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In the Search of Self: Female Identity and Subjectivity in Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen"

We are all just vessels through which identities pass: we are lent features, gestures, habits, then we hand them on. Nothing is our own. We began in the world as anagrams of our antecedents.¹

The concept of identity is an essential factor which conditions the awareness of existence of an individual and simultaneously defines their social affiliation, ways of behaving and patterns of perception, in a particular social and cultural space. Identity as a conceptualized issue is, however, a complex and problematic socio-cultural phenomenon, the observation of which echoes in a wide spectrum of approaches and various definitions of the same idea.

This paper aims to discuss the concept of female identity as both a socio-cultural construction and as an individual structure. Simultaneously, with reference to Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen,"² an attempt is made to answer the question of the existence of the self of an individual as private and social. On the analogy to particular theoretical aspects such as the marginalization of an individual, dichotomy of the language and abjection, for instance, motifs such as the dualism of the female psyche, the quest for origins, the formation of private identity and suicide, and their connection with the process of self-formation, will be taken into consideration.

¹ Maggie O'Farrell, *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox* (London: Headline Review, 2006), 118.

² Doris Lessing, "To Room Nineteen," in *A Man and Two Women* (Frogmore: Panther Books, 1977).

Identity is ... maintained through social and material conditions. The social and the symbolic refer to two different processes but each is necessary for the marking and maintaining for identities.³

According to Kathryn Woodward, identity is a socio-cultural project based on the idea of binary oppositions. The statement that social norms and cultural stereotypes shape the perception of a female identity and her self-definition is accurate. Furthermore, socio-cultural regulations prevent us from perceiving or manifesting any potential traces of individualism and creativity. In such circumstances the notion of "I" can be only defined through the prism of the social status one possesses and through the hierarchy of cultural values dominant in the society within which they exist. Nevertheless, the obligation to have a schematic self-definition and to function within the frames of the imposed order of things may be challenged or consciously rejected, as in the case of Doris Lessing's female protagonist of the story "To Room Nineteen."⁴

Susan Rawlings disavows all the limitations imposed on an individual by the majority and makes a solitary quest to discover her true self. The female character rebels against the regulations, and specified ways of perceiving the self, and initiates her own personal struggle to retain her uniqueness and release her desires. She rejects patterns of behaviour accepted by the society and the role of the Feminine Mystique,⁵ a stereotypical vision of an ideal woman, mother and housewife who is obedient and sacrifices all her passion, ambitions and dreams for the sphere of the domestic. Susan's view of life and conscious abandonment of social values and the norms of conduct that precisely define both female identity and her obligations can be regarded as a reflection of Simone de Beauvoir's point of view on female destiny.⁶

She is opposed to the essential. He is Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being, She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is incidental, inessential her.⁷

³ Kathryn Woodward, ed., "Conceptions of Identity and Difference," in *Identity and Difference* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 12.

⁴ Lessing, "To Room Nineteen."

⁵ Rosemary Agoenito, ed., "The Feminine Mystique," in *History of Ideas of Woman. A Source Book* (London: Perigee Trade, 1978), 377.

⁶ Dan Dervin, "Matricentric Narratives During Sixties," in *Matricentric Narratives. Recent British Women's Fiction in Postmodern Mode*, Women's Studies, Vol. 16 (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997).

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), 717.

Beauvoir presents female identity as a project precisely designed and defined by the dominant social group. She indicates that woman is perceived in the patriarchal society not as an individual but as the Other. Furthermore, her socio-culturally shaped identity not only imposes on her a position subordinate to that of the male, but also suggests that the identity of a woman cannot be discussed in other contexts such as procreation, submission and otherness.

