



A Study of Female Consciousness in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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ABSTRACT

Doris Lessing is a writer who is concerned with the representation of women identity in the Western World. In her renowned novel, *The Golden Notebook* Lessing aims at showcasing women identity i.e., their psychology, relation to men and children, their place in a male-dominated society and their frequent attempts to escape from the social and political oppression. *The Golden Notebook* is a story of a female writer who experiences alienation as well as fragmentation in a disintegrated world with consciousness. The aim of this paper is to present a truthful account of female identity from a feminist point of view.

KEY WORDS: Feminism, Female Consciousness, Identity Crisis, Free-Woman.

INTRODUCTION

Doris (May) Lessing is a Post-modern British woman novelist, poet, playwright, librettist, biographer, short story writer, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007, comes before us as a major woman novelist who has written eloquently about women's lives. Doris Lessing was the eleventh woman and the oldest person to ever receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. In 2008, *The Sunday Times* ranked her the fifth place on a list of "The 50 greatest British Writers since 1945". She is often considered as an outspoken post-modern feminist who has probed the inner lives of women and spoken out against political injustice. She depicts the world as a terrible place, people by terrorists, in which the women can be as violent as the men. Through her fifty books, she has always been intensely committed to active persuasion to reform society.

As a novelist, she has enthralled as much by ideas as people. Several of her

novels are numbered among the modern classics. Central themes in Lessing's works are feminism, the battle of the sexes, individuals in search of wholeness, and the dangers of technological and scientific hubris. She has been described by the *Swedish Academy* in Stockholm as "An epicist of the female experience whose books - most notably *The Golden Notebook* - have delved into the human psychological experience and subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny." (*Nobel Prize Citation*, 2007-10-11).

Lessing's primary intention is to comment on 20th-century life - which entails significant pressure upon women - and to refer to humanity as a whole, with all its possible influences. As a novelist, she has enthralled as much by ideas as people. Several of her novels are numbered among the modern classics. Central themes in Lessing's works are feminism, the battle of the sexes, individuals in search of wholeness, and the dangers of technological and scientific hubris.



Lessing's writing covers many styles and approaches, ranging from feminism and Marxist theory to communism. In addition to that, she is also particularly concerned with psychology, politics, and sociology and she always comes up with new spiritual themes and perspectives in her writing. She attempts different kinds of novels, often testing new ways of communicating with her readers.

Many of Lessing's novels resonate with the quest for identity theme. Whatever the genre, this runs as an undercurrent in all of her fiction. Thus one may say that Lessing is keenly aware of the crucial significance of this motif. And the implications are her particular and definite concept of woman's identity and, further, the idea of not only independence from patriarchy, but a wholeness of character which mark the delineation of her female protagonists. According to Lois A. Marchino,

Lessing in her works presents "the unifying theme of the search for self-identity: through knowledge of the self one also discovers one's role in society." (*The Search for Self in the Novels of Doris Lessing*, 252).

The predicament of women gained its frontiers and new forces of feminism continued to surface, though modified slightly. Even Lessing's powerful novels testify to varying degrees of illusionment and betrayal. The so-called 'free-women' of Lessing were not so free, after all. In Lessing's novels the women's predicament is intense, as marriage turns out to be an entrapment from which escape lies through mental

breakdown. Lessing's fiction crystallizes the mid-twentieth century women's 'ideological feet'; at another level, the predicament becomes a quest for independent and alternative identities for women.

Doris Lessing published *The Golden Notebook* (1962) in the company of Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark and Margaret Drabble. She is well known for having been a beacon of inspiration to a generation of feminists. Her *The Golden Notebook* hailed as the most important work that has left its mark upon the ideas and feelings of a whole generation of women. It is often considered by the critics as a later-day tract on feminist literature due to its experimental style and explorations of self, creativity, and feminine identity. As Zerine Aklesaria rightly pointed out,

The Golden Notebook, her best-known work, brought her instant fame and a cult following as the high priestess of Feminism. (*The Hindu*, 4).

The novel presents a body of experience acquired at the crucial frontiers of modern life. It takes a close look at patriarchal gender arrangements which distort the quality of human relationships. It also deals with the crucial problems of freedom and responsibility, the predicament of the free women in the mid-twentieth century in terms of a novelistic structure which may be called 'post-modernism.'

