

# Rose's Trauma and Recovery in the Other Woman

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**Abstract:** Doris Lessing, an important contemporary British novelist, has written about trauma for many times in her works. *The Other Woman* is also a novella related to trauma. The novella, set in the World War II, depicts the heroine Rose's different traumatic events, which bring great blow to Rose. She also shows some symptoms of trauma, including avoidance and denial, panic and fear, insecurity and control. However, Rose is not overwhelmed, and through her own effort and others' help, Rose begins her recovery from trauma.

## 1. Introduction

Cathy Caruth in her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" [1]. Traumatic events in the field of psychology are most often conceptualized as life-threatening and anxiety-provoking experiences [2], including death of the family member or lover, physical pain or injury (e.g. severe car accident), serious illness, war and natural disasters. Each person reacts to a traumatic event differently as a result of factors present before, during, and after the incident, but some common emotional symptoms of trauma include denial, anger, sadness and emotional outbursts [3]. Doris Lessing, a famous British writer, lived a life full of different kinds of trauma, so she was largely concerned with the trauma of people in her works, especially the psychological trauma of women. *The Other Woman*, a novella published in 2008, was one of works. In the novella, the young woman Rose went through a series of traumatic events, such as the unexpected death of her parents, the World War II, the deceit and betrayal of her lover. Probing into the traumatic events Rose experienced, Doris Lessing examines Rose's dynamic psychological changes and the process of her recovery. *The Other Woman* has attracted the attention of some scholars, but most of the research is from feminism (Li Jingjing [4], Wang Lijing [5], Wan Lijun [6], Shao Xiaqin [7]) and spatial narration (Chen Shu [8], Shao Juanping [9]). This paper focuses on two aspects: the symptoms of Rose's trauma and her recovery from trauma in *The Other Woman*.

## 2. The Symptoms of ROSE's Trauma

### 2.1 Avoidance and Denial-the Unexpected Death of Parents

Emotional avoidance is a common reaction to trauma. In fact, emotional avoidance is part of the avoidance cluster of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, serving as a way to escape painful or difficult emotions [10]. The avoidance cluster is categorized as the attempt to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings as well as external reminders such as conversations about the traumatic event or people or places that bring the event to mind. In *The Other Woman*, Rose's mother and father encountered accident successively. Her mother was killed one morning crossing the street to do some shopping, and her father died of bomb strike. Rose's reactions to the death of her mother and father are the typical emotional avoidance and denial.

The unexpected death of Rose's mother was a great blow to her, but she seemed very calm. A young policeman, in charge of her mother's death, thought "Rose was too composed to be natural. Her mouth was set and there was a strained look in her eyes. " [11] With the insistence of the policeman, "Rose sent a message to her father; but when he came she put him straight into bed with a cup of tea." [11] With the insistence of her father, she reluctantly wrote a letter to inform her fiancé George, but it would be faster and easier to make a phone call. When George hastened across

London to comfort Rose, he “was surprised to find her seated at her usual place at the table, her hands folded before her, pale, heavy-lidded, but quite composed. The kitchen was spotless and there was a smell of soapsuds and clean warmth. Evidently the place had just been given a good scrub.” [12] George tried to comfort her tenderly, but she looked quietly at him and replied unnecessarily “I’m not taking on.” [12]. She had planned to marry George next week, but the mother’s death made her change her mind. “She knew she would not marry him-rather, could not marry him. She did not know why this was impossible or why she was crying: she could not understand her own behaviour. Up till so few hours before she had been going to marry George, live with him in the little flat: everything was settled. Yet, from the moment she had heard the shocked voices saying outside in the street: “Mrs. Johnson’s (her mother) dead, she’s been killed”-from that moment, or so it seemed now, it had become impossible to marry George. One day he had meant everything to her, he represented her future, and the next, he meant nothing.” [12] The moment her mother was dead, she moved everything to suit her, for example, the picture on the wall, the location of the dresser, or the height of the towel-rail.

Rose was a small and thin girl, and she was prided herself on being a sensible person. However, the mother’s death brought great trauma to her and changed her a lot. She did everything she could to avoid thinking of her mother’s death: she loved her mother very much, but she looked composed when she heard the news; she refused to be consoled by anyone, no matter he was a stranger or a loved one; she even didn’t want anyone to know the news of her mother’s death; she changed the arrangement of the room that could remind her of her mother; she even broke up with her fiancé George unreasonably, although she knew she was fool if she gave him up. All of these reactions of Rose show that she tries to escape the painful emotions caused by her mother’s death. It is the emotional avoidance.

