

## Economic Abuse: A Neglect Facet Of Domestic Abuse Against Women In Doris Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen”

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### Abstract:

*When we talk about domestic violence, the first thing that strikes our mind is physical or sexual abuse but many hidden forms of abuse are difficult to identify like economic abuse against women. Economic abuse is an insidious form of domestic violence that is perpetuated against women. This kind of abuse is significantly associated with physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. This research paper explores the theme of female independence, autonomy, and economic abuse in the relationship in Doris Lessing's 1963 short story "To Room Nineteen". The story portrays the life of Susan Rawlings, a middle-class woman, who becomes a victim of economic abuse within her marriage. After marriage, her life revolves around her husband, her four children, and her home. The female character, before getting married, had a well-paid job, working in an advertising firm but she was compelled to give up her job because, after the birth of four children, Susan shut herself out from the public sphere and was restricted to private sphere, which was the root cause of sexual inequality between man and woman. That was the beginning of her misfortune. Without work, she had no money and had to rely on her husband. So, by analyzing the text and contextualizing it with relevant social and economic issues, this paper aims to shed light on the subtle yet profound impact of economic control on women's lives. So, this paper analyzes the theory of "Learned Helplessness" in the context of domestic violence against women by "Martin Seligman" and the Liberal feminism approach by 'Betty Friedan'.*

**Keywords:** *Economic abuse, learned helplessness, female autonomy, Inequality.*

**Introduction:** Violence against women or gender-based violence is a global phenomenon. Domestic violence has many forms and kinds like physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and emotional abuse. This paper deals with one of the less explored types of domestic abuse which is economic abuse against women. Financial or economic abuse research in the context of VAW is scarce, with the majority of studies on the issue coming from the United States and Australia, and taking a quantitative approach. As a result, it is important to investigate the link between financial abuse, its many manifestations, and other types of abuse utilizing qualitative methodologies and concentrating on other welfare situations to broaden our understanding.

The term economic abuse was just introduced into discourses when it was identified as a tactic used by perpetrators within the Duluth Power and Control Wheel. Yet it is only recently that researchers have turned their attention to defining and understanding it. It was first used in the late 1980s to describe the tactics used by abusers within the Duluth Power and Control Wheel,

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but it was not defined in the research literature until 2008. Then Adam and colleagues set out that:

‘Economic abuse involves behaviors that control a person’s ability to acquire, use and maintain economic resources, thus threatening their economic security and potential for self-sufficiency’ (p.564, 2008).

### **Definition of Economic Abuse:**

The Westminster Government's Domestic Abuse Bill – It recommends that the term 'any behavior' within the definition is understood to include controlling tactics that sit under the constructs of economic restriction, exploitation, and sabotage, the definition recognizes perpetrators will also prevent a partner from using\maintaining goods or services and, attention is given to the suggestion that single incidents of economic abuse would not fall under this definition. Controlling behaviors that limit women's economic well-being have been described within the violence against women literature since the 1970s. Economic abuse has only recently been recognized as a distinct kind of violence against women. Historically, economic abuse has most often been included within the definition of psychological abuse (Shepard & Campbell, 1992; Tolman 1989,1999). Recently, researchers began to identify economic abuse as a different form of abuse. It is also recognized by the UK government in its definition of domestic violence as set out by the Domestic Violence, Crime, and Victims Act (2004): "Any incident of threatening behavior, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality. This is further affirmed by the developed administrations, In Tackling Violence at Home: A Strategy for Addressing Domestic Violence and Abuse by the Northern Ireland office (2005), domestic violence is defined as including financial abuse. Tackling domestic abuse; The All-Wales National Strategy (Welsh Assembly, 2005: 6) states that domestic abuse can include 'control over access to money' whilst the Scottish Executive's (2003) National Strategy for preventing Domestic abuse includes 'withholding money' as a form of controlling behavior within its definition of domestic abuse. As most studies have been focused on physical, sexual, and psychological violence, this paper seeks to draw attention to one of the abstruse forms of domestic abuse, which is economic abuse experienced by women, and describes its consequences on the victim's health and development. The British and Indian governments recognized economic abuse as part of domestic violence over a decade ago, reflected in the consultation paper, Safety and Justice: The Government's Proposals on Domestic Violence (Home Office, 2003) in the UK and the Protection of Women from Domestic violence Act 2005 in India (Chowbey, Punita, 2017, 5).

