

Female Psychological Deterioration Through Islamic Feminist Lens: A Critical Analysis of Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen"

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a critical analysis of Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" through the theoretical framework of Islamic feminism, examining the psychological implications of gender inequality within private spheres. Drawing on Dr. Ziba Mir-Hosseini's Islamic feminist theory, this research investigates how systemic inequalities in domestic spaces contribute to female psychological deterioration, ultimately affecting broader societal structures. The study focuses on the protagonist Susan's psychological disintegration within an ostensibly egalitarian marriage in 1960s London, revealing how subtle forms of inequality can lead to profound psychological consequences. Through careful analysis, this research demonstrates that women's mental well-being, particularly in their role as mothers, significantly impacts family dynamics and social stability. Rather than merely critiquing patriarchal structures, this study examines how socially constructed domestic roles and expectations create barriers to genuine equality in private spheres. The tragic culmination of Susan's psychological journey into suicide serves as a powerful lens through which to examine the broader implications of gender inequality in domestic spaces. This research contributes to contemporary discourse on gender equality by highlighting the distinction between superficial and substantive equality, while suggesting that Islamic feminist principles offer valuable insights into addressing these complex issues.

Introduction

Doris Lessing, the British writer, has been known as one of the finest novelists. She was the oldest person ever to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature at the age of 87. In 2001, she was awarded the David Cohen Prize for lifetime achievement in British Literature. She has been ranked fifth on a list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945" by The Times. Feminism is one of the major themes of her works as she is known for her strong sense of feminism.

There's no doubt that fiction makes a better job of the truth" (*The Golden Notebook*). So, she wrote the truth based on the unsettled minds which roots back in the inequalities from

which a mother goes through. The paper discusses this effect of injustice and inequality through the lens of Islamic Feminism. First Mr. Hosseini throws light on the perspective of Feminism that it is

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about men as well as about women. It is a critique of patriarchy as a system that exists all over the world. How patriarchy destroys the relationship between man and woman as it happened in this story, where the relationship of Mathew and Susan is destroyed and utterly disturbed. And the inner disturbance of the mother, which is caused by the sense of injustice, disturbs the whole system of the family. So, as the family is the unit of society, so the woman is the unit of family. The disturbance of a family develops a sense of restlessness in society. Mr. Hosseini refers to Feminism that it's a consciousness and a movement to do actions to bring positive changes. And the term Islamic Feminism started to emerge in 1990s. It refers to a group of a woman who are feminist, but their frame of reference is religion. They went to reclaim their justice and equality that the Quran and Prophet brought for everybody including the women. They are asking a question that why the women have not been treated as equal citizen both in interpretations of the text and in the system of law that is developed in Islam. The fact is that same as the whole world, even in Muslim context the women are treated as second class citizen. They are asking why? So, they are reclaiming justice and rights. It is a movement, it is the consciousness, within that movement there are different perspectives, but they agree together that the source of their legitimacy is Quran and Islam. So, they locate their feminism within religious tradition and cultural tradition. Apart from feminism and movement, it is a knowledge project. It gives a methodology. It is a part of the critical branch of knowledge. It is introduced as the part of knowledge building concept of gender which is distinguished between biological differences between men and women by sex. And how these biological differences are viewed by

societies and how these biological differences became the base of undermining women's equality and humanity in society. According to perspective of Islamic Feminism, Dr. Ziba Mir Hosseini points that this equality does not mean that men and women should have identical rights, she says that Muslim Feminists are asking for subsequent equality, which is lacking in most of the contexts, as in house of Mathew and Susan. The Islamic Feminism is not asking for the formal equality, not the equality in appearance, but the equality should be in laws. Equality should be in opportunities and results. If Susan gets equality of attitude, conduct and behavior from Mathew, she does not lose her peace of mind.