Not long before the war ended, Rose’s father died of bomb strike, which was a greater trauma to Rose. Jimmie, a stranger for Rose, wanted to comfort her and persuaded her to move out of the basement which was going to collapse because of the bomb. However, Rose decisively refused. “I’m staying here,” she announced defiantly, with unmistakable fear. Nothing’s getting me out. Not all the king’s horses.”[13] She felt safe, because this was her home and she waited here for her father to come back. In the evening, she sewed on her father’s socks, because she denied the fact that her father had died. “Sometimes there are mistakes. Sometimes people come back, don’t they?” [14] Rose was afraid, really, that Jimmie might talk of her father. “Not once had she allowed herself to think of it-her father’s death, as it must have been. She said to herself the words: My father’s dead, just as she had once said to herself: My mother’s dead. Never had she allowed those words to form into images of death....no, she could not bear to think of it. Underneath the surface of living was a black gulf, full of senseless horror. All day, at the factory (where she helped to make other bombs) or in the basement at night, she made the usual movements, said the expected things, but never allowed herself to think of death. [14] When Jimmie deliberately retold her the brutal fact, her face was contracted with hatred. Such a stream of foul language came from her mouth. “The quiet, composed, neat little Rose was changed into a screaming hag, who scratched and kicked and clawed....and she picked up a candlestick and threw it at him.” [15]

After the death of her mother and breaking up with George, her father was the only person for Rose to rely on. She did whatever she could to avoid thinking of her father’s death: she denied the death of her father; she refused to move out of the dangerous basement; she did everything as usual, such as cleaning the basement, sewing on her father’s socks or going to work; she became extremely angry when Jimmie retold her father’s death. In a word, she would not think and she refused to respond. All of these reactions of Rose are effectively an effort to withdraw from distressing feelings caused by the death of her father. It is the emotional denial.

## **2.2 Panic and Fear- the Horrible World War Ii**

The war is “the most destructive form of human behavior” for the reason that it “kills people, destroys resources, retards economic development, ruin environments, spreads disease, expands governments, militarizes societies, reshapes cultures, disrupts families, and traumatized people.”[16]

Doris Lessing has mentioned the impact of the world wars several times in her autobiography or interviews. Therefore, many of her works are set in the two world wars. *The Other Woman* is one of the works related to the World War II. In the novella, Rose was deeply affected by the trauma of the war. Rose didn't go to the war personally, but she was deeply influenced by the war. Just as Fellman and Laub have said, hearing trauma patients speak about trauma can also make listeners become participants and co-memoriators of traumatic events. Because of the influence of trauma victims, listeners will also feel the same confusion, injury, confusion, fear and conflict as the victims.[17]

The war brought the great trauma for all the British people, no matter the soldiers or the ordinary people, including Rose. When the war started, Rose's heart was filled with panic. "She felt...that there was a deep basic insecurity, that life itself was an enemy to be placated and humoured, liable at any moment to confront her, or people like her, with death or destitution." [18] "But life was terrible, there was no justice....And now there was a war, and all sorts of people were going to be hurt, all for nothing-that proved it too, if it needed any proof. Life was frightening and dangerous-therefore, put money into the post office; hold on to your job, work, and-put money into the post office." [18] Rose, a young woman, was not interested in politics or war, but the horrible war made her mind filled with panic. The only thing she could do was hard-working and put some money away every week. Rose and her father were both permanently tired and sad. However, the war went on, month after month, year after year, food was short, it was hard to keep warm, the searchlights wheeled over the dark wilderness of London, the bombs fell screaming, and the black-out was like a weight on their minds and spirits....it seemed as if the war was a long, black, noisome tunnel from which they would never emerge. [19]

With the ongoing war, the fear was growing in her mind. She was very haggard and worn. "When she looked in the mirror she was afraid. She was very thin now, nothing but a white-faced shrimp of a girl, with lank, tired, stringy black hair." And what was more unfortunate was that the basement where she lived got the bomb strike. The basement was destroyed completely and her father was also killed by the bomb. In the mean time, Gorge's wife, the friend of Rose, also died in the bomb. All of these made Rose so frightened that she was desperate for some protection. She hurriedly fell into the embrace of Jimmie who ever comforted her to face the death of her father, although Rose was not familiar with Jimmie. However, Rose didn't get the protection of Jimmie. "The nights when he (Jimmie) did not come to her she would sit by herself, crying for hours, not knowing why she was crying, looking down from the high window at the darkened, ravaged streets-a city dark with the shadow of war." The panic and fear caused by the World War II hung over Rose for a long time.

### **2.3 Insecurity and Control**

Emotional insecurity-constantly worrying about not being good enough, lacking confidence, and all kinds of self-doubt, can trigger depression and anxiety. An insecure person is psychologically weak. He believes he has certain flaws and he is not as perfect as he should be. He starts compensating for those flaws or shortcomings by certain actions. Rose's heart was filled with insecurity, which came from her horrible war and her last straw Jimmie. The insecurity causes a strong desire for control, because everyone needs some control over events in their life. The more you feel insecure, the more you want to control everything.