### **The Connection between Economic and other kind of abuse:**

It has been linked to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Financial or economic abuse, the words used interchangeably in this research, refer to identical acts. However, it might be beneficial to consider financial abuse as a subtype of economic abuse "Indian law recognizes what is termed "economic abuse" in the special legislation against domestic violence -the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005(PWDV-Act), violence or abuse in the economic context does not form part of the public consciousness in the same manner as intimate partner violence of a sexual and physical nature does. Economic violence holds back women from being truly independent, obstructs their ability to make money-oriented decisions, and is frequently a major contributing factor in their ability to leave abusive situations or separate themselves from their abuser (The Indian Express, 2023). Women’s Aid (2019) reported that psychological repercussions of Economic abuse can hurt a woman's self-esteem, focus, memory, and mental health, limiting her capacity to work.

For Instance; "He had access to all my bank account statements and accounts. I did not know anything about his finances" (economic abuse survivor).

This type of abuse might be difficult to detect. It might take time to develop and may begin with protective or caring behavior. When most people think of domestic violence, they envision physical, emotional, or sexual aggression. Although economic abuse does not leave marks, it can have a detrimental effect on a person's safety and well-being now and in the future. This abuse is intended to restrict someone's freedom. It is frequently encountered as part of a behavioral pattern known as coercive control. You've probably heard the term "financial abuse" before. The phrases economic abuse and financial abuse are sometimes used interchangeably. Financial abuse is a type of economic abuse that involves things like stealing money and forcing someone into debt. Economic exploitation is broader. It is about more than just regulating a person's money and resources. It also takes into account their other resources, such as shelter, food, and jobs.

### **Economic Abuse in "To Room Nineteen"**

This paper deals with the analysis of economic abuse against women in Doris Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen" under the framework of Seligman's theory of "Learned Helplessness" and the "Liberal Feminism" approach by 'Betty Friedan'. "Doris Lessing, who was raised in a middle-class family, is one of the writers who challenged the limitations of the housewife's social role and psychological situation. This short story was first published in the collection "A Man and Two Women" in 1963 and portrays the life of Susan Rawlings, a middle-class woman, who becomes a victim of economic abuse within her marriage. By analyzing the text and contextualizing it with relevant social and economic issues, this chapter aims to shed light on the subtle yet profound impact of economic control on women's lives. Lessing emphasizes how women are financially reliant on their husbands, especially when they are not working, by displaying the demolition leveled against Susan. Susan could be a victim of her class and place in the world bored middle-class housewife stereotype or of her gender things go wrong because once she has given up "being herself" to be a wife and mother, she cannot recapture who she once was.

"To Room Nineteen" was published at the height of the feminist movement. During this time, women worked hard to rediscover their lost selves, to see the world through their own eyes, and to reflect on how they lived their lives. It was a reaction to the destruction of a postwar society in which women were expected to find satisfaction in conventional marriage and family structures. Those women wanted to be useful to the new social situation they were in; they wanted to follow the new rules, but deep inside there was a feeling of incompleteness, anger, frustration, and lack of assertiveness that they couldn't or shouldn't express in words because they didn't know how to describe it. Betty Friedan (an American feminist writer) understood them since she was one of these women who had the same issue of verbalizing that should be kept inside their brains regardless of their cultural background. She understood it to the point where she "baptized" such an agonizing feeling as "the problem that has no name" in her famous book "The Feminine Mystique" (1963), and together with other idealistic intellectuals first began the second wave of feminism in the United States, a social phenomenon that has helped to change Western Women's History ever since. Therefore, the researcher analyses the liberal feminism approach by Betty Friedan in this paper.

The narrative opens with the introduction of Matthew and Susan Rawlings, a couple noted for being highly practical, calculating, and well-prepared in all they undertake. While this appears to be a happy family, Susan, who becomes a housewife while Matthew continues to work, soon

crumbles. As Cowley said “Susan's mental state starts to deteriorate, pushing her more and more towards the comforts of isolation- and it happens almost entirely because of gender roles of that period and systematic limitations held in place against women” (Cowley, 2019). Susan, whose universe centered around her husband, four children, and her home in a mid-twentieth-century London suburb, now feels despair and suffocating in her home because before getting married Susan had a well-paid job and also had a talent for commercial drawing. But after getting married, Susan was compelled to leave her job for the sake of her children, husband, and home and this is the beginning of her tragedy because if there is no job, no money. Without a job or money, she was completely dependent on her husband for everything. This leads to her husband's faithful behavior. In this case, “Friedan urged women, once their children were attending school, to seek employment that would challenge their capacities and provide personal satisfaction. Women could enjoy a family with children but needed to get involved in pursuits outside the domestic sphere as soon as possible by entering into public life and paid employment (Blog, 2010, p334).

