

✦ **Schizophrenia or female consciousness: diagnosing a borderline personality in Doris Lessing's "To room nineteen"**

Paulo Henrique de Sá Junior

Mestrando em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa da UERJ

Professor de Literaturas de Língua Inglesa

Faculdades Integradas Simonsen

Self-discovery together with the disintegration of the "self" are some of the major themes present in Doris Lessing's works. Political and committed, Lessing is sometimes not as accessible as some of her contemporaries, but she has expanded the boundaries of fiction, especially of fictional and psychological realism. In "To Room Nineteen" (1987), she combines the political, the social and the psychological to narrate the disintegration of a personality. Susan Rawlings, married to Mathew Rawlings, leads a very successful marriage up to the point she recognizes the stormy sea their, or better, her marriage became.

The social-political institution which marriage stands for in the mentioned short story influences, or better, generates the central issues brought to discussion in this present work. Elaine Showalter's "Women, Madness and the Family" (1985) sets the primary roots for this analysis, once she argues that

... female schizophrenia [is interpreted] as the product of women's repression and oppression within the family. Madness itself became intelligible as a strategy, a form of communication in response to the contradictory messages and demands about femininity women faced in patriarchal society. (p. 222)

Both the dichotomy sanity/madness and Sigmund Freud's concepts of hysteria, absence and his principle of the double conscience will be applied in our analysis of Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen", highlighting the problematization of social demands. Besides, diagnosing the borderline personality which is Susan Rawlings applied to Derrida's concept of limit is also our subject of study.

Jacques Derrida in his essay "Cogito e história da loucura" (2001) argues that Western society needs madness once this is related to the possibility of history. Which means that the necessity of madness is directly associated to the origins of history. Moreover, questions about the notion of truth could be raised since its key element is decision. Decision constitutes reason which is the free subjectivity of madness.

It is hard to say that decision and reason go together with madness due to the fact that the binomial decision/reason derives from culture, the same culture established by the social-political environment from which society depends on. All the anthropological virtualities are delineated by culture and they will give form to the specified disease which stands in the boundaries of both the cultural reality and the social group inserted in it. The historical constitution of mental diseases establishes labels for those who are mentally disturbed, or mentally unbalanced, giving birth to a world of exclusion. Such world focuses on all the ones who are incapable of production and labels all the incapable ones as hysteric or schizophrenic. In particular, schizophrenia was a disease diagnosed in women. Naturally, they were the ones who were incapable of production because the social-political environment in which they were inserted was the patriarchal one, thus reinforcing the idea that "women's high rate of mental disorder is a product of their social situation, both confining roles as daughters, wives, and mothers and their mistreatment by a male-dominated and possibly misogynistic psychiatric profession" (Showalter, 1985, p. 3).

Under any circumstances could one neglect the fact that there is not any form of culture which is not related to different forms of both behaviour and language. All individuals have to be inserted in perfect moulds established by what is named society. If customs, different forms of behaviour, attitudes and the individual production escape from the standard social-political circle, then madness, or a form of deviant behaviour is classified under the title of the negative, the insane, the different. Negativity is the big umbrella term under which the different concepts of madness are found. Foucault's intention was to raise the possible notions of truth under the title of negativity, argues Derrida (2001).

Questioning the boundaries of negativity, Foucault problematizes the historical description in relation to the geographical, political, and ethnographic boundaries. What about the totality of reason? This complex question could be answered in the following way: men are to men not only the image of their own truth, but also the eventuality of their death. In other words, madness is the absence of one entire work, or what is not uttered. It is the emptiness.

The historical constitution of madness is impossible to be dealt with without making the necessary allusions or any kind of structural study in relation to institutional policies. The historical framework of negativity is what within the previous centuries situates madness as a female malady. Sigmund Freud in his "Cinco Lições de Psicanálise" (1992) tries to define what the three key elements, namely of hysteria, absence and double conscience mean to the marrow of the historical constitution of madness.