Consequently, there emerges the notion of social identity as one constructed by the social order, in conformity with patriarchal tradition, and imposing on its members the ritual of imitation of exemplary modes of female ideals. The social self symbolizes, thus, woman's fulfillment as an icon of both a perfect mother and wife. However, such embodiments of social and cultural orders may function as oppressive mechanisms directed against femininity as well. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "... woman's procreative destiny must imprison her in repetition and immanence."⁸

As a matter of fact, Susan Rawlings does not consider motherhood to be an extension of female identity and the essential goal of a woman, but as a particular impediment to the achievement of inner harmony. Moreover, she undermines the value of the institution of marriage and emphasizes the impossibility of maintaining a dialogue between an individual and a society. This perspective points to the fact that socially-constructed identity is an artificial product designed to suppress woman's creativity and, what is more, it becomes a meaningful obstacle to the process of self-formation of an individual. "It is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in woman. There are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or 'I' without which a human being, a man or a woman, is not truly alive."⁹

The protagonist searches for private space, an anonymous place where she would be capable of expressing her true self, of liberating suppressed desires, and where by means of being herself, she could achieve the inner harmony. Room Nineteen, rented in a casual hotel secretly, becomes for Susan the Room of One's Own,¹⁰ the refuge where all the boundaries limiting the capacities of an individual vanish. In Room Nineteen she lives in a separate ideal world; she transforms herself into an artist creating her new identity. In Room Nineteen she just "Is." A place which is both anonymous and free from public influence, in contrast with the sphere of domestic, gives one the opportunity to discover the essence of self and to obtain moments of liberty and forgetfulness. The refuge found by Susan enables her to discover unknown senses of female identity.

⁸ Dervin, "Matricentric Narratives," 38.

⁹ Agoenito, "The Feminine Mystique," 380.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2, gen. ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 2153-2214.

What did she do in the room? Why, nothing at all. ... She was no longer Susan Rawlings, mother of four, wife of Matthew. She no longer was mistress of the big white house and garden, She was Mrs Jones, and she was alone, and she had no past and no future.¹¹

Continuous existence in the new hermetic but private reality where her true identity can be manifested becomes the main aim in the life of Susan and due to invariable social regulations, her craving for seclusion gradually turns into an addiction. "She was determined to arrange her life, no matter what it cost, so that she could have that solitude more often. An absolute solitude, where no one knew her or cared about her."¹² Room Nineteen is the only place where she has the opportunity to liberate her true self and to manifest her subjectivity, where it is not still dependent on social conventions. As Woodward states:

Subjectivity includes our sense of self. It involves the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions which constitute our sense of "who we are" and the feelings, Subjectivity involves our most personal feelings and thoughts.¹³

Susan's subjectivity is not yet entirely in accordance with the concept suggested by Woodward. Lessing's protagonist does not create her subjectivity within the framework of social conventions. The sense of true self is, thus, adopted and experienced not through culture and language, which produce a particular code by means of which self-definition is formulated, but beyond them, secretly and in seclusion. Particular points of view and beliefs that she identifies with constitute her second identity within the confines of Room Nineteen. Susan's desire for individualism is satisfied, however, at the cost of being excluded from the social order. The protagonist is perceived by society not as an individual but as the Other to whom, as to any opposition, negative cultural value is attached. "Difference can be construed negatively as the exclusion and marginalization of these who are defined as 'other' or as outsiders."¹⁴

By making a conscious attempt to define herself in agreement with her inner convictions, Susan transgresses the boundaries enforced on an individual by the social sphere, stresses the existence of "the problem that has no name"¹⁵ and deconstructs the myth of the Feminine Mystique. However, to question culturally accepted practices and meanings established by the social order is tantamount to rejection of the universally accepted social code. But this is unavoidable while

¹¹ Lessing, "To Room Nineteen," 278.

¹² *Ibid.*, 271.

¹³ Woodward, *Identity and Difference*, 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁵ Agoenito, "The Feminine Mystique," 377.

revealing the identity of an individual. The need to reject the dominant systems of representation related to both culture and meaning becomes the prerequisite for creation of a desired representation. Moving beyond limitations produced by the social order and neglecting its artificial code, created for a specific purpose and directed against the individual, cannot, however, go unpunished.

