by sewing, stitching and mending as if the embroidery would safe her life. But the gulf between the two is inevitably widening and in their lonely unkempt house "they were stunned, unfulfilled figures"[4]. Moreover, the house is the only witness of Mary's tragedy: her dreams, her fear about her sexuality, the problems she has with accepting her past and so learning to live in the future, all occur in her house. It therefore comes to symbolize the disintegration of Mary's conscious self which leads to her death, and to represent Mary's literal, emotional and psychological entrapment. Tony Marston is the only one who tries to understand Mary's plight. Analyzing her degeneration into a thin, sick, mad woman, he thinks: "For her, there was only the farm; not even that – **there was only this house**, and what was in it. And he began to understand with horrified pity, her utter indifference to Dick; she had shut everything that conflicted with her actions, that would revive the code she had been brought up to follow" (*GS*, p.187).

Thus, Mary's tragedy is not entirely due to the infinity and impossibility of the African land, which could be envisaged as a vast cemetery full of "tumbled graves,"(T. S. Eliot) perpetually tormented by the burning and unending sun, but also due to the closed and suffocating little cottage she is entrapped in. Just before her tragic death, Mary, although scared, makes no attempt to defend herself, she remains in the cottage and visualizes her death as the downfall of the house:

> She was listening to the night outside. And, slowly, the terror engulfed her which she had known must come. Once she lay down, and turned her face into the darkness of the pillows. (…) He was in the room, just beside her! But the room was empty. There was nothing. She heard a boom of thunder, and saw, as she had done so many times, the lightning flicker on a shadowed wall. Now it seemed as if the night were closing on her, and **the little house was bending over like a candle**, melting in the heat. She heard the crack, crack; the restless moving of the iron above, and it seemed to her that a vast black body, like a human spider, was crawling over the roof, trying to get

[4] S. Charles, S. Liebetraut, *D.H. Lawrence and Doris Lessing's "The Grass is Singing"*, "Modern Fiction Studies" 1978-79 , No 4, p. 123.

inside. **She was alone. She was defenseless. She was shut in a small black box, the walls closing in on her, the roof pressing down** (*GS*, p. 203).

As can be seen, it is not merely Eliot's smothering and oppressively hot atmosphere that is taken over by Lessing and put in the epigraph of the novel, but the spatial arrangement as well. Furthermore, the Turners' cottage can also be viewed as a representative of colonialism, which allows for a bodily interpretation: the abandoned house in the middle of the African desert is the corpse of the colonizer defeated by nature and the enormous infinity of the surrounding African landscape[5]. Lessing shows and describes Africa according to the European tradition with the white colonizer in the centre and the continent seen with his eyes. Nevertheless, she already indicates that Africa has two faces: that of a hostile and violent land and that of an intact, if not immaculate place, mostly represented by Moses, the Turners' servant who kills Mary in revenge[6].

We have chosen Lessing's much later short story *To Room Nineteen* (1978) as another example of the story where living spaces are used as means of characterization. The marriage of the main heroine and her death at the end of the story, just like in the novel *The Grass is Singing*, are shown in the context of great tensions the main heroine experiences between her needs and the demands of the collective. Lessing depicts the Rawlings family as bound and limited by the ideologies of marriage, family life, and childhood, as well as by conventional standards of "success". Susan, for example, leaves her successful and well paid job in an advertising firm upon marriage and is pregnant after two years because this is the way women of her status are expected to do. Shaped by collective pressures, the Rawlings attempt to adhere to middle-class standards, while learning from what they perceive to be the mistakes and failures of others who they believed had married young and who probably regretted lost opportunities. They establish their marriage through rational discussion which takes precedence over emotional contact and honesty. Although Susan Rawlings refuses to make the mistake of taking a job for the sake of her independence, she is trapped in the ideology of the patriarchal collective which demands from her "motherhood" and life as an uncomplaining, charming and devoted wife. Through an ironic use of the collective's language, which is Susan's only way of thinking, Lessing reveals Susan's tensions between her personal sense of "self" and the ideology of the collective.

[5] S. Roberts, *Sites of Paranoia and Taboo: Lessing's "The Grass is Singing" and Gordimer's "July's People"*, [in:] *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Doris Lessing*, Philadelphia 2003, p. 135.

