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## Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*: A Feminist Shell of the 'Free Women'

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### **Abstract:**

This paper has been written with the aim to interpret *The Golden Notebook* from the feminist point of view. The novel's theme, structure, characters, narrative style serve well for the aim of feminist interpretation. It also artistically discusses the challenges to feminism reflected in *The Golden Notebook*. The structure makes the theme to reach its best expression. It reflects not only the fragmentation of protagonist of *The Golden Notebook*, Anna's inner world but also the chaotic society she lives. Doris Lessing employed a woman writer as the first person narrator in the novel. She has certainly served as spokeswoman for women's rights in her life and her works. After women have gotten the license of writing, tremendous phenomena directly illustrate a series of problems in women's political life. Compared with traditional women, the "Free Women" in *The Golden Notebook* enjoyed a kind of free professional life, but they don't get deserved happiness after their fearlessly walking out of the kitchen. The relationship between women and children is also a big issue in the crusade of feminism. Feminism successfully has given women the equality of parental rights, but the right cannot produce harmonious relationship between women and children without the "fathers' protection". "Free Women" discarded their loveless marriage but still could not find their perfect marriage. Lessing's novel tells us that males are not the enemies to women but their collaborators . . . .

**Keywords: Feminism, Free Women, Interpretation, Marriage, Traditional and Writing.**

Literature is the reflection of human action. Since the last two centuries, the woman writer and women's writings have gone through some significant changes. Doris Lessing has a creative energy like her male contemporaries, in the nineteenth century she was confined to the marginal of a patriarchal society by which she was only appreciated on account of her marital and domestic duty—for she was not entitled to many rights. Maybe she wrote a manuscript under a male pseudonym to be accepted; maybe she burnt or buried her manuscript, afraid of the consequences it might have. She perfectly inscribed a counter narrative by which she did manage to articulate some of her objectives. Doris Lessing is the prominent women writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1962, her masterwork *The Golden Notebook* was published. It is regarded as the companion volume of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The novel soon became popular among the feminists because of its realistic description about women's independent awareness and their living condition.

What indeed would have happened if Shakespeare had a sister? Unlike her brother William who had every opportunity to develop his interests and eventually shows up his ambitions. "Judith", as Virginia Woolf named her, ambitions seemingly would have been narrowed down from the moment she was born. If she had any ambition that would not include a domestic career, it would not have been accepted. Many stories by and about women will never be known, discussed in class, or taken up in history books. The history of "female literature" would have had a much wider scope today, if it was not for woman's supposedly inferior position that did not allow her to develop any artistic qualities.

Women's writing in *The Golden Notebook* is the fact that writing by and about women is assessed from a completely different point of view compared to writing by men. It almost seems that female authors of today are still located in a marginal position—or at least very easily overlooked. Women's writing has always been inscribed in definitions made by men. Subsequently, when a woman writer could not be included in the dominant tradition, her work was described as inferior, inadequate or negatively connoted as “feminist text.”

Social conventions, historically and culturally determined, are fundamental for the comprehension for the cognitive paradigms at work in society. Furthermore, these social conventions are represented in the ideology and plot structure of narratives. These may be the characteristics of a certain society. This premise is corroborated by Franco Moretti who claims that, “narrative outcome is an appropriate criterion to capture the ideological and rhetorical essence of a historical narrative culture” (Keunen 42). Traditional things bind the women writers in a psychological cell. These cells are the creation of stereotype society. Every society has its own way to traditionalise the women writers. Blau Duplessis asserts that:

The teleological structure of romance plots traditionally worked towards to conventional endings, deemed appropriate for women. Either the heroin is rewarded by marriage for remaining chaste, or she is “condemned to death” for failing to fit the straightly outlined boundaries society laid out for her. There is no room for female protagonist to aspire to a combination of romantic love interest and achieve a degree of Bildung. Indeed, “these endings were dominant, related to real practices of sexualities, gender relations, kin and family, and work for middle-class women”. (4)

It is the conventional plot structure for the most of the 18<sup>th</sup> century narratives. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the first sight looks, “rewarding with respect to Jane Austen and the Bronte Sisters, “love” and “quest” were still mutually exclusive in the narrative plot, the latter traditionally being suppressed in favour of the first” (Blau Duplessis 13). One specific theme where tension between the designated role of a woman and a meaningful vocation is displayed, bears close resemblance to the theme in *The Golden Notebook*; the figure of the female artist, as represented in the *Künstlerroman*. The *Künstlerroman* is a subgenre of the Bildungsroman and covers the growth of an artist to maturity; it displays the struggle of a young person against the ideology of a bourgeois society of his or her time:

Using the female artist as literal motives dramatizes and heightens the already present contradiction in bourgeois ideology between the ideals of striving, improvement, and visible public works, and the feminine version of that formula: passivity, “accomplishments,” and invisible private acts. (Blau Duplessis 84)

Being an artist, whether painter, writer or poet, was not included in a woman's daily domestic obligations. Potential artistry remained undeveloped and came to be seen as oppositional for the female gender. Subsequently, in using the notion of a “female artist” as a fictional character and heroine of the novel, one does not only oppose the conventional notions of womanhood but also the “conventional romantic notions of the genius” (Web), who because of her particular status as “intelligent” can break the chains of society's straitjacket.