The act of transgressing boundaries established by both culture and society, in order to achieve the final liberation of an individual's identity has serious consequences as well. There is no escaping the fact that exclusion from the social sphere is an unavoidable consequence of Susan's rebellion against the imposed order of things. Furthermore, it is an indisputable proof of the hostility of the social order and of the dominant conventions towards the presence of any potential traces of difference or individualism.

Social order is maintained through binary oppositions in the creations of "insiders" and "outsiders" as well as through the construction of different categories within the social structure where it is symbolic systems and culture which mediate this classification.... The identity of the "outsider" is produced in relation to the "insider."¹⁶

Simultaneously, another aspect of the problem arises. Susan's inner conflict between the desired, the true self, and the social self projected upon her by the society, finds reflection in the textual structure of the story. The private identity of the female character is constantly repressed and imprisoned within brackets. By contrast, the social self symbolizing the perspective from which she should be seen and defined, both by the society and by herself, does not encounter any limitations and can be perpetually present in the textual reality. By analogy, the parallel between the division of the female psyche into the private and the social sphere and Julia Kristeva's theory of the symbolic and the semiotic order in the language¹⁷ may be drawn.

In the light of Kristeva's methodology the symbolic order is connected with reference; it is based on the rules and is inscribed into the sphere of the social, whereas the semiotic order partly possesses the characteristics and desires of its user, of the individual.

The semiotic is the "raw material" of signification, the corporeal, libidinal matter that must be harnessed and appropriately channeled for social cohesion and regulation. Kristeva describes the semiotic as "feminine," a phase dominated by the space of mother's body.... By contrast, the

¹⁶ Woodward, *Identity and Difference*, 33.

¹⁷ From Julia Kristeva: "The Semiotic and the Symbolic," Part 1, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, gen. ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 2169–2178.

symbolic is regulated by secondary processes and the Law of the Father. The symbolic is the domain of positions or propositions. The symbolic is an order superimposed on the semiotic.¹⁸

In this perspective, on the analogy of the dichotomy of language introduced by Kristeva in "Revolution in Poetic Language,"¹⁹ the specific structure of Lessing's story and double identity of her protagonist can be discussed. Lessing begins her short story with an introduction characteristic of stories for children which aims to point at the omnipresence and repetition of the same socially-constructed patterns of conduct and perception. The previously mentioned practices establish social norms and accurately determine the actions and responsibilities of the collective subject. Further development of the narration and analysis of structure of the text indicate another layer of signification and the proper, yet bracketed, story of the individual. "In Lessing, ..., the narrative voice switches from an impersonal tone, ..., to a first-person, present-voice."²⁰ The bracketed textual reality becomes a symbol of the semiotic order and of an independent but rejected female subject, imprisoned within the framework of social norms and cultural stereotypes. In the words of Kristeva: "Poetic language, ... but perhaps better termed '*the text*' – becomes an instrument of productive violence because it involves 'the sum of unconscious, subjective and social relations'. ... the text is in this sense a practice; that is, it becomes a means of transforming 'natural and social resistances, limitations, and stagnation', once these enter any of the various codes of signification."²¹

Similarly to the analysis of structure of the text presented above, Kristeva's two modalities of the semiotic and the symbolic orders of the language may thus be perceived as two inseparable components symbolizing the duality of the human psyche. But language not only determines our communication, yet is also involved in the process of molding our identity. Each of the orders introduced by Kristeva participates in a different process of the self-formation of the individual, and simultaneously exposes a meaningful split in the human psyche. The double textual structure of Lessing's story is, therefore, reflected in the dichotomy of the psyche of the female protagonist. In the words of Kristeva both modes are equally important and dynamic, and present two distinct aspects of the identity formation of a subject.²² However, for Lessing's female character

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva: "The Semiotic and the Symbolic," *Kristeva Extracts*, accessed January 5, 2007, www.ualberta.ca/~dmiall/Ghotic/Kristeva.htm.

¹⁹ Michael Payne, "Revolution in Poetic Language," in *Reading Theory. An Introduction to Lacan, Derrida and Kristeva* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publications, 1993), 162–204.