[6] E. Bertelsen, *Veldtanschauung: Doris Lessing's Savage Africa*, [in:] "Modern Fiction Studies" 1991, No 4, p. 650.

The couple believe that they have acted by choice and will in all their decisions, but both Susan and her husband Matthew experience a certain disappointment with their well-planned life. Each though, reassures the other that "everything was all right. Everything was in order. Yes, things were under control"[7]. Susan, increasingly isolated from her life as a free woman, becomes aware that she did not choose her limited life. More and more she relies on archetypal images and the phrases of the collective, and prepares for "her own slow emancipation away from the role of hub-of –the-family into woman-with her-own-life" (*RN*, p.311). Just like the heroine of *The Grass is Singing*, however, Susan fails to make the transition and go out of the entrapment of her house and house duties. She comes to realize that "a high price has to be paid for the happy marriage with four healthy children in the large white gardened house" (*RN*, p. 310). That price is the loss of her freedom and sense of her social self.

Lessing as a writer is concerned with chronicling relationships, with their subtle shifts and balances of power, their surfaces and depths, their advantages and shortcomings. *To Room Nineteen* is a story of a marriage, or rather the story of a "failure of intelligence" in a marriage "grounded on intelligence" and about a woman trying to find her personal living space to feel comfortable while in marriage. She tries to be a good wife and a good mother as well as a good manageress of her beautiful house, but there is no place for herself within this large gardened house and she is in search of her lost identity looking for the "room of her own".

Being an intelligent woman, Susan does everything in an intelligent way. When she marries Matthew and they are both 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. Both, before they married, had pleasant flats, but they felt it unwise to base a marriage on either flat, "because it might seem like a submission of personality on the part of the one whose flat it was not" (*RN*, p. 227), so they moved into a new flat in South Kensington which is a fashionable west end of London, on the clear understanding that when their marriage had settled down they would buy a house and start a family. And this is what happened. They lived in their charming flat for two years giving parties and going to them, being popular young married couple, and than Susan became pregnant, she gave up her job, and they bought a house in Richmond (a district of greater London). They had a son first, then a daughter, then twins, son and daughter. Everything right, appropriate and what everyone would wish for,

[7] D. Lessing, *To Room Nineteen, Women and Fiction*, London 2002, p. 225. Further references to this book as *RN* and page number are given in the text after the quotation.

if they could choose. People felt that these two had chosen: "this balanced and sensible family was not more than what was due to them because of their infallible sense for choosing right" (*RN*, p. 228). And so they lived with their four children in their gardened house in Richmond and were happy. They had everything they wanted and planned for. Susan gave up her well paid job, and turned herself into a full-time housewife for the sake of the four children. She even forgave her husband's unfaithfulness in marriage: "They put the thing behind them, and consciously, knowing what they were doing, moved forward into a different phase of their marriage, giving thanks for past good fortune as they did so" (*RN*, p. 243). Susan was a good wife, devoting herself to the whole family before she realized her present situation; she thinks about her identity lost in her married life. She suddenly discovered that housework, children and husband made her lose her self-identity. She could only be dependent on others, and could not rely on herself any longer. She suddenly hated her house and her daily household duties and wanted to escape from them. "Well, even this was expected, that there must be a certain flatness…" Susan admits. Both Susan and her husband knew what happened to women of fifty at the height of their energy and ability, with grown-up children who no longer needed their full devotion. Lessing uses a vivid metaphor to describe the desperate situation in the family: "Their life seemed to be like a snake biting its tail" (*RN*, p. 230). "Matthew's job for the sake of Susan, children, house, and garden – which caravanserai needed a well-paid job to maintain it. And Susan's practical intelligence for the sake of Matthew, the children and the garden – which unit would have collapsed in a week without her" (*RN*, p. 237). When the youngest children went off to school and Susan is eager to feel free at last and start to live for herself, she does not have the sense of freedom she hopes for. She feels as if she had nothing to do and never had spare moments for herself. Her time was taken up in waiting for the children to come home, consulting with the maid or preparing for dinner. She became anxious and isolated, pulling away from Matthew, and her husband began to have an affair. What is more, Susan begins feeling imprisoned in her beautiful house, and this is where her main problem lies. She cannot find any seclusion in her own house to feel privately, just like she cannot find such a place outside her house because she is dependent on her husband financially and can only ask him for the money to find a separate place for herself, and she cannot feel alone in the place known to her husband. At the beginning of her state of restlessness, Susan tries to find her personal living space within the boundaries of her house, which is large enough for the whole of the family and Mrs. Parkes, the cleaning woman:

> The school days came round, and this time they were nearly two months, and she behaved with a conscious controlled decency that nearly drove her crazy. She would lock herself in the bathroom, and sit on the edge of the bath, breathing deep, trying to let go into some kind of calm. Or she went up to the spare room, usually empty, where no one would expect her to be. She heard the children calling "Mother, Mother", and kept silent, feeling guilty. Or she went to the very end of the garden, by herself, and looked at the slow moving brown river: she looked at the river and closed her eyes and breathed slow and deep, taking it into her being, into veins (*RN*, p. 270).

Yet she was possessed with resentment that the seven hours of freedom every day (during weekdays in the school term) were not free, that never, not for one second, she was free from the pressure of time, from having to remember this or that. She could never forget herself; never really let herself go into forgetfulness. Susan could not get free from

> this structure – big white house, on which the mortgage still cost four hundred a year, a husband, so good and kind and insightful; four children, all doing so nicely; and the garden where she sat; and Mrs Parkes, the cleaning woman – all this depend on her, and yet she could not understand why and what it was she contributed to it (*RN*, p. 265).

Later Susan understood that it was impossible to stay in the house and satisfy her need for privacy. The spare room at the top of the house now had a cardboard sign saying 'Private! Do not disturb' on it. The family and Mrs Parkes knew this was "Mother's Room" and that she was entitled to her privacy. But still Susan was sure that it was impossible to have a room somewhere in the house without such a fuss being made. For the family it was a valuable lesson in respect for other people's rights, but for Susan it ended in failure to find a truly solitary place for herself: quite soon she was going up to the room only because it was a lesson which was a pity to drop. Then she took sewing up there, and the children and Mrs Parkes came in and out: it had become another family room and another 'cage' for Susan.

After the failure to find a sort of privacy inside her own house, Susan still dreams of having a room or a place, anywhere, where she could go and sit, by herself, no one knowing where she is. She decides to rent a room, telling no one. She finds such a room which is ordinary and anonymous, and is just what Susan needs: "She put a shilling in the gas fire, and sat, eyes shut, in a dingy armchair with her back to a dingy window. She was alone. (…) She could feel pressure lifting off her" (*RN*, p. 272).But Susan's blissful loneliness does not last long: Miss Townsend, the manageress of the hotel, knocks at the door bringing her a cup of tea with her own hands,

so concerned was she over Susan's long silence and possible illness. After that incident, Susan has to look for another hotel room, she completely withdraws spiritually from her family leaving the burden of the big house on Mrs Parkes. She also suggests to employ an au pair girl to take care of the children which makes her husband wonder whether she is going back to work. Susan understands that she was breaking her part of the bargain with her husband, that "her spirit, her soul, should live **in this house**, so that the people in it could grow like plants in water" (*RN*, p. 269). In return for this, her husband would be a good loving husband, and responsible towards the children. But the problem of the couple is that nothing like this had been true of either of them for a long time: he did his duty; she did not even pretend to do hers. So Susan is also aware that her husband, with his real life in his work and the people he met there, and very likely a serious affair. And all this is seen by Susan as her own fault.

Susan finally finds a hotel room where she can treasure her anonymity, doing completely nothing but looking out of the window. Sitting alone in the hotel room, she was no longer Susan Rawlings, a mother of four, wife of Matthew, employer of Mrs Parkes and of German au pair girl Sophie Traub, with all the relations with friends, school-teachers and tradesmen. She is no longer mistress of the big white house and garden, owning clothes suitable for this and that activity or occasion. She is alone in the room 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 am 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 (*RN*, p. 262).

The room in Fred's Hotel becomes more her own than the house she lives in. Susan visits her room five days a week and asks for the money for it from her husband:

> He agreed to give her five pounds a week. She asked for just so much, not a penny more. He sounded indifferent about it. It was as if he were paying her, she thought: *paying her off* – yes, that was it: things had gone too far for that. Now, every week, on Sunday nights, he gave her five pounds, turning away from her before their eyes could meet on the transaction (*RN*, p. 263).