The horrible war killed Rose's father, who was the only one she could rely on. "I (Rose) didn't have anybody but Dad. It's been him and me together forever so long. I haven't got anybody at all..." Besides her father, her basement was also destroyed by the war. Rose was full of insecurity because of the war. With the help of Jimmie, Rose moved from her basement to the top of an old house, but she didn't like it. "Several times he[Jimmie] noticed that she looked unhappily down from the window and quickly came away, with a swift, uncertain glance around at the empty rooms. All her life she had lived underground, with busses and cars rumbling past above eye-level, the weight of the big old house heavy over her, like the promise of protection. Now she was high above streets and houses, and she felt unsafe." Rose felt in love with Jimmie, but Jimmie couldn't make

her feel secure. Jimmie didn't want to marry Rose, so he deceived her into his wife's unwillingness to divorce. "Rosie, she[Jimmie's wife] won't divorce me, she won't give me my freedom." These dramatic words were supplied straight to his tongue by the memory of a film he had seen the week before. In fact, Jimmie divorced his wife three years ago. Jimmie's deceit deepened the insecurity of Rose gradually.

Nobody wants to live in constant insecurity and chaos, so does Rose. The insecurity drove her to turn to the external world in order to find things she could control. She couldn't change the top of a house, but she can control the settings of the house. "She gave herself to the pleasure of arranging furniture, putting things away....She had arranged the new flat to look like her old home. The table stood the same way, the calendar with yellowing roses hung on the wall, and she worked happily beside her stove, making the same movements she had used for years; for the cupboard, the drying-line and the draining-board had been fixed exactly as they had been 'at home'." Rose tried to control her life by controlling the settings. Besides the control on setting, she tried to control the food of Jimmie because of his ulcer. She even tried to become a citizen of his country-out of love for him and because she felt herself lacking. She bought the desk and chest for Jimmie. She wanted Jimmie to go home as soon as he got off work. However, the strong sense of control made Jimmie uncomfortable. "He felt as if the warm, soft fingers were wrapping around him. He felt suffocated." Jimmie hated Rose's control so much that he protested it in his own way. "He pulled the pickle bottle towards him and heaped mustard pickle over his fish....If he had attacks of terrible pain in the night, after a plateful of fried onions, or chips thick with tomato sauce, he would lie rigid beside her, concealing it. He never used the desk and chest that Rose bought for him. Finally, Rose realized she couldn't control Jimmie, so she had to find other ways to seek security.

### 3. The Recovery of Rose

Experiencing a traumatic life event is horrific and terrifying, but this experience does not have to become your defining moment. It is possible to grow through a traumatic event, or series of events. The recovery process of trauma may be conceptualized in three stages: establishing safety, retelling the story of the traumatic event, and reconnecting with others.

In *The Other Woman*, Rose's recovery from trauma is not obvious or definite, but we can find the hope of her recovery. At first, Rose sought the refuge from others. Rose couldn't control Jimmie and she felt insecure for her future, so she wrote to Jimmie's wife, Mrs. Pearson, which was a good way for Rose to seek refuge.

In the letter, Rose retold the story between herself and Jimmie. "Dear Mrs. Pearson, I am writing to you on a matter which is personal to us both, and I hope it gives no offence, because I am not writing in that spirit. I am Rose Johnson, and your husband has been courting me two years since before the war stopped. He says you live separate and you won't divorce him. I want things to be straight and proper now, and I've been thinking perhaps if we have a little talk, things will be straight. If this meets with your approval, Jimmie will be home tomorrow night, ten or so, and we could all three have a talk. Believing me, I mean no trouble or offence." Through the letter, Rose retold her traumatic event she was experiencing. When Mrs. Pearson came to meet Rose and told her the real situation of Jimmie. "Now don't get upset, Rose. It's time you knew what's what. We got divorced three years ago. I got the kids, and he's supposed to pay me two pounds a week for them." Rose was shocked. "I haven't got nothing," wailed Rose. "I haven't got anything or anybody anywhere." Mrs. Pearson comforted Rose and invited Rose to live with her. "I was looking for someone to help me with it. You could live in my place if you like. It's only got three rooms and a kitchen, but we'd manage.... I've got the basement....Well, it's warm and dry and in one piece, more than can be said for most basements."

Rose decided to reconnect with Mrs. Pearson, and she didn't want to be cheated or betrayed by Jimmie again. "I'll come with you[Mrs. Pearson] now, if it's all right. I'll get my things tomorrow. I wouldn't want to stay here tonight." Rose also talked with Mrs. Pearson about adopting Jill and Mrs. Pearson agreed. "Rose was thinking, dully: I'll have Jill, that's something. And by the time she grows up perhaps there won't be wars and bombs and things, and people won't act silly any more."

“Jill is a shadowy figure in the story, but she is the embodiment of freedom and hope. This figure symbolizes Rose’s inner desire for peace, freedom and hope.”

Rose was a brave girl, and she made a big step forward. Although she experienced a lot of traumatic events and also had some symptoms of trauma, she could face her own problems. She left Jimmie, adopted Jill and lived together with Mrs. Pearson. She finally chose the basement as her room, and some scholars believed it was Rose’s self-imprisonment. However, it was difficult for Rose to recover immediately, so she had to find a safer environment for her to gradually move on from trauma. The basement would be the best choice, which was the good beginning of Rose’s recovery.

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