Freud claims that hysteria is not an organic cerebral disfunction, but it is an enigmatic state which simulates the whole set of acute cerebral perturbations, since Greek medicine time. The patients labelled with hysteria are considered the transgressors of the scientific laws, being considered the ones who exaggerate and simulate. Along with the hysteric symptom, some alterations in relation to the personality followed by confusion are easily observed. This is named absence by Freud. Such absences build up a world of phantasy absolutely sad, which last some hours and finish up by the time the phantasies formed were revealed. Furthermore, it is difficult to recognize that the psychic alteration during the absences is a consequence of those phantasies, which are intensely affectionate.

Another interesting aspect to be highlighted is the one which refers to what Freud names double conscience. It is possible to be found in one single personality several mental combinations. These can be independent more or less from each other. Whenever this mental division of personality happens, what remains connected to the conscience is called the consciente and what remains disconnected is named inconsciente. In Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen", what can be observed is a clear case of double conscience together with moments of absences. The protagonist, Susan Rawlings, lives on the borders of both the consciente and the inconsciente, once metaphorically, the image brought by the river and its perennial flow of water is what brings her full moments of absences. Living in the borders, or in the limit, is what Derrida in "Fazer Justiça a Freud: a história da loucura na era da psicanálise" (2001) questions as being the margins of topological problems. He states that

O limite nunca é um lugar de repouso, ele nunca forma uma linha indivisível e é sobre essa margem que se colocam sempre os problemas de topologia mais desconcertantes. Onde se situará, aliás, um problema de topologia a não ser sobre a margem? E por que haveríamos de nos inquietar com a margem se esta formasse uma linha indivisível? Além do mais, um limite não é propriamente um lugar. (p. 101)

The ideas mentioned contribute to a better understanding of the historical constitution of madness. Historically speaking, women were believed to be more vulnerable to insanity and to be differently affected by it in the conduct of their lives or to suffer from a failure in intelligence as Lessing states in the beginning of her short story.

Men stand for reason, culture, discourse and the mind, while women stand for silence, irrationality, nature and the body. These are Showalter's words in the "Introduction" for *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1985). They call attention to what has been credited in

relation to the dualistic system of language, representation and sexual differences. The same can be applied to Susan, Lessing's protagonist in "To Room Nineteen", the image of a well structured married goes rotten as she, Susan, becomes aware of the incarcerated institution she belongs to, a man-made symbol.

Such a man-made symbol may be viewed as a synonym for confinement, law, prison, slavery, dependence, emptiness, the evacuation of one's self and, mainly, a source of mental disorder, instability, hysteria or schizophrenia. Female consciousness has been viewed as hysteria or the unconscious form of feminist protest. Throughout the centuries, madness has been represented as feminine, a female malady. According to a traditional psychiatric view, little attention has been given to questions of gender and feminine insanity represented in literature, by means of auto-biographies, personal letters and even a non-structuralist analysis of a literary work suggests that the double conscience and here named of madness, or the disrupting of a monolithic personality, is the price women artists pay for the exercise of their creativity in a male-dominated world. Several outstanding names could be mentioned and several characters too. From Ophelia and Lady Macbeth, to Pecola and Grace Marks, Susan Rawlings is the one who impersonates an unconscious feminist protest.

Doris Lessing questions women's role in "To Room Nineteen", going against the principle that a "woman's 'proper' role is to be wife and mother. Escape from either role - that is - whether from that of a downtrodden worker or downtrodden wife and mother - was left open along only a few routes, illness and disability being the chief one" (Szasz, 1977, p. 78). The ethic of individualism and the development of privacy is closely tied to the capitalistic economic system. This is what castrates female consciousness in the solidified and well-known institution which is marriage, leading them, women, to embarrassment, humiliation, mental disability and making them a borderline personality.