She even lost her sense of self-identity when she started to figure out what she had given to her relationship of marriage and what she got back in return. This inequality proves to be poisonous for her life. She was a passionate lady, who dreamt of making her life purposeful. When she lost that purpose, she lost her sense of proportion also. She forgot that she is a mother also, and there is a whole family who depends upon her. Dr. Ziba said that "writing a novel seems to be a way out" Interview to Moyers & Company. This short story is a way out where the dearth of subsequent equality is reflected which is a demand of Islamic Feminism. In this story, if Susan looks for subsequent equality, she spends a peaceful life with a healthy mind, but as she was looking for identical equality, that's why she was nowhere. She has lost connection with her (Mir-Hosseini 2021) husband, with her children, with her home, with her house help, and in the end even with herself. In the West, the divorce and the suicide rate are rocketing. The World Population Review reflects that the divorce

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rate is higher in developed countries and mostly in Western countries. Russia's divorce rate in 2022 was 3.9. while there is not any Islamic country in the list of higher rates of suicide and divorce rate. World Health Organization published report can be viewed as the reference that the Muslim countries have no challenges in this regard. The teachings of Islam demonstrate a way of life, where everyone, no matter, women or men, is attributed to their set roles and values.

It is inevitable to understand that Islam dictates the lessons of a free and easy-going life. Even few Western writers also wrote in detail about the place of women in Islam and her rights. John Esposito came up with a book, "Women in Muslim Family Law", in which he profoundly shared his deep studies which he did to comprehend the value and space of Muslim women, which is mostly misunderstood in Western society. Islam is the name of that free but comprehensive and dignified space for women, where she is allowed to do business like Hazrat Khadija, and she can willingly take pride in performing household activities. But a husband must provide real peace of mind to his wife, meanwhile, the male plays his part as a breadwinner of the family also. Along with delivering all his social responsibilities, he must know how to balance his social and financial duties as well as his personal responsibilities towards his family. According to Islamic ideology, the man is responsible for the mental and physical peace of his wife. In this story, the wife is restless because she is unable to understand her value and her purpose in life, so the responsibility lies on the shoulders of husband that arises the debate that why he stayed unaware of the restlessness of his wife. Islam allows it equally to men and women to make themselves useful. The only

distinction lies because of their compatibility to do something. As a male, a man cannot reproduce, he has no power to bring a new life in this world as a woman can do so. Same as that the female body does not allow her to perform few specific tasks which a man can perform easily. According to Islamic Feminism there is no inferiority or superiority among male and female, there are only differences, which we should embrace gracefully. Islam contains a positive view towards the will of everyone. It propagates the fact that differences do not make anyone superior to anyone.

Islam believes in making everyone educated and well-informed enough to handle their issues by their own. In this story of Doris Lessing, *To Room Nineteen*, this is not the behavior of man, who pressurizes his wife to leave her job or to be a full-time housewife, it was her own will to be fit in the so-called ideal frame of the good women in their society, who leaves her all dreams just because of her house and children.

Doris Lessing submissively shows in the beginning of the story how the couple were equally talented in their jobs. Both had well-paid jobs. Matthew was a subeditor for a large London newspaper, and Susan worked in an advertising firm. He was not the staff of which editors or publicized journalists are made, but he was much more than "a sub-editor. But the female chooses to be a fulltime housewife as she knew it that how a perfect mother should look like be, and by the way who developed and beautified the idea of a perfect mother, again it's the scheme of patriarchy who has even trapped the minds of even the most talented, educated and the brilliant minds of the society. Patriarchy in a sense is also dangerous for the life of a male who all his life staggers to establish his role as a perfect

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man who melts himself for the attainment of that role.

Their life seemed to be like a snake biting its tail. 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, the house and the garden--which unit would have collapsed in a week without her.

The demand of arranging a babysitter for the kids was made by the wife, which her husband fulfilled without a delay. It shows clearly that she could have asked for it many years before, if she was willing to keep on doing her job. But she herself was undecisive, because she herself does not know what she wanted to do. The first right of a woman is to be well acknowledged, well-disciplined and aware of her own self. A woman needs to be trained and educated in a way, that she must know that when and how to take a better decision for her own self. Most of the female problems arise because they themselves do not acknowledge their worth. The male, the society, the laws, and culture, everything lays behind her own perception and handling of the things. A real woman who propagates and demands equality, freedom, rights etc., she must be well known to her own self first. Otherwise, no matter how successful life she lives, or no matter how many maids she keeps, or no matter how many vacations she takes to get relaxation like Susan of this story, she cannot settle her mind like the main character of this story. She shivers, shatters and breaks because she did not learn to balance herself. And Islam is the perfect institute for that.