“First, I spent twelve years of my adult life working, living my own life. Then I married and from the moment I became pregnant for the first time I signed myself over, so to speak, to other people. To the children. Not for one moment in twelve years have I been alone, or had time to myself. So now I have to learn to be myself (Lessing, p.351).

The pursuit of freedom is a recurring motif in Susan's journey. Trapped in the societal expectations of a perfect marriage, she seeks liberation from the constraints that confine her. The title, "To Room Nineteen," refers to the space where Susan finds solace and a fleeting sense of freedom. The room becomes a metaphor for the sanctuary she craves, away from societal norms and expectations. Susan's quest for freedom raises questions about the sacrifices individuals make in the pursuit of societal acceptance and conformity.

### **Theory of Learned Helplessness:**

“In “To Room Nineteen” Lessing’s condemnation of the effects of the institution of domesticated marriage and motherhood is the more forceful because Susan Rawlings appears at first to be a most unlikely candidate for craziness and suicide” (Hunter, 1987,94). Sa Junior (2003, p.1,4) reproduces what Doris Lessing said and wrote once in 1972: “I have spent nearly thirty years in close contact with mental illness: 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.” Such proximity to insanity was one of the sources of inspiration she used for writing *To Room Nineteen* (qtd. in Camara, 239). "The question is: wouldn't it be more logical if Susan had searched for some psychological help instead of committing suicide? How is it possible that such an intelligent woman could have been so short-sighted and resistant to look for help? We recognize that Susan needs immediate assistance, but she was unable to overcome her fears and ask for help. This condition leads to the theory of learned helplessness by Seligman. “Hopelessness, helplessness, dependence, low self-esteem, these conditioned weaknesses ensure that Susan prefers entrapment and death to change” (Hunter E. 92). The theory of Learned Helplessness develops when an individual realizes, through a succession of failed experiences, that he or she has no control over the outcome of events, that the event hurts the individual, and that the individual expects to fail before the event occurs. The individual perceives no link between effort and goal achievement. "Learned Helplessness, in psychology a mental state in which an organism forced to bear aversive stimuli, or stimuli that are painful or otherwise unpleasant, becomes unable or unwilling to avoid subsequent encounters with those stimuli, even if they are "escapable" presumably because it has learned that it cannot control the situation. The theory of learned helplessness was conceptualized and developed by American psychologist Martin E.P. Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania in the late

1960s and '70s. Seligman coined the term learned helplessness to describe the expectation that outcomes are uncontrollable. Learned helplessness has since become a basic principle of behavioral theory, demonstrating that prior learning can result in a drastic change in behavior and seeking to explain why individuals may accept and remain passive in negative situations despite their clear ability to change them. In his book *Helplessness* (1975), Seligman argued that as a result of these negative expectations, other consequences may accompany the inability or unwillingness to act, including low self-esteem, chronic failure, sadness, and physical illness (Nolen L. 2023). In the connection of this theory, Susan wanted to express her condition to Matthew but she was not able to do that because she thought she would be misunderstood. The feeling of helplessness surrounded her. "All her efforts would become worthless. Failing to express or articulate what she feels, she begins to retreat gradually – at first from her husband and her family, and then from her real life entirely" (Camara et al; 241). "Some research suggests that Economic Abuse is a distinct phenomenon that might have consequences that are at least as pernicious or even greater than physical or sexual abuse (Spinazzola et al; 2014). As a result, persons who experience EA from their partner, for instance, might feel powerless or helpless in their relationships. They may fight back or attempt to leave these relationships but may eventually stop trying, behaviors which are called 'learned helplessness' (Overmier and Seligman, 1967).

As Susan has been unemployed for twelve years, since having the first of their four children; as a result, she must beg Matthew for money every week, without explaining to him why she is leaving the house so frequently. Susan thinks she has no place in this world; her life is pointless and useless; she has become a distant mother, a boring wife, and an awful homemaker. Susan has to convey all of her sadness and inner desperation to Matthew, but she knows he will not understand, he will not believe her, and worse, he may think she is insane. In her opinion, there is no other solution to her pointless life except to disappear. As Quawas argued "Rather than continue to live in a radically alienated position, she chooses the only healing she can find through death. She chooses death over compromise with the crushing image of the ideal woman, the monolithic scripted self that patriarchy has called upon women to produce and create. She remains true to herself which she discovers and creates through her introspection, the "real" authentic self that has been in "cold storage" during her married life" (Quawas R.2007, 111).