Literature has been trying to represent madness as a social phenomenon. All the characters mentioned before were the result of the environment they were inserted in as the main determinants of one's individuality and social behaviour. Dr. R. D. Laing's studies on the interpretation of schizophrenia parallels the evolution of Lessing's fiction in 1960s. The interpretation of this "mental disease" might be viewed as an intelligible and potentially healing response to conflicting social demands. In other words, what is called "normal" is a product of a social-political repression. This annihilates "thinking" and goes contrary to what Dr. Laing states in *The Politics of Experience* and *The Bird of Paradise* (1975):

Each of us is the other to the others. (...) Our first way to experiencing the world is largely what psychoanalysts have called phantasy. This modality has its own validity, its own rationality. (...) Phantasy is a particular way of relating to the world. It is part of, sometimes the essential part of, the meaning or sense (le sens: Merleau Ponty) (pp. 26-27)

It is also important to mention that negativity, or the element of negation, is in every relationship and every experience of relationship. From it comes nothing as experience, the emptiness.

What is poetry? In literary terms it can be the compounded of communication, invention, fecundation, discovery, production and creation. Creation evokes miracles and miracles are everywhere because they take part in the formation of phantasies. Literature is nothing more than this exercise of power, the power of the unconscious, the phantasies which emerge from "recollections in tranquility", appropriating William Wordsworth's words.

Showalter (1985) sets the primary roots for the discussion of social demands and its relation to the building up of a female consciousness. She states that schizophrenia is the product of women's repression and oppression within the family. Yet, the idea of psychosis pointed out by Laing as the divisions within the self can be a parallel to what Sigmund Freud names the double conscience. The self and its compartmentalizations are a directly influence of those moments of absences, which were also studied by him. Furthermore, schizophrenia, hysteria or female consciousness can pass safely through as a quest for self-discovery.

In Lessing's "To Room Nineteen", not only the previous concepts mentioned can be clearly applied to the borderline personality which is Susan Rawlings, but also to the notion of limit defended by Derrida (2001), together with the blurring of frontiers between sanity and insanity.

Studies have proved that the majority of cases of insanity reflect women struggling for femininity within their family and society. The questions about Laingian case studies referring to women as the product of their environment were left unanswered in several representations in literature. Doris Lessing's works come closer to such issues and try to resolve them by means of her borderline characters. Showalter in *The Female Malady* (1985) quotes Lessing, Laing, and Clancy Sigal making references to their mutual influences:

In the late 1950s, [they] "formed a circle of almost incestuous mutual influence"<sup>1</sup>. But Lessing had had a lifelong interest in madness and in the unconscious. "I have spent nearly thirty years in close contact with mental illness", she wrote in 1972, "first through people who were 'mad' in various ways, and with whom I had very close contact ... I have always been close to crazy people"<sup>2</sup>. (p. 238)

In accordance to what has been mentioned, "To Room Nineteen" is one of Doris Lessing's masterpieces to be discussed under social demand issues. This means that her protagonist, Susan, is one of the most interesting case studies in literature to be diagnosed as a borderline figure, once she, throughout the narrative, builds up her female consciousness or her schizophrenic attitudes.

The first line of the mentioned short story establishes its mood indicating a story which is going to happen in the liminality of normality: "This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence: the Rawlings's marriage was grounded in intelligence." (p. 150) The atmosphere established is the one of total conformity to the rules and regulations, which run a patriarchal society. The liminality of normality is broken when, by chance, Susan, comes to the conclusion that her role at home is a useless one, which means she is a hundred percent devoted to the familiar institution which nullifies her as a human being, as a capitalized woman. Only when she gives attention to the river flowing at the back of her house, does she understand how her life was going by like it.

