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Gender Inequality in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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Abstract:

All historical explanations of gender are agreed on one fact; masculinity and femininity are not eternal given norms they were elaborated, institutionalized and made to seem eternal, to justify the power and authority which men enjoyed at the expense of women. This power and authority exist at several levels: the economic, the sexual, the social and the psychic. For Lessing the term 'feminism' is not about speaking against men and their short comings but stands for gender inequality. She speaks about humanity. Her feminism is an aspect of anxiety to recover humanism denied by the contemporary world

Keywords: Masculinity, Femininity, Patriarchy, Power, Personal wholeness, Feminism, Humanism, Sexual – Social- Cultural- Political issues, Love, Trust, Unification.

Gender Inequalities involve intimacies and enmities; love and hatred, affection and violence, power and abjection, hurt and surrender. Human beings play out their destinies in and through a combination of these emotions and the acts which are inspired by them. They also come to and acquire a sense of themselves, their needs and desires in the course of living these relationships. To understand those affective and experiential elements which are central to human self-perceptions as men or women, we need to identify those qualities and acts which mark men and women as different and yet complementary. Most of these qualities and acts are aspects of our physical existence; that is; we feel, are and live as men and women.

The deepest task of Doris Lessing's characters is to achieve a personal wholeness that subsumes sexual identity or gender under a larger principal of growth. As far as the roles of men and women in Lessing's novels are concerned, they seem to be clearly defined. Men are found to be dominating and exercising power over women.

Male characters such as Dick and Douglas have a possibility to exercise authority and power over women due to their control over the public and political realm of life which determines the conditions of the private of women. The female characters Martha and Mary consider their involvement in the political and farm

matter that they perform for a short period of time, are actually intended to be reserved only for men. By their participation in such tasks, they prove their ability to art on an equal level to men. Thus Martha tries to form an identity in a society where the division of labour between the sexes is strictly defined according to the norms of bourgeois family;

Women are confined to domestic life; they are wives, mother, and lovers, whereas men have their main function within the social and political spheres of life. Marriage is a white middle- class woman's way of realizing her social potential.¹

It is also worth stressing those social issues and relations that are central to the development of female identity. One of the most relevant elements to discuss is the role of marriage and family. In fact, it is the family which is the source of women's oppression because under patriarchal domination it is the agency in and through which women and men are engendered, replicating men who dominate, women, who do submit.²

Women in *The Golden Notebook* Anna and Molly are to be seen as different aspects of the same female nature. Rubenstein says that man is both a self and body and there is always a confusion about where he really is.³

Anna Wulf, the protagonist of *The Golden Notebook* is a single woman who lives with her daughter in an apartment. She is a writer battling writer's block after the success of her first novel, an autobiographical account. When first published *The Golden Notebook* was hailed by feminists as a novel that anticipated the women's liberation movement. The fact is that many of its formulations on gender issues though appear superannuated today the text remains a point of reference for critical studies of feminism and gender issue in English literature.

Finally while Saul gives the first sentence to begin her novel and Anna, her first sentence to begin his novel, they are liberated from madness and hatred for each other : Saul's gift to Anna is: "...the two women were alone in the London flat,⁴ When Anna writes Saul's sentence, it is symbolic of how man joins woman in an enterprise. The woman is able to accomplish her achievement. For Lessing "Free Women" does not mean women available for sex as and when men want to satisfy their body urge. Anna cracks up only because Gender she wants to stand for the whole person, the whole individual.

Anna revives the old question of man-woman relationship in the way in which Ibsen, Bernard Shaw and the host of others did. Men see women as objects to be possessed, used and discarded. Therefore, women are seen as ... a board, a lay, a baby, a doll, a bird,...talk about butts and boobs, every time you mention a woman.⁵ It is an indication of a unification of a feminine sensibility merging with masculine strength. A monumental work is possible only when there is oneness in man and

woman. This indicates that Lessing's drifting it is not towards feminism but towards the unification of total sensibility of men merging with women.

Asked if there is a significant difference between the kinds of literature produced by men and women, Lessing replies:

A woman sees certain things very differently from the way a man does, yet there are also male writers who maintain they can plumb the depths of a women's soul. But the reverse is difficult too. A woman can never completely get inside a man's consciousness.... Only in this way can multiplicity arise in literature. I believe, for example, that women act more instinctively than men, that they approach psychological subjects not scientifically but instinctively.⁶

The Golden Notebook begins with the novel within the novel, not with her reality. In this novel Anna is having a conversation with her friends Molly, Tommy and Richard, who are her friends in her real life. The major idea is that gender roles are limiting and they had to be redefined, along with the entire relationship between men and women.

The gender issue referred by Doris Lessing is the study of a woman who is trying to live in a way women never lived before, namely, as a single mother striving for artistic career, working for living, and problems that arise from such a life style, not only the problems imposed by society, but also inner problems resulting from individual's upbringing.⁷ Some critics consider Lessing's refusal to confine herself to gender issue as a rejection of feminism, but according to Doris, feminism and humanism are not opposed to each other but are problems as two faces of same coin. In her novels, she does not evoke liberal humanism as white, western or middle. Her vision intends to embrace an equality based on acceptance of difference, on sophisticated versions of feminist thinking in which gender is one of the issues among many problems of humanity.