Friedan rightly said "In the case of feminine role the situation is radically different.... The woman's fundamental status is that of her husband's wife, the mother of his children (p122).

Dantas & Tobler (2003) and Torralba (2007) assure that through psychic suffering, the subject, even being and/or feeling vulnerable, may find a possibility to humanize himself. Dalmolin & Vasconcelos (2008, p.42) affirm that overall, the subject in this case has two options: he can either seek assistance to leave his comfort zone and try new experiences, or he can stagnate as a result of his helplessness and personal failure in this process. When he aims to succeed, Fadiman & Frager (1994) assert that he tends to overcome even more challenging and toilsome obstacles more easily" (qtd. in Camara et al; 2014, 240). On the contrary, if his experience is painful, he tends to give up trying and his self-esteem may be deeply affected. This might also eventually result in an irreversible feeling of complete helplessness, according to Torralba (2007). According to Lyra et al., A person who is facing some kind of psychic suffering normally presents some characteristics in common such as indefinite emptiness, helplessness, anxiety, apathy, social isolation, sadness, blame, unsatisfying interpersonal relationships, sorrowing and he may consider life is completely meaningless (ibid, 240).

“As for the money, five pounds, she simply asked Matthew for it. She saw that she was not even frightened he might ask what for he would give it to her, she knew that and yet it was terrifying it could be so, for this close couple, these partners had once known the destination of every shilling they must spend” (Lessing, p172)

In the article "Economic Abuse: A Subtle but Common Form of Power and Control", Christy et al; (2020) argued that "EA is part of control and manipulation utilized by the abuser, often leaving them with a "sense of helplessness" and "unawareness" of their current financial situation".

Susan comes across as financially submissive. She needed money to pay the rent on room nineteen, which she had reserved to spend her time discovering herself and looking for ideas to attain self-actualization. She was completely reliant on her spouse since she couldn't find work. In reality, gendered norms and behaviors are the dynamic forces that begin and take control of women. Susan was not allowed to challenge her spouse due to societal standards and expectations. Susan suffered alone for two reasons. First, she was burdened by conventional beliefs that urged her to do things in a certain way. Second, she muted herself and suppressed herself. When she takes a holiday alone, she desires to move beyond the isolated world of her familial duty, reinforcing her network of identity, but as she prowls "over the wild country", she begins to see how her job as the hub of the family or the Angel in the House has occupied and consumed ten years of her life.

“There was no need to use the dramatic words 'unfaithful, 'forgive, and the rest: intelligence forbade them. Intelligence barred too, quarreling, sulking, anger, silences of withdrawal, accusation, and tears. Above all intelligence forbids tears" (Lessing, p155).

### **Quest for Freedom:**

Susan's journey into "Room Nineteen" represents her desperate quest for autonomy and personal fulfillment. Her seclusion in that room symbolizes the isolation and loneliness that many women experience when they seek to break free from traditional gender roles and the expectations imposed by a patriarchal society. Her quest for solitude underscores the societal discomfort with women asserting their independence. In "To Room Nineteen," Susan's breakdown is a culmination of the unending expectations society places on women – to be good wives, mothers, homemakers, and even career women. The story exposes the impossibility of reconciling these contradictory roles in a patriarchal framework, pushing women to the brink. The story critiques the institution of marriage itself, as it often enforces patriarchal norms and perpetuates gender inequality. Susan's struggle with her marriage reflects the oppressive nature of traditional unions that can stifle a woman's individuality and dream. Betty Friedan truly says; “A woman has no identity except as a wife and mother. She does not know who she is herself! (24).

Stark observes that denial of money is among the ‘most prominent’ occurring in ‘more than half of all abusive relationships’ (2007, 272). Studies certainly seem to indicate that anywhere between 43 and 98% of women experience economic abuse as part of domestic violence.

Lessing in this short story, crystallizes the invisible restraints imposed on women and their pathetic results of them. When Susan who is regarded as an intelligent woman is deprived of money and intellectual improvement for the sake of proper wifedom and motherhood- which are societal assertiveness- she loses her real self and the chance of attaining that self-offer madness and suicide in such a society. "I am simply not myself," says Susan (Lessing, 425). Betty Friedan says that “the wife having worked before marriage, or at least having been



educated for some kind of intellectual work, finds herself in the lamentable position of being 'just as a housewife' (52).