Matthew suspects her of having a lover and even suggests "to make foursome", so Susan has to invent a lie about a hypothetical lover simply because her husband is ready to believe it, but is unable to understand her feelings. Realizing that her husband's rational world would not recognize

her "irrational" feelings, Susan comes back to her favorite Room Nineteen in Fred's Hotel, turns on the gas, thus committing suicide:

> She was quite content lying there, listening to the faint soft hiss of the gas that poured into room, into her lungs, into her brain, as she drifted off into the dark river (*RN*, p. 270).

Summing up the short story by Doris Lessing, we should first of all underline the significance of living spaces that is signaled in the title – *To Room Nineteen*. In that room, the heroine feels the privacy and shelter which her large and beautiful family house cannot give. Susan does not own the house, the true owner of it is her husband and this might be one reason Susan feels alienated from her home, growing increasingly restless and looking for the space which may be truly hers. The hotel room where she simply sits in a wicker chair letting herself go slack, "slipping into dark fructifying dream that seemed to caress her inwardly, like the movement of her blood" (*RN*, p. 269), loses its allure to Susan once her husband learns of it. The peace of the room has gone, so Susan decides to die.

Along with symbolic images of house and rooms in the story that are used to illustrate the limitations that individuals, particularly women, experience because of social conventions, the image of dark river is also important. The river is used to symbolize Susan's reluctance to change, her inability to define herself against and in relation to the collective, rather than letting herself float along with the demoralizing collective experience. More than once during the story, to be alone, Susan walks to the end of the garden and looks at the slow-moving brown river, she closes her eyes and breathes slow and deep, "taking it into her being, into her veins". The narrator's tone here is evidently ironic, because merging with the river, Susan identifies with the social collective although it is the very force which prevents her from having time for herself and becoming her true self.

Thus, in both *The Grass is Singing* and *To Room Nineteen* by Doris Lessing, the living spaces functioning as rooms and houses, are used to represent female entrapment and limitation rather than psychic growth, freedom, and the merging of the personal and the collective. Both Mary of the novel *The Grass is Singing* and Susan of the short story *To Room Nineteen* do not have the ability to think outside the conventional ideologies of the society and communities they belong to. Throughout their lives, the two heroines lack the energy to form lives for themselves and develop their personalities, so their passivity unfortunately has fatal consequences.

Streszczenie

Domy w życiu bohaterek Doris Lessing

W twórczości i życiorysie Doris Lessing (1919-2013), laureatki nagrody Nobla w dziedzinie literatury (2007), można znaleźć znaczący wpływ kontynentu afrykańskiego, gdzie pisarka mieszkała ponad dwadzieścia lat. Akcja debiutanckiej powieści Lessing *Trawa śpiewa* (1950) osadzona jest w realiach Afryki Południowej i opisuje tragiczne wydarzenie – morderstwo białej kobiety Mary Turner. Sprawca, czarnoskóry służący Moses, nie stawia oporu przy aresztowaniu, a śmiercią Mary, oprócz jej męża, nikt nie wydaje się przejmować. W centrum powieści – dom małżeństwa Turnerów, o który na początku Mary bardzo dbała, ale po kilku latach budzi on odrazę wewnętrzną, stając się jednocześnie symbolem całkowitego rozpadu małżeństwa Turnerów i rozpadu równowagi psychicznej Mary.
Bohaterka krótkiego opowiadania Doris Lessing *Do pokoju dziewiętnaście* (1978) nie ma problemów finansowych, zamieszkuje w bogatej dzielnicy Londynu, w dużym i pięknym domu, w otoczeniu męża i dzieci. Ale tak samo jak nędza materialna doprowadza Mary do szaleństwa, tak i brak duchowości w stosunkach z mężem i presja otoczenia powodują brak równowagi psychicznej i rozterki Susan Rawlings, zmuszając ją do poszukiwania odrębnego pokoju poza własnym domem, w hotelu, gdzie ostatecznie popełnia samobójstwo. W trakcie analizy funkcjonowania pomieszczeń i ich roli w charakteryzacji obu bohaterek, autorka artykułu pokazuje przyczyny rozpaczy, samotności i zobojętnienia obu kobiet na świat zewnętrzny, co doprowadza ich do szaleństwa i śmierci.

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzenie życiowe, rasizm, kwestie społeczne, Rodezja, szaleństwo, przemoc, obrazy przestrzenne.

Keywords: living spaces, racism, colonialism, social issues, Rhodesia, madness, violence, spatial images.