²⁰ Dervin, "Matricentric Motifs," in *Matricentric Narratives. Recent British Women's Fiction in a Postmodern Mode*, 66.

²¹ Payne, "Revolution in Poetic Language," 165.

²² *Ibid.*, 167.

such a split of identity becomes a burden and a source of inward conflicts originating in the impossibility to retain a private self and to manifest one's identity as an individual. The components of the inner dichotomy of the human mind are deprived both of the initially established hierarchy and of dialogic interaction. Susan's state of mind in the light of prevailing norms established by the majority not only indicates madness or schizophrenia, but also becomes for her a serious obstacle to the manifestation of desired self. Under the circumstances, the dialogic relation between the symbolic and the semiotic modality cannot be maintained.

The symbolic order is initially inscribed in the social and cultural existence of Susan alongside the semiotic order. Nevertheless, the symbolic order, represented by the sphere of language which is imposed on the female protagonist as a system of socially accepted values, is unquestionably the dominant mode. Furthermore, the same system of signs, functioning as an artificial code that adjusts meaning, patterns of perception and rules of conduct, may be considered an equivalent of Bourdieu's concept of habitus.²³

In the words of Bourdieu, habitus may be defined as a particular matrix of ways of behaving, of modes of thinking and of norms of naming the surroundings.²⁴ The diffused schemes of perception have a meaningful impact on the process of self-formation and on understanding of the reality. Those deliberately established social conventions not only suggest the acceptable social practices but also create a specific example of collective identity which is in conformity with the ideas of the majority and serves as a model for members of a particular community. Such an identity is deprived of any characteristics of an individual self and is created in order to support and validate a certain social order. Both the symbolic modality and the habitus have an impact on the process of shaping and defining the identity of a subject and are incontrovertibly connected with the issue of domination of the social order and with the symbolic hierarchy of values introduced by it.

"All signifying practices that produce meaning involve relations of power, including the power to define who is included and who is excluded."²⁵ The symbolic order dominates over the semiotic one, as the superimposed and invariable component of identity and symbol of laws of language and cultural conventions, yet in the case of Susan Rawlings a gradual passage from the symbolic to the semiotic may be observed. Despite the fact that she is forced to exist within the framework of the symbolic order and to accept the diffusion and artificial definition of the self, the case of Susan demonstrates that the semiotic order may transgress limitations established by culture and society. "The symbolic control of the

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Męska dominacja*, trans. Lucyna Kopciwicz (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2004), 45.

²⁴ Bourdieu, *Męska dominacja*, 46.

²⁵ Woodward, *Identity and Difference*, 15.

various semiotic processes is, however, tenuous and liable to break down or lapse at certain ... psychically significant moments.”²⁶

Therefore, the semiotic order is capable of becoming the dominant as well. The dichotomy of Susan’s mind constantly exists, yet with the passage of time a consistent denial of the social self and a conscious manifestation of newly-acquired identity becomes evident. Moreover, the increasing power of the semiotic order over the symbolic one indicates the fact that the existence of a dialectic relation between the two modalities, introduced by Kristeva, can be undermined. Lessing’s female protagonist not only privileges the semiotic order and her private identity but also articulates her libidinous drives. She consciously accepts the private self as the dominant identity and the only one she desires to possess. Susan unquestionably rejects the rules of language, social norms and cultural conventions that construct the socio-cultural and collective self, and gradually makes her way towards the seductive sphere of the semiotic, described as “feminine” and correlated with notions such as water, fluidity, rebirth and the space of the maternal body.

Susan is constantly tempted by the semiotic order and often encounters on her journey of self-discovery as an individual various symbols of the sphere of the semiotic. The river that plays a crucial role in Susan’s life becomes a powerful metaphor of nature, suppressed drives and the private self. Moreover, the river has associations with repressed dreams and increases further the most secret yearning for solitude, subjectivity and forgetfulness. In contrast with the symbolic order, represented by collective identity, social position, the constant monotony of everyday life, her role as a mother and wife and the civilized space of the domestic, symbolized by the garden, the river becomes the embodiment of private identity, privileged by the protagonist herself but rejected by the social order.