The Golden Notebook, arguably the magnum opus of Doris Lessing, becomes a feminist novel depicting a woman's struggle with sex, politics, motherhood, creatively and success



though the novelist declares that she does not intend for it to be so. It is an acknowledged classic in which the theme and the form are inter-dependent with each other. It deals with a novel entitled 'free woman' which is divided into parts, and between the parts are four separate notebooks written by the protagonist of the novel, Anna Wulf. Among the four note books, the 'black one' outlines Anna's experiences in Africa, 'red one' describes her political experiences including her disillusionment with communism, 'yellow one' becomes a novel within a novel written by Anna about a woman called Ella and the 'blue one' depicts the emotional and personal diary of Anna. Finally all the four books get integrated into a 'Golden Notebook' which the protagonist will be writing in the future. Thus the post-modern styling of the novel often makes the reader to focus on its form and leads him to pay only little attention on the serious themes of it.

The Golden Notebook relates the story of a divorced single mother Anna Wulf who works as a novelist in 1950s London. Anna is afraid that her bad experiences and relationships with wrong men may drive her crazy. To get away from the danger, she records her life and experiences in four different notebooks. 'The black notebook' deals with her life as a writer, 'the red book' records her political views, 'the yellow book' is about her emotional life and 'the blue book' deals with her everyday life. 'The Golden Notebook' the fifth and the most important note book records all the experiences to understand her own life and her search for a personal and political identity.

The Golden Notebook takes up almost all the issues related to the plight of women. Arguing about the right for women to be independent and to be her own person and not something that belongs to a man. Lessing clearly presents how women are not regarded as capable of supporting themselves as they do not have the same rights as men. They are not given full education or a well paid if at all they get a job. Though the women in the novel are not represented all the occupations provided in the society, all the women mentioned in the novel are mostly full-time mothers or teachers, secretaries, cleaners. Though some women like Anna and Molly can support themselves, the society never thinks that the unmarried women are happy and comfortable and their life is not seen as perfect and fulfilled until they have a man.

Lessing presents the struggle of a sensible woman clearly and candidly in *The Golden Notebook*. She doesn't hesitate to show how many consider unmarried Anna and Molly as failures as they were no men to support them. Lessing presents the limits of the feminist movements by raising her two main characters, Anna, Molly, to condemn the traditional old views. They are instead raised as 'free' women; they grew up believing that a woman could do just the same things as a man could, especially when it comes to work and supporting themselves. They have learnt that no woman should rely on men to be able to have a descent life. Both Anna and Molly realize that their life changes drastically, the moment when they get married. Their new life with her husbands becomes more or less isolating and trapping. They are supposed to stay



at home and take care of the household as the earning the daily bread has become the duty of the husband alone. But the irony is that these 'free' women do not experience life differently from the other 'traditional' women. "Being so young, twenty-three or four, I suffered, like so many 'emancipated' girls, from a terror of being trapped and tamed by domesticity" (130). Though they are women who are comparatively more 'free' than others in the novel, they still experience the same problems in the society.

Lessing portrays most of the woman characters typical representatives of the world they live in. Anna and Molly who are more independent than the other women as they are divorced and have learnt to live by themselves and support themselves. But they change and become reserved in the matters of dating with men. They do everything for that person cook for hours before he comes even though he tends to cancel their date. They prefer to keep quiet about their affair so that no body including his wife can find out. They are ready to please that person even though they know that he already has a family. They know it pretty well that he never would abandon his family and even then they keep hoping and sacrificing themselves for them. Thus the novelist shows how independent even the so called 'free women' are.