The dominant society even did not allow women to be strong enough to make

the right decisions for themselves. She could have demanded a helper for the handling of kids before leaving the job. Susan could have possibly established herself well in her job so she could manage the burden of the pay of house help. But she did not realize it. she was a passionate woman; she has tried her best to keep her vision throughout her time that she should start her job again after her kids started to go to school. But up till the time she got that time, she forgot that what she was, and she utterly lost herself. Islam gives the equal liberty to female, and male to grow and prosper. This story revolves around the female character, who was a successful lady, was enjoying a bright career, but after her marriage, because of her kids, she took the decision to postpone her job for a while. All the time, when her kids were growing age, she kept it on her mind that she would start back her job and career right from the time when her kids will start going to school. But because of her restlessness and empty mindedness, she started to feel useless and lost herself. She even at the end commits suicide. With all her responsibilities as a mother, she is a living figure, who wants herself to be recognized and figured, which her husband was unable to give her.

May be from feminist point of view, the male gave freedom and rights to women outside the home, but inside, still there is a lot of struggles to go on. Balance is the priority of every settlement. This missing balance became the cause of the suicide of a mother figure. This trauma is being depicted by Doris Lessing in a unique and adopted way. Doris Lessing says in an interview, "It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, that is our phoenix, that represents us at our best, and our most creative."

Islamic History and the Islamic Feminism

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To ask for equality was not easy in 7th century when Islam stated the rules and laws for the equality of women. The time when the tradition was to bury the daughters alive, that time, the Prophet Muhammad gave the clear impression that male, and female are equally important and must be entertained at an equal level of justice and law. Quran became the first book of the world who gave the equal opportunities and equal level of living to women and men. Even in few cases, the women enjoy the high ranks. As is said, Heaven lies under the feet of a mother. The hadith is a fine example that how al-Sulami went to Prophet Muhammad and asked for the permission to join them in battle, but Prophet asked, "Do You have a mother?" Al-Sulami replied, "yes." The Prophet told him, "Stay with her, because paradise lies beneath her feet.

No one question, that why it's not father? Islam clarifies that men and women are equal before God. Women got permission and freedom to take part in battles and to run their own business. Throughout the world, it's a hot debate that Muslims should look towards their religion for the solution of every problem and issue. In Islamic state of Medina, men and women used to offer their prayer side by side. The first wave of Feminism came in the late 19th century & early 20th in which there was the concern to get the rights of vote and the equal property rights for the women. To add on here it is worthy to pen down that Islam gave these rights to women long time ago, when Europe even did not realize its need.

For men there is a share in what their parents and close relatives leave, and for women there is a share in what their parents and close relatives leave- whether it is little or much. These are obligatory shares" (4:7)

It is Islam which propagates the equality based on deeds and acts, as in another verse, Allah has mentioned that He does not like favoritism, in chapter An-Nisa, verse 124:

"But those who do good whether (male or female) and have faith will enter Paradise and will never be wronged even as much as the speck on a date stone"

The points and the awareness which is being shown in the late 19th century by the first wave of Feminism, which were mentioned and clarified long ago by our Islam. The need is just to understand and act upon that and to preach the right knowledge and message of our religion. The west takes the credit of giving respect and freedom and equality to the women around the globe, but the need is to highlight that in reality, the Muslim women got all that in 7th century. It is only Europe who still has to look for equal laws, rights rules and regulations, Islam has given the complete code of life long before. Allah only admires and blesses based on faith. Allah has mentioned in chapter An-Nahl, verse 97:

"To whoever, male or female, does good deeds and has faith, we shall give a good life and reward them according to the best of their actions"

Islam has given the legal statues to women and raised her life and level in society and even in the four walls of her compartment. Western Feminism advocates according to the western socio-culture which is a way more away from the Asian context. In Iran, the rise of Islamic Feminism is also based on this challenge. The 1979 revolution got the wave of opposition to patriarchy and its domination. According to Iranian Islamic government, women rights were proposed as the interest of Islam, rather than of west.

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Many believers were reluctant to completely tie with the western thought and ideology of Feminism and on the other hand, it was also questionable from many believers that how the promises and practices of Islamic government differ. To get the roots of the cause and to practice the right ways of equality compatible with the Muslim states, many activists found it appropriate to form and rely on the accomplishment of the women's movement throughout the world in context of Islam and west. Other does not believe on the relevance of Islam and feminism, and in between they found it appropriate to figure the feminism through the filters of Islamic culture and politics. Although there are differences, the mainstream of western feminism such as women's control on their bodies tuned alert.