... 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 her veins.²⁷

The part of Susan’s double identity which she desires and which is simultaneously shaped by her individual beliefs and judgments, in contrast to the collective self, becomes for her the only one which offers her space unlimited by any regulations. She can be an individual and exist in accordance with her own convictions. The garden, which reminds her of a domestic prison, and society, which defines her as insane, are the other elements creating a mosaic of the symbolic order, which she consciously neglects. Only the depth of the river

²⁶ Kristeva, “The Semiotic and The Symbolic,” in *Kristeva Extracts*.

²⁷ Lessing, “To Room Nineteen,” 265.

is capable of offering her a space which is not governed by any boundaries, the condition necessary for her to manifest and decipher the dominant part of her psyche. Furthermore, the river becomes a symbol of the gradual passage from collective to individual self and has an influence on the creation of the identity of an independent person who is completely aware of her own uniqueness. Susan avails herself of the opportunity to reveal the domination of the private self and profoundly believes in the rightness of establishing the private self's supremacy. However, this neglect of the social order and undermining of trust in collective identity it constructs cannot be regarded as a process which is uncomplicated or which does not demand sacrifice.

Consequently, the question arises of the possibility of a complete denial of the symbolic modality in order to emphasize the domination of the semiotic one, and the need for an individual to die as a consequence of this act. For Susan Rawlings, to make the decision to reject the symbolic order is tantamount to death. This irreversible act of escape from both the social order and the social identity symbolizes a conscious and determined rebellion against the oppressive symbolic order. It indicates the consistent defiance by Susan of its regulations. The choice of death made by Susan was motivated by her attempt to retain the semiotic order, the embodiment of her precious and enigmatic identity, individual capacities and hidden desires. The suicide committed by the protagonist becomes, thus, the only way for her both to liberate her private self from the influence of the sphere of the social, and to free herself from the scope of the symbolic order.

In this state of affairs, the issue of abjection,²⁸ its connections with the female body and with self, and its relation to Susan's act of committing suicide becomes significant and is worth further examination. The issue of abjection introduced by Kristeva in "Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection,"²⁹ is unquestionably one of the essential notions associated with recent approaches to the female body and to the self. Kristeva's concept of abjection not only functions as a meaningful category in numerous theories of the female body within the feminist discourse, for instance, but also may be regarded as the crucial factor in the examination of such phenomena as maternal function, subjectivity, formation of identity and the act of suicide and its implications. Lessing's story may be perceived both as a parallel of rejection of the body as the source of social oppression and as a repudiation of a socio-culturally shaped identity.

Kristeva's methodology may be applied while discussing the act of suicide committed by Lessing's protagonist. Susan consciously decides to take her own life, and this is considered by her to be the only way to deny the symbolic order and the social identity which is its artificial construction. "... I expel myself,

²⁸ Julia Kristeva, "Powers of Horror: Approaching Abjection," in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

²⁹ Oliver, *The Portable Kristeva*, 229–47.

I split myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself."³⁰ Death is considered by Susan as a passage to a new secret individual identity which threatens the social order. Susan deeply believes in the rightness and necessity of her deed and is determined to sacrifice her body, considered both as a symbol of the social self and as the mediator of the symbolic order, so as to attain inner harmony and to manifest the incontrovertible supremacy of the private self.