The psychological analysis Lessing artistically indulges at every juncture of the life of Anna, transforms *The Golden Notebook* into a great work of art which can also be a propagandist work. Anna gets hurt when Michael expresses his feelings that he is happy as long as they have sex. But Anna wants

much more than that; she wants his love and affection. She feels almost abandoned and hurt even when other man call her after breakup with Michael as she knows that the men who call her are all married, and they call her only because their wives are on holidays and they need an affair. "...they seem to think you're going to fall over yourself to get into bed. What on earth do you suppose goes through their minds? " (398). She begins to wonder what men really think about her. She even becomes furious because they think that they have power to just call her and expect that she will be coming running. Then she doubts whether there are any normal men at all. But, at the same time, she feels very much satisfied to be sought after by the men as she experiences some kind of victory over their wives. She yearns for adventure and fun unlike the boring and dull wives. But she cannot but dream of getting married and having a nice husband one day - a man who will love her.

Lessing meticulously portrays the growth of the character of Anna by presenting her modern sensibility and traditional desires. Anna says to Molly, "our real loyalties are to men," or when her lover Michael lays his face on her breast in his sleep and she thinks, 'the truth is I don't care a damn about politics or philosophy or anything else, all I care about is that Michael should turn in the dark and put his face against my breasts" (257). Thus she is not only traditional in her desires but also honest in evoking her desires.

In many ways Anna Wulf is an autobiographical extension of Doris Lessing who has strong analytical and introspective intelligence and takes up



the vocation of a writer. Lessing uses more a dramatic method to present the life and struggle of Anna Wulf. Thus the omniscient narrator of the free woman section is also revealed to be Anna Wulf. It is because of this reason that *The Golden Notebook* is considered meta-fiction - a novel about writing a novel- in which both the process and the form are examined by the writer.

The entire novel rotates on the two pivotal of extremities and similarities. It encapsulates the oppositions and loyalties of two generations and describes the nuances of the man-woman relationships. By juxtaposing the trauma of the individuals and the upheavals of the political ideologies, it presents the forces that shape the psyche of the individuals and the stance of the society. Anna and Molly in *The Golden Notebook* live 'free' of men and marriage and seek to find out what's-wrong-with-men and marriage thereby revealing the precariousness of freedom and the identity of woman they live same kind of life - 'not getting married' (10) and 'bringing up children without men' (16) and neither of them was 'prepared to get married simply to give our children fathers' (16) and 'refused to live by the book and the rule' (16). Subsequently, they 'must take the consequences' (16).

Lessing portrays the sense of alienation of the woman in the lives of Molly and Anna. They helplessly allow Richard, Molly's ex-husband and son Tommy to bully them in spite of their awareness that the two men are hurting them. They unwittingly extend friendship to other men who also mistreat them, such as Nelson, de Silva, Willi, George and Paul. Lessing shows that all these

men are sadists as well as misogynists. As Ellen Morgan observes, "Anna's responses to these men as humanistic in the profoundest sense-as evidence of a mature ability to see that no human being is all good or bad, that most have something to offer which redeems at least in part that which is ugly in them." (*Alienation of the Woman Writer in The Golden Notebook*, 477).

Anna finds out the way, out of her split experience by presenting it in four different notebooks : "a black notebook', which is to do with Anna Wulf the writer, a 'red notebook', concerned with politics; a 'yellow notebook', in which I make stories out of my experience; and a 'blue notebook' which tries to be a diary" (406). There are many ways of reading the four notebooks of Anna and the study of it from the point of view of Anna's quest makes it a genuine feminist works. All the four notebooks reflect Anna's piecemeal, inconclusive, ambivalent experience of a war-ridden world. Besides disclosing and revealing the splits and rifts that permeate Anna's psychic reality in the 'Black Note Book' which appears first in each sequence the two aspects of Anna's life as a writer 'Money' and 'Source' are discussed separately by allotting two divisions. In the first one 'Money' the financial and business details of her first and only novel is presented.

The 'source' reconstructs the real experiences which she had fictionalized in that novel. The 'Black notebook' reveals schisms in Anna's psyche also. The sexual ambivalence which has split her along several fracture lines are vividly presented. Anna compares her frigid marriage to a German Jew, Max Wulf,



with the fictitious Willi Rodde of her novel; her ambivalent attraction to men like George Hounslow and Paul Blackenhurst recalls for her the inner conflict between the needs for submission and control in male and female relationships. The second segment of the 'Black notebook', emphasis 'Money' thereby recording her frustrated meeting with agents and editors of film or TV shows. She becomes more and more hysterical when she fights against the total misunderstanding of her own work.