From all parts of the Islamic states, the voice of feminism merged into the Western Feminist thought. Qasim Amin as the first feminist of the Arab world was the Egyptian philosopher, promoted the value of justice and equality of women. And he faces controversies. He basically criticized the early marriage, lack of women education, seclusion and veiling. Same as that Begum Faizunnesa Choudhurani from Bengal is known as the social activist who raised her voice against injustice. She campaigned the female education and many social issues during late 19th century when there was first wave of feminism taking flight in Europe. She became the first female "Nawab" of south Asia. In Iran, Afkhami did her best for the achievement of women's learning and social justice. She bore exile too, but she did not abandon her task. All around the globe, female activists from all Muslim countries, performed their role to bring up the real face of the equality of gender in Islam. Islamic Feminism from Iran got the formal beginning. After the revolution, the

emergence of Islamic Feminism spread around the women of all classes, no matter they belong to a lower, middle or elite class. Islamic Feminism started to make references to Quran and Hadith and Traditions of Islam. There are seen the conscious efforts of reinterpreting the Quranic references which are related to gender equality. The traditions of Muslim women fighters and the rulers in Islamic history are the proofs of the importance of female in Muslim society and Muslim Tradition. The companion of Prophet Nusayba bint Kaab also known as Umm 'Ammarah, taught Islam to other women. She introduced herself as a female teacher and then she came in front as a brave fighter when she took part in Battle of Uhud. She actively defended our Holy Prophet. She is the fine example for the Muslim women that at that century, our female were activists and fighters. They were not confined inside four walls. By giving these examples, the set mind set about the conservative slant of Islamic regime would be normalized and sensualized. To challenge those Muslim thoughts, which are stubborn to accept the social abilities and guts of female, Islamic Feminism digs into the historical references and here we see that both the secular feminism and Islamic feminism are at the same point of reveling the discrimination on the basis of gender and sex. Islamic Feminism is attempting to build up the ways of getting equality and social justice to the women through reforms of institutions. Within the patriarchal and existing norms, this is a fine try as Deniz Kandiyoti states that "bargaining with patriarchy". She did extraordinary work for the enlightenment of female statues. When the Shah of Iran in 1963, started the "white Revolution", along with many other reforms, when he reformed the right of vote for women, a major clash has been seen from Ulama community. When Khomeini

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gave rights to women to be in chamber, there were the echoes against him from all clergies. Islamic Feminist are concerned to refigure and reinterpret the Quranic verses to upraise the political and social status of women in Islamic states. After the reforms of Shah, the place of women is enhanced in public and private spheres. In the story of Doris Lessing, it is clear that the female protagonist commits suicide as she was not able to get the intention and love and the rights in private sphere. When male or female do not prioritize their relationship and when the worldly greed and the intention towards materialism crosses the limits, the relationships loss their importance. Islam emphasis on keeping the sanctity of relations, rest all comes latter.

“O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person (Adam), and from him (Adam) He created his wife [Hawwa (Eve)], and from them both He created many men and women and fear Allâh through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (do not cut the relations of) the wombs (kinship)” (Qura’n, 4:2)

Susan goes through a trauma, she was all the way alone in raising her children as her husband was always busy in his job and duties. If they limitize their unnecessary and unlimited expensis, he may not have to strive this hard. He was all the way deep in collecting the worldly pleasure and comfort for his family, despite of the fact that his family was in need of his time and attention. He was lost in the outside world somewhere and Susan was inside, waiting and longing for his attention and love. That’s why there is clearly mentioned in Islam that do not ruin yourself in competing with others in collecting the wealth.

“*Competition will destroy you, untill you visit the grave*” (Qur’an,102:1-2)

The couple started a happy life, but they failed to evaluate timely that what was going wrong around them. They were unable to understand and handel their mental condition, the situation went out of control, and she committed suicide. As the narrator informs us in a story that.

Their life seemed to be like a snake biting its tail. Matthew's job for the sake of Susan, children, house, and garden—which caravanserail needed a well- paid job to maintain it.”

They were wise and intelligeny enough at same time that they had a view of society and they in mind planned to avoid those similar mistakes.”