Emptiness. Yes. Emptiness is the most important word to qualify or distinguish Susan's life. "What she saw was a woman alone" (p. 157). Only her thoughts would make company to her. And these same thoughts were the ones which haunted her and brought her enemy to life. A creature created by her figments of imagination. Such figments contributed to the intense moments of absences experienced by her. She seemed to be away from her cruel and nude reality by the time she was wondering alone in her garden, just watching the river flowing like her empty life.

Self-imprisoned. Caged. Confined. These were the themes which haunted her fragile and impotent being till the moment she dares to spend hours away from home, only by herself, to try to find an answer to all those conflicting questions haunting her mind. The phantasies created highly contributed to those moments in which affection was missing. Affection not in relation to her family but to herself.

Several symptoms could be brought to the fore in relation to her disease because she was aware, or perhaps, partially aware of what was happening to her. She knew she was going through a very different process of awareness as she could see the "reflection of a madwoman" (p. 168) when brushing her hair looking at the windows. The double conscience is easily understood when Susan spends those several hours away from home. Conscience is she at home when longing for those hours of solitude, on the contrary, inconscience does she become by the time she is in those moments of silence, looking at nowhere, maybe being even numb in relation to the oppressive and repressive world in which she was inserted.

Susan's psychic divisions are the results of the intense fight between her internal and external powers. Powers which reflect her moments of absences, her highly inconscience desires, and the strong will to blur the frontiers of both her family and her (dis)integration. That is, the frontier line of her divided self should be blurred according to her, due to the fact she liked her children, her husband and her house.

Moreover, her psychic quest was stronger as that feeling of “emptiness [which] run deliciously through her veins like the movement of her blood” (p. 172).

Hysteria? Schizophrenia? Or simply a building up of female consciousness? Susan Rawlings knew she was going against those established patterns of society. She knew she was on the verge of breaking the bonds, which connected her and her family. Fighting for independence and going against the limits of “normality” fairly contributed to those stigmatized labels or diagnoses that names someone as insane. Hypocrisy? Why not? Why not succumb and be within the limits established by the so-called society? Or in a better way, the so-called patriarchal society? Susan Rawlings was able to be in contact with herself only when listening to the hiss of gas, to that “... faint soft hiss of the gas that poured into the room, into her lungs, into her brain, as she drifted off into the dark river (not highlighted in the original)” (p.180).

It is certainly possible to scrutinize within both feminist theory and a cultural history of madness having as a counterpart the unconscious protest of feminists as patriarchal values carry a high level of interventions in such studies. It is also common knowledge that “a person might feel sad or elated, insignificant or grandiose, suicidal or homicidal, and so forth; he is, however, not likely to categorize himself as mentally ill or insane” (Szasz, 1977, 11). These words contribute to what has been discussed so far. They mean that labeling is a very dangerous task. What happens, for instance, in Doris Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen”, is the fact that a woman, well-married and highly successful in her familiar bonds, stops to review and rethink her left-overs.

Lessing’s story is able to criticize the patriarchal institution that is marriage under new perspectives. These perspectives are the ones which refer to the (dis)integration of a female personality, its overcrossings of limits and, especially, the metaphorical disease named schizophrenia. Is Susan a schizophrenic character? Or is she only trying to rethink her policies of secrecy and privacy within her private world? Dr. Szasz’s words quoted before are able to answer these questions.

What is curious about Susan Rawlings is that she impersonates a kind of emblematic figure, which stands for all those who are striving for dissociating their self from the collective one. By collective, one can understand being the social demand or patriarchal world we still live in. As a matter of fact, Susan comes to the conclusion that there will not be any more room for her in such a world since she does not conform to its policies. As a result, she will find room only in her own confinement, or her own solitude. Death or perhaps the black river is the only remedy for those who find themselves living in the borderline of social demands.

## NOTES

[1] Lesley Hazleton, “Doris Lessing on Feminism, Communism, and Space Fiction”. New York Times Magazine, July 25, 1982, p. 27.

2 Lessing to Roberta Rubenstein, 17 November 1972, quoted by Rubenstein, *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 197.

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