The 'Black notebook' reveals Anna's private politics together with the politics of the idealistic communist group in Southern Africa. Both of them are equally characterized by schisms. Anna has the ability to recognize this split within herself at individual level, "And yet there were always two personalities in me, the 'communist' and Anna, and Anna judged the communist all the time, and vice versa" (66); at collective level, "inherent in the structure of a Communist Party or group is a self-dividing principle" (P.64).

The 'Red notebook' reflects the split in society and the protagonist's efforts to rectify it and bring back wholeness. Anna is conscious of her affinity with the communist party in Britain – "the dry, wise, ironical political woman, or the Party fanatic who sounds, literally, quite maniacal. And I have these two personalities myself" (141). Moreover she joins the party because there is "a need for wholeness, for an end to the split, divided, unsatisfactory way we all live. Yet joining the Party intensified the split - not the business of belonging to an organization whose every tenet, on paper, anyway, contradicts the ideas of the

society we live in; but something much deeper than that" (142). In the later segments of the 'Red book,' Anna gets disillusioned and admits that Stalin, once her hero, is 'mad and a murderer' (259).

The 'Yellow notebook' relates the progress of Anna by recording the dynamics of the laws of the dissolution of a long relationship with her lover Michael and the consequent psychic split in her at emotional level. Anna boldly investigates the different facets of the relationship, and tries to understand the reasons for its failure. Thus she tries to drive out the pain resulted from pain her psychic paralysis. By creating an alter ego in the character of Ella she transforms Michael into Paul Tanner, her friend Molly into Julia and her daughter Janet into a son, Michael. That she gives the name of her former lover to the son asserts her psychological obsession. The different circles of the themes are artistically connected as Ella, the character concerned by Anna is a writer and the Anna, the protagonist of the novel, is more or less an autobiographical extension of Lessing. The strength of Lessing as a woman is obvious in the way she portrays Anna and Ella with a lot of verisimilitude. Both of them suffer from psychic splits.

The confusion in the psyche of the contemporary woman who seeks for an identity is reflected in the woman characters of Anna's novel. Both Ella and her friend Julia have an instinctive human need to respect and identify themselves as human beings though they have a conditioned contempt against them as woman. "The two women", in the words of Morgan, "share a minority - group psychological orientation which



compels them to depreciate their femaleness and their friendship and seek approval from and identification with men." (*Alienation of the Woman Writer in The Golden Notebook*, 472-473). This is evident when Ella vents her contempt for the magazine for which she works and the stories that she writes for the magazine because they are "sensitive and feminine" (149). Ella can't conceive a future without a man though she hates the parties that she has to attend in which she has to meet men. All those parties remind her the fact that she is 'on the market again' and that, she wants to get married again. But, Julia tells her "It's no good taking that attitude - that's how everything is run, isn't it?" (149). But they have to dismiss their feelings as they have come to know that it is no use of complaining over it again and again. The 'Yellow Book' deals with schisms, splits, mental illness, and mental breakdown. They have firm bearing on the theme of identity crises.

Anna describes her disillusionment of her domestic life and her earlier sterile marriage in 'Black notebook' also in her novel, *frontiers of War*. Her breaking of the relationship with Michael results in a breakdown. She finds out that there is no fusion of a self and a body in her relationship with Michael. Thus Anna examines her disillusionment about erotic relationships through the fiction of Ella and Paul. By attributing her needs and desires and also her particular vulnerability to Ella, Anna traces out the incompleteness which she cannot notice in herself. She is able to notice the sexual vulnerabilities as the manifestations of self-driving patterns which permeate all of their involvements with her world.