Elaine Showalter indicates that the female literary tradition, from the Brontë's onward to the present day, shows a development similar to any literary subculture. Women are embedded within the framework of a larger society "and have been unified by values, conventions, experiences, and behaviours impinging on each individual" (Showalter 11). Nevertheless, it is impossible to discern a "movement" because there is no indication of deliberate, conscious progress in their writing. Therefore, it is unmistakably important to view this literary tradition in relation to the wider evolution women's self-awareness and the struggle to conquer their place in a male-dominated world. Three stages can be discerned in the development of women's writing:

First, there is a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles second; there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values and *advocacy* of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some dependency of opposition, a search for identity. (Showalter 13)

An appropriate terminology is suggested: Feminine, from the 1840s to the death of George Eliot; Feminist, from 1880 to 1920; Female from the 1920s onward until present day.

In deconstructing the conventional ideological and cultural gender institution in narratives, Doris Lessing is an important female author who offers an oppositional narrative strategy. In this context, being a white South-African and a woman, Lessing can be said to display "double marginalization": she came to England in 1949 to escape the troubles her own country, Rhodesia, was facing at the time". (Blau Duplessis 89)

In trying to break free from the key tradition, the concept "anxiety of influence" as formulated by Gilbert and Gubar is indispensable. The explanation starts with Harold Bloom, one of the foremost researchers on the psychology of literary history. This is characterized by what Bloom coined "anxiety of influence", "fear that the writer is not his own creator and the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings" (Gilbert and Gubar 47). Bloom's "model of literary history" is essentially male, describing the tension between literary artists as relationship between father and son. Nevertheless, from a feminist point of view it still proves a useful model. As Western literary history is tremendously male, Bloom has investigated this very fact and "clarified the implications of the psychosexual and sociosexual contexts by which every literary text is surrounded" (Gilbert and Gubar 47). Bloom's model thus proves useful to define, firstly, the patriarchal context in which so much western literature was conceived and, secondly, it is a useful criterion to indicate the female authors' fear from her male counterparts.

On a thematic level, although she does something object that term, writing *The Golden Notebook*, she was crowned a feminist icon by the Women's Liberation Movement. The novel epitomizes Second Wave feminism, in which the formal characteristics "align feminist first person narratives with the political literature of other non dominant groups" (Lauret 98). In brief, the personal is connected to the political. The protagonists are "Free Women" who embody the modernity of late fifties: they are divorced, take lovers and have a career. They want an independent life and obtain the same liberties men enjoy. This personal story is encompassed by their political engagement as communist and, as communism in the end altogether failed to engender social change, the upcoming women rights movement succeeded in altering society profoundly, by conflating the personal and the political.

The reader meets Anna and Molly, two articulate women with a shared political (communist) interest, both dealing with problems related to their love life and motherhood. Anna has written a successful novel *Frontiers of War*, of which she still receives royalties and therefore is free to do volunteer work for Party; Molly is a minor actor in the theater. Both are divorced and entrusted with the care of a child, Janet and Tommy respectively after a year of separation, the two women catch up with each other and soon it becomes clear that Tommy is a worrisome teenager and that Anna is dealing with a writer's block.

Anna Wulf, before she got married to Freeman, experiences a mental breakdown largely as a reaction to the fact that the world around her is falling apart; she sees her own reaction as perfectly normal due to the chaos and horror surrounding her. Anna tries to take control of her life and resolved her writers block by writing in four different note books "and not one because, as she recognizes, she has to separate things off from each other, out of fear of chaos, of formlessness and of breakdown" (Schlueter 3). She has a red note book concerned with her communist politics; a black notebook to record her life in Africa in the 1940s; a blue one that attempts to be diary and finally a yellow notebook in which she creates her fictional alter-ego Ella; Paul, an alter-ego for Ella; Julia, an alter-ego for Molly.

Every notebook is written in the first person, covers the years from 1950 to 1957. Furthermore, the novel has a fifth notebook, called *The Golden Notebook* written in 1957, also about the events taking place in that year. Besides the notebooks, there are five sections entitled "Free Women", written in the third person and which cover the year 1957 and the events of that summer. It is written in an objective mode in which Anna serves as the central awareness. The novel opens with a "Free Women" section, follows by entries of the black, the red, the yellow and the blue notebook, every time in that order. After this pattern is repeated four times, the novel ends with *The Golden Notebook*, which is a fusion of her blue diary and a final "Free Women" section.