She had about four hours. She spent them delightfully, darkly, sweetly, letting herself slide gently, gently, to the edge of the river. Then, with hardly a break in her consciousness, she got up, pushed the thin rug against the door, made sure the windows were tight shut, put two shillings in the meter, and turned on the gas. ... She was quite content lying there, listening to the 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.³¹

The act of death is, thus, a particular stage in giving birth to her new self, a quest for origins, a step towards the semiotic order which is the only one that offers Susan the possibility of shaping her desired identity as an individual. She commits suicide motivated by a desire to exist in a private reality, not be governed by any repression or habitus whose imitation and constant obedient repetition become the destiny of each member of society. For her, then, the struggle to retain the supreme identity, the opportunity to be unrestrained as an individual, becomes her destiny. Under the circumstances, the conclusion that Susan's deliberate death, her abjection of the body and of the social self, is the only possible way for her to fulfill her desire to be herself and to shape her private identity, seems to be inescapable. Consequently, the assumption that rejection of both the social order and of socio-cultural identity is impossible is hard to avoid. In this state of affairs, the act of committing suicide, as equivalent to abjection, is necessary in the process of the self-formation of an individual and in her further search for the essence of self.

In the conclusion of this paper, it can be said that the possibility of rejection of a socio-culturally shaped identity of an individual does not exist. Being an individual is, thus, to be considered as being the Other who has no voice and no right to exist within both a community and a culture. On the basis of the issues discussed herein it can be assumed that possession and manifestation of the supreme and the desired private self is tantamount to the act of deliberate social death. The concept of identity as a socio-cultural structure may thus be regarded not only as oppressive and static but also as inscribed into the destiny

³⁰ Oliver, *The Portable Kristeva*, 231.

³¹ Lessing, "To Room Nineteen," 288.

of each female member of society. Manifesting the true self becomes thus synonymous to becoming the Other, an individual marginalized and rejected by the society and its conventional framework of thought.

Karolina Błężyńska

W poszukiwaniu siebie:
kobieca tożsamość i subiektywność w opowiadaniu Doris Lessing
To Room Nineteen

Streszczenie

Niniejszy esej porusza tematykę tożsamości jednostki, a także, nawiązując do rozmaitych teorii literackich i krytycznych, podejmuje dyskusję dotyczącą różnych definicji i spojrzeń na to zagadnienie, zarówno w kontekście psychologicznym, jak i społeczno-kulturowym. Powtarzając za Kathryn Woodward, można powiedzieć, że tożsamość jest swego rodzaju konstruktem społeczno-kulturowym narzuconym jednostce przez dominującą prawa i regulacje oraz, częstokroć patriarchalny, system wartości (krytykowany chociażby przez Simone de Beauvoir, a reprezentowany przez metodologię Pierre'a Bourdieau), który z założenia nie pozostawia przestrzeni na jakiegokolwiek odstępstwa od obowiązujących i ściśle określonych zasad. W nawiązaniu do historii bohaterki opowiadania Doris Lessing – *To Room Nineteen* – niniejszy tekst ma na celu zmodyfikowanie dotychczas istniejącego patriarchalnego pojęcia tożsamości jednostki poprzez przedstawienie wizerunku kobiety, która podejmuje wyzwanie walki o swoją niezależność, wolność wyboru i chęć pozostania sobą. Susan Rawlings staje się bowiem synonimem walki o zachowanie swej prywatnej tożsamości wolnej i niezależnej kobiety. Odrzucając uniwersalne wzorce, definicje i role – w szczególności matki i żony – narzucone jej przez społeczeństwo i kulturę, Susan podejmuje samotną walkę o zachowanie swej indywidualności oraz prywatnej przestrzeni, gdzie nie jest zmuszona odgrywać żadnych ról w Goffmanowskim teatrze codzienności, ani też zakładać teatralnych masek, które zacierają wszelkie ślady kobiecych uczuć, emocji i indywidualizmu. Kwestionując instytucję małżeństwa i predyspozycje kobiety do bycia matką, Susan stopniowo odkrywa inną, prywatną rzeczywistość, która nie uprzedmiotawia ani nie ogranicza kobiety, lecz przeciwnie – daje jej możliwość ekspresji swych pragnień i posiadania tożsamości zgodnej z jej własnym „ja”. Przekraczając granice wyznaczone przez kulturę i społeczeństwo, bohaterka odnajduje sens własnego istnienia. Mimo że tytułowy pokój numer 19 staje się swoistą oazą szczęścia i samotności, która oferuje Susan możliwość ujawniania swej prawdziwej i pożądanego tożsamości oraz gwarantuje jej beczenną anonimowość, społeczeństwo i kultura narzucają jej także swój model tożsamości, który z upływem czasu staje się jej brzemieniem i doprowadza ją stopniowo do (auto)destrukcji. W świetle metodologii Julii Kristevej, znacząca staje się zatem koncepcja abiektu, a także pojęcie sfery semiotycznej oraz symbolicznej, która umożliwia przedstawienie jeszcze jednej dychotomii – relacji między umysłem a ciałem kobiety, a w konsekwencji między prywatną (prawdziwą) a społeczną (narzuconą i dlatego też teatralną) tożsamością. Czy możliwe jest zatem funkcjonowanie w dwóch światach naraz? Czy owa dychotomia tożsamości może doprowadzić do sytuacji, w której, pozostając prywatnie sobą, w sensie społecznym będziemy jednocześnie kimś zupełnie innym?