On the contrary, they used their intelligence to preserve what they had created from a painful and explosive world: they looked around them and took lessons. All around them, marriages collapsing, or breaking, or rubbing along (even worse, they felt). They must not make the same mistakes, they must not.” (902)

But life and materialism caught them. They were trapped from the same reasons and same facts.Susan and Matthew were both well-informed and responsible people. And the inner storms and quicksands were understood and charted. So, everything was all right. Everything was in order. Yes, things were under control.” (903)

How from this much controlled life, life went to an edge where there was no other way than committing suicide. Imam Ghazali says that three habits destroy a man or woman: greed, envy, and pride. Ibn’Abbas and Anas bin Malik reprted that the Messenger of Allah said, “If a son of Adam were to own a valley full of gold, he would desire to have two. Nothing can fill

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his mouth except the ear(of the grave). Allah turns with mercy to him who returns to Him in repentance”

If the husband had given the time, intention, and care to the family and wife, the situation might differ. The Quran supports and pins the relationship of husband and wife on the social need of give and take.

And one of His signs is that He has created for you, spouses from among yourselves so that you might take comfort in them, and He has placed between you, love and mercy. In this, there is surely evidence (of the truth) for the people who carefully think.” (Qur’an 30:21). There is no way out there that a caring relationship goes on the verge of destruction. “They (your wives) are clothing (covering) for you, and you too are a clothing (covering) for them” (Qur’an 2:187).

Islam gives the lesson to love, trust and care the partner. Morehow the law of inheritance is there in Islam, since the beginning of our religion. By implementing these laws women became more strong and mentally healthy. Islam teaches morality in order to attain a peaceful society. The clashes between the actions, interpretations and the actual implications of the Islamic values are therefore exit because of the many misleading and misguided interpretations which are from patriarchal system for the benefit of the set system. To reinterpret the Islamic resources from the eye view of female perspective, the reforms can transform the set patriarchal beliefs, and the results can be totally upside down. Ijtihad is the base of Islamic Feminism as it gave the reasons and consent of reinterpretations of Hadith and verses. The modern linguist construction of Arabic language also leads the way of different

angles of interpretation of Islamic verses. Apart from reinterpretation, another tactic is to dig in the history where the role of female and their sacrifices have been covered behind the strong walls of patriarchy. With the help of works in Islamic Feminism, the actual rights and justice to women is being reversed which was defused because of the social norms and cultural obstacles. No Islam forces the women to stay in an abusive relationship. Prophet Muhammad PBUH has given the right to female to choose for her and to fire divorce as Khulah, if she feels herself not in a healthy and happy relationship with a particular man. Islam gives the teachings which are compatible to the mental peace and health of each and every member of society. If a lady does not feel secure or peaceful, or contented in a relationship, in Islam, she has the right to choose her path by her own. In 2009. the global movement of Musawah, initiated by 12 women from different countries, is working in depth under the shadow of Islamic Feminism. Musawah is a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. Under this movement, they are focusing on “A Conscience – Growing Exercise” which helps them to foster livelier in their lives. They are exploring the ways of grounding the marriage life in equality, justice and mutual well – being in the light of Quran and Sunna. In the shadow of Western thought, culture, and feminism, the Muslim societies have been misrepresented and Islam is misrepresented. The movement of Musawah, across the region, playing its part in culminating the Islamic thought by revealing the facts of Muslim history and tradition. Men was never in charge of women, throughout the history, Quran, Sunna, men is being introduced as the partner of female. When unconsciously he became in charge, and when he started to dictate. Women is blessed by God with the

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power of wisdom, she can figure out the good and evil. The need is to rethink the matter of authority in Muslim Legal tradition. Family is the base of society, and Musawah is working actually for strengthening the foundation of this base.

Conclusion

The best is to say that the history and all interpretations were developed by the male perspective, from the outlook of male phenomenon, and now with the sense of Feminism, the Muslim women came in light

to get their rights, on the way of their fight of justice and equality, they had been always shut by giving the examples and references of Islam and Quran, but now they are up to find the real meanings of the Quranic Text and Hadith, to know that what really Islam has said about them. How God can make the female this much subordinate that she can't make her space in the world. The merciful God cannot do this injustice to female, so the Feminist initiative has given the way to Islamic Feminism to investigate the roots and to find the real meaning and real place of female in Islamic context.

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