Almost at the end of *The Golden Notebook* section, Anna looks back at her life in the form of the film sequences run off by a projectionist directed by her. She names each section of her life: "the Mashopi film", "the film about Paul and Ella", "the film about Michael and Anna" etc. It is here that Anna finally is able to confront herself with the chaos her life has become. "Time had gone, and my memory did not exist, and I was unable to distinguish between what I had invented was all false. It was whirl, an order less dance, like butterflies in a shimmer of heat, over the damp sandy vlei". (Brewster 151)

Anna's split, symbolized by the four notebooks, is conflated in *The Golden Notebook* section which Anna gives to her lover Saul Green, who is even more fragmented within himself than Anna is. "Anna and Saul Green the American 'break down'". They are crazy, lunatic, mad etc. They break down into each other, into other people, break through false patterns they have made of their pasts, the patterns and formulas they have made to shore up themselves and each other, dissolve" (Schlueter 4). At the end of their affair Saul Green gives Anna the theme of her next book, which begins with "the two women were alone in the London flat", exactly at the beginning of the real novel *The Golden Notebook*; vice versa Anna gives Saul her Golden Notebook and the theme of his next book, of which the first sentence is written in it: "on a dry hillside in Algeria a soldier watched the moonlight glinting on his rifle." "Pressures, inner and outer, end the notebooks; a heavy black line is drawn across the page of one after another. But now that they are finished, from their

fragments, can come something new, *The Golden Notebook*.” (Preface of *The Golden Notebook*, vii)

*The Golden Notebook* is a highly self-conscious and experimental work, as Doris Lessing herself claimed: “*The Golden Notebook* was an extremely carefully constructed book. And the way it’s constructed says what the book is about...” Yet after the book was published 1962, “... very few people have understood” (Schlueter 79). The book was mainly praised for Lessing’s perspective representation of women’s consciousness subsequently; the book was almost exclusively defined as a work that “has left its mark upon the ideas and feelings of a whole generation of young women”. (Hardwick no. pag.)

The most of the devices Lessing uses in her attempt to “break certain forms of consciousness” are to be found in the yellow notebook. Most sections of this notebook deal with another book Anna is writing, called *The Shadow of the Third*, which in the beginning resembles the “Free Women” section but later on is reduced to mere incomplete fragments. When Anna starts her yellow diary about Ella, she contemplates: “I see Ella, walking slowly about a big empty room, thinking, and waiting. I, Anna, see Ella. Who is of course, Anna? But that is the point, for she is not. The moment I, Anna, write: Ella rings up Julia to announce, etc., and then Ella floats away from me and becomes someone else. I don’t understand what happens at the moment Ella separates herself from me and becomes Ella”. It is clearly the moment when Anna starts to fall apart; Lessing stops her right before the point of suicide.

Instead of a coherent narrative about Ella, the last entry of the yellow notebook comprises nineteen fragments of possible stories. Each story is entitled “a short story” or “a short novel” and dates which are otherwise carefully noted down are omitted. Then Anna’s diary follows in the blue notebook where, amongst other things, her love affair with Saul Green is described. This affair seems to contain the semen of the nineteen stories that precede it. It is not clear why Lessing has put the story ideas first, and then the experience out of which they might have come, but it might be a last indication of how for Anna’s mind has been fragmented:

Through the character of Anna, Lessing is able to question the appropriateness of realist forms to represent the fragmented nature of modern reality, and the crises of belief with which intellectuals on the New Left had to grapple. In abandoning conventional narrative, *The Golden Notebook* also explores the relationship between language and ideology and the possibility of the new revolutionary literary form. (Joannou 24)

In *Neither Compromise nor Happiness* (New Republic, 1962, 17), Irving Howe states that Doris Lessing is radically different from other women writers in the sense that “she grasps the connection between Anna Wulf’s neurosis and the public disorders of the day, and second in that she has no use either for the quavering of the feminist writers or the aggression of those female novelists who’s every sentence leads a change in the war of the sexes” (Hite 60). In short Howe asserts that writing by and about women is an inferior genre, which Lessing herself has overcome by surpassing apparently typical feminine narrative conventions, subsequently described as: the inability to see personal experience in a bigger whole, whole, bitchiness, melodrama or “minute gradations of sensibility?” (Hite 61)

Thus, Lessing expresses artistry, as a woman she often designated an oppositional choice for their fictional heroines, according to their limited options in society: a choice between marriage and death, for there was no compromise offered to them. Gradually, women gained more rights and subsequently more freedom of choice. During the First and Second Wave of Feminism women fought to be treated on an egalitarian basis compared to men's privileges. Although many battles have been won, *The Golden Notebook* proved that women were not liberated completely. As Lessing embedded her protagonist in the bigger social picture of the sixties, she managed to depict the way men and women related to each other in that time in a very perfect approach. Maybe Anna Wulf succeeded in achieving wholeness. However, she succeeded in finding a way of living, where she can have satisfying love life and at the same time deal with society's, or men's prejudice about "Free Women".

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