Karolina Bleszyńska

À la recherche de soi-même :
identité et subjectivité féminines dans le récit *To Room Nineteen*
de Doris Lessing

Résumé

Le présent essai aborde la question de l'identité d'un individu, mais aussi – tout en se référant à de nombreuses théories littéraires et critiques –, entreprend une discussion concernant les définitions et interprétations différentes de ce problème, aussi bien dans le contexte psychologique que socioculturel. En suivant les propos de Kathryn Woodward, on peut dire que l'identité est une sorte de structure socioculturelle imposée à un individu par les lois et réglementations prédominantes, et souvent par un système patriarcal de valeurs (critiqué par Simone de Beauvoir, et représenté par la méthodologie de Pierre Bourdieu) qui par principe interdit toutes dérogations aux principes strictement définis et étant en vigueur. En se référant à la héroïne du récit de Doris Lessing – *To Room Nineteen* –, le présent texte a pour objectif de modifier la notion patriarcale (existant jusqu'à présent) de l'identité d'un individu tout en présentant l'image d'une femme qui accepte le défi de lutter pour son indépendance, sa liberté de choix et la volonté de rester elle-même. Susan Rawlings devient le synonyme d'une lutte ayant pour objectif de conserver son identité privée d'une femme libre et indépendante. En rejetant des modèles universels, définitions et rôles – en particulier ceux de la mère et de la femme – qui lui sont imposés par la société et la culture, Susan entreprend un combat solitaire pour garder son individualité et son espace privé, où elle n'est pas forcée de jouer de rôles dans la mise en scène goffmanienne de la vie quotidienne ni de mettre de masques théâtraux qui effacent tous les signes des sentiments et des émotions féminins, et ceux de l'individualisme. En questionnant l'institution du mariage et les prédispositions de la femme à être mère, Susan découvre petit à petit une autre réalité, la privée, qui ne chosifie ni ne limite la femme, mais bien au contraire, elle lui donne la possibilité d'exprimer ses désirs et d'avoir une identité qui soit conforme à son propre « moi ». En transgressant les frontières déterminées par la culture et par la société, l'héroïne retrouve le sens de sa vie. Bien que la chambre éponyme numéro 19 devienne une oasis particulière de bonheur et de solitude qui offre à Susan la possibilité de manifester sa véritable identité fort désirée et lui garantie l'anonymat inestimable, la société et la culture lui imposent leur propre modèle d'identité qui, avec le passage du temps, devient son fardeau et la conduit petit à petit à l'(auto)destruction. À la lumière de la méthodologie de Julia Kristeva, la conception de l'objet devient alors significative. Il en est de même avec la notion de la sphère sémiotique et symbolique qui permet de présenter encore une autre dichotomie, c'est-à-dire une relation entre l'esprit et le corps de la femme, et par conséquent entre l'identité privée (véritable) et sociale (imposée, donc théâtrale). Est-il donc possible de fonctionner dans deux mondes en même temps ? Cette dichotomie de l'identité peut-elle conduire à une situation où, en restant nous-mêmes dans le privé, nous serons – au sens social – des personnes tout à fait différentes.