Thus, Lessing makes a candid analysis of the role played by sex in the life of man and woman. She points out that kind of sex offered to the woman is a threat to their self-respect and dignity and identity. They are not allowed to be either a political or independent. Thus their resentment of the man, as well as the patriarchal society is firmly recorded. Lessing presents the counter arguments for feminism through the character of Ella who is afraid that her perceptions are illegitimate and inconsistent with the broader humanism to which she is committed because of her feminist stance. By preparing the novel as a platform for an intellectual debate; she makes a strong for the equality of the woman by the other side also. She shows how illogical Ella's views are by presenting the consequences. Lessing sensibly dramatizes the misreading of Ella who finds woman as the sole causalities of the patriarchy and never realizes that the men have been living an artificial life through out. In her own balanced and perceptive method, Lessing shows how Ella "consistently tells herself that her oppression is her own fault or an unchangeable condition to which one must gracefully resign oneself." (Ellen Morgan, 474). By refusing to meet and deal with the anger under the surface and she regards men not as co-victims and never sympathizes with them.

All the important people related to her struggle have a dialectical relation to one another as everyone contributes a factor essential for her development. *The Golden Notebook* connects Anna's experience of the past, present, and future, to unity the fragmented parts of the self. But Lessing is ingenious technique is obvious in the way she



portrays Anna Wulf passing on her way to a reintegration of her personality with one extreme form of dissolving into other people's identities. She points out that Anna and Saul "breakdown' into each other, into other people, breakthrough the false patterns they have made of their pasts, the patterns and formulas they have made to shore up themselves and each other, dissolve. They hear each other's thoughts; recognize each other in themselves' (vii). Finally Anna identifies with Saul so absolutely that "when he leaves the flat 'to go for a little walk' my nerves seem to stretch out and follow him, as if tied to him" (492).

In *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing emphasizes and focuses on the self-division of a typical modern woman who is torn between and artistic objectivity and emotional subjectivity it is because of this struggle between the ideas and the reality, ambitions and pit falls, cravings and artificial joys and pragmatic sufferings that a modern woman is more prone to psychic disturbances. All these divisions get manifested in Anna's breakdown, in which such border; lines between subject and object are blurred and become indistinct. She tries hard to control the chaos overwhelming her by objectifying her experiences in various methods and struggles to keep a distance from them, throughout. As Roberta Rubenstein points out that 'though Anna "reaches the same area in the abnormal consciousness where earlier Mary Turner had succumbed completely, for Anna these altered forms of consciousness become essential stages in the eventual reintegration of her personality." (*The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing*, 96).

Lessing proclaims that her "major aim was to shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped" (xiii). Thus her critique of the world includes a major analysis of the plight of the woman besides an argument for the equal rights for them. By portraying a protagonist who does not know the difference between the reality and the fiction of her experience, Lessing places the reader in no more privileged situation in relation to the novel as a whole. She never allows the reader to be a passive being and makes him a participant of the action through unconsciously.

The Golden Notebook basically deals with a politicized woman who experiences nervous breakdown from which she eventually emerges intact. Lessing shows that the nervous breakdown of Anna is largely but not entirely a response to the horrors of the contemporary world. Paul Schlueter rightly observes that: "Probably more than in any other novel, *The Golden Notebook* captures the authentic quality of what it is to be a woman, especially a woman in a man's world, and even more especially a woman who frankly admits the existence of her sexuality, her neuroses, her intellect, her desperation in living, her disgust at the mediocre, her refusal to compromise her essential being." (*Doris Lessing: The Free Woman's Commitment*, 58).

Though Lessing avows that she is not a feminist, she discusses such issues like menstruation, orgasm and frigidity, considered a taboo for any woman, without any hesitation like a staunch feminist. She does not care what the



traditionalist calls the literary decorum and portrays a protagonist who has an excess of fear of her own body odours.

A careful reading of the work of Lessing shows that she never hesitates to discuss controversial issues like homosexuality and lesbianism. She disapproves them both. In *The Golden Notebook* Lessing depicts the conflict between the maternal and erotic life. She clearly portrays the plight of a woman who keeps alive in order to rear her child in spite of a power inclination to commit suicide. As a writer, she has experienced that the problems women writers face are entirely different from that of men writers.

To conclude, one may say that Lessing in her lengthy and ambitious novel *The Golden Notebook* that appeared in the early part of her career explores the inner recesses of a true feminist, maybe a radical feminist. But some transformation took place in her as she presents a moderate form of feminism in her latest novel *Alfred and Emily*. Perhaps in her long career as a creative artist and also as a woman, she depicts a different and at the same time convincing facet of feminism in her apparently last novel.

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