"Susan knows that she is trapped in her own house and feels like a long-term prisoner, living out a "prison sentence". Her sense of identity has been lost in the Sturm and Drang of her marriage and her life has been a masquerade and a performance to gratify other people. She is constantly tethered to her family, weighed down by their demands and the "pressure of time" (Quawas, 2007 p.115).

Susan's journey unfolds as a quest for personal freedom, a yearning for autonomy that clashes with the traditional gender roles and societal expectations of her time. The story suggests that societal norms can stifle individuality, leading to a profound sense of entrapment. Susan's pursuit of freedom takes her to Room Nineteen, a symbolic space where she can momentarily escape the constraints of her role as a wife and mother.

### **Statistics of Economic Abuse:**

According to a new Australian government survey, one in every six Australian women has experienced economic abuse by a partner, with an estimated 1.6 million having their money and job opportunities controlled and restricted; women reported economic abuse at a rate more than double that of men, with 7.8%, or an estimated 745,000, experiencing partner economic abuse. Kristein Diemer a sociologist University of Melbourne says that "economic abuse can have one of the greatest impacts on women deciding or choosing or finding a way to leave a relationship because she may not be able to support herself and her children, and this form of abuse can impact her for her lifetime". Sharp Jeffs (2015) estimates up to 98% of women seeking services for domestic abuse reported instances of Economic abuse in their partnership. In the same study, she found that 20% of women in the general population reported experiencing some form of EA. In addition, she reported that women who are 25 to 34 years old and who have children are more likely to experience EA (Jeffs, 2015).

Conner said in the article titled "**Financial Freedom: Women, Money, and Domestic Abuse**" (2014) that financial constraints, in particular, have a significant effect in limiting the freedoms experienced by women. Furthermore, financial insecurity is one of the main reasons why, after achieving independence, a battered woman has few options and may eventually succumb to her partner's attempts to reunite. Economic insecurity is a bond that links a woman to her abuser, luring her in again and again; it is, in fact, one of the strongest predictors of continuous violence after the abuse begins. Financial insecurity raises the risk levels, limits avenues of escape, and diminishes the possibility that a survivor of intimate relationship violence would be free from her abuser once released.

Christy K. et al; (2020) in the article "**Economic Abuse: A Subtle but Common Form of Power and Control**" conducted interviews in England to expand the knowledge base and provide support regarding the reality and impact of economic abuse on women.

Adams E.A. et al; (2008) in the article "**Development of the Scale of Economic Abuse**" confirms that specifically, all of the women who took part in the study had encountered psychological abuse; 98% had endured physical violence in the last months of their relationships; and an incredible 99% had experienced some type of economic abuse at some time during their relationships. The findings empirically illustrate that EA is a crucial component of the extensive system of strategies employed by abusive males to obtain power and retain control over their spouses.

A recent bill drafted by the Home Office Government (2019) is attempting to better address this oversight. This bill specifically and clearly outlines the range of behaviors that might fall under economic abuse, such as "isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources, and depriving them of the means needed for independence" (HM, Government, 2019,5).

### Conclusion:

Doris Lessing's remarkable and eye-opening short story attempts to draw the reader's attention to the quiet war women undergo on their journey to independence without fully understanding their inner power. "According to Marxist Feminism, the tragedy began with her renouncement of material or economic independence. Marriage for her, became a turning point from equality to subordination" (WANG & WEN, 2012,67) Lessing wants readers to understand Susan not just as a woman caught up in the tangled web of her community's social duties, but also as a woman trying to break free from a constrictive society and create her own. She employs the third-person omniscient narrator, switching freely between summary and direct speech, objective description and the protagonist's subjective perspective, and mere factual reporting analysis and commentary. Susan's stress and distress, her loss of faith in love, her self-sacrifice and self-denial, her detachment from her feelings and self-division, her social roles and inner conflict are all highlighted in the text, but it also creates an atmosphere of protest against the world as it is and depicts the creation of an alternative reality that is unacknowledged in our world. Susan's eventual tragedy highlights the consequences of a society that imposes rigid expectations on individuals. The story prompts readers to reflect on the cost of conforming to societal norms and the toll it can take on personal well-being.

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