For Lessing, 'feminism', the term itself stands for the study of gender inequality and not simply speaking about short-comings or against men. She speaks about humanity. Her feminism is an aspect of anxiety to recover humanism denied by the contemporary world.

In Lessing's view, men and women do not really confront each other, for they define each other according to vastly different needs, shaping reality to fit the pattern of their desires. Women, depending on men for happiness, deny their men's deficiencies. Men, in contrast, do not spare their women, using them as sexual scapegoats and viewing them as threatening, dominating mother figures, separating them into categories of conventional wife or sexual playmate, playing one off against the other the high level of intelligence demonstrated by the men in *The Golden*

Notebook is sharply at odds with their emotional insecurity, their need to enforce submission, their aggressive cruelty in the force of frustration. Frequently, they perceive women not as particular individuals, but as types as types of generalized woman. In short, both men and women share in the violence of the modern world by playing their opposing roles of oppressor and oppressed.⁸ Related to Gender issue Susan Watkins states that:

Women are encouraged to sacrifice their own well-being for their children.⁹

Lessing demarcates between man's love and women. The man has mechanistic understanding of sexual pleasure. Marian, Molly, and Richard discuss this issue. For Richard sex is purely physical. Therefore he says, (...it's purely physical one. How to get an erection with a woman you've been married to fifteen years) For Molly it is: *It's emotional as if they didn't connect.*¹⁰ Female sexual experience is connected with love and trust.

The entire analysis boils down to the view held by Simone De Beauvoir as stated above that one is not born, but becomes a woman. Under patriarchal society a female child is strictly brought up under the strict control of her parents to be given to her master, her husband, who will determine and shape her for the rest of her life. Traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her for sake of a child. Finally, Lessing's vision of man-woman relationship comes through Anna and Saul Green's union: Both get reflected in each other. Both become aspects of each other, both give birth to each other. They come together. Their divisions are broken down. Their fragmentation ends by attaining formlessness. Thus, man-woman relationship has an epiphany in their union.¹¹ As regards Lessing's view, oppression of women is manifested in both especially within the socio-political context and family relationships.

Doris Lessing belongs to second – wave feminism and basically, this has a lot of influence on her writings. Her feminist thinking developed in those cultural tracks of the period second –wave feminism referred to a period of feminist activity beginning in the early 1960s till 1980s which sought Legal and Political rights in the United kingdom. It saw cultural and political inequalities as linked. The movement encouraged women to understand aspects of their own personal lives as deeply politicized and reflective of a gender-bias structure of power. Second –wave feminism dealt mainly with gender discrimination in society. Betty Friedan specifically located this system among post-world War II middle class suburban communities.

It is, in fact, the biggest war waged in the world between sexes as told above. For this war, the contenders are male versus female. A broad spectrum of feminism rises against man. And war of sexes is fought to arrive at the solution as to how best humanity can lead a happy, healthy, purposeful life that spells peace, pleasure and prosperity for the entire humanity. Describing the man-woman mode of relationship,

Anna after falling in love becomes oppressively possessive, dependent. For Anna and Ella sex is emotional. Their sex hunger arises out of emotional hunger. She can't even enjoy sex unless she loves a man. For men's love is selfish and detached. For them it is a temporary refuge from boredom and loneliness. His aspect is best brought out in the novel through Anna and Saul relationship and Anna and Ella friendship. Women are conditioned to rely on men for protection and status. Their sexual pleasure is dependent on emotional stability.

Therefore a woman does not belong to herself. She is, rather, someone's daughter, wife or mother. Ultimately, a child is a woman's happiness, her justification for existence. She finds through the child herself realization. "It is a shared responsibility and a shared pleasure."

Finally, Lessing's vision of man-woman relationship comes through Anna and Saul Green's union: Both get reflected in each other. Both become aspects of each other. Both give birth to each other's thoughts and behavior. Both become whole by merging into each other. They come together. Their divisions are broken down. Their fragmentation ends by attaining formlessness. Thus, man-woman relationship has an epiphany in their union.

Lessing's protagonists mainly spring from the white privileged class, and are thus free from racial discrimination or oppression. In Lessing, the struggle is for abolishing the gender discrimination and seeking mutuality and harmony in life. The dichotomous attitudes which continue to operate throughout a women's life start right in her parent's home. She is prevented from developing her individuality. A woman in a male dominated society is conditioned into the emotional and cognitive traits of subordination and dependence.

Love, in fact, is essential need of Lessing's women. Most of her women marry and remarry not because they want to gratify their sexual urges but because they strive for love in the form of understanding, sharing and participation. But in a male-dominated society, as Friedan observes:

Love has customarily been defined, at least for women, as a complete merging of egos and a loss of separateness, togetherness, a giving up of individually rather than a strengthening of it.¹²

While woman is supposed to completely give up her individuality in love as well as in marriage, for man these mean self-gratification on all fronts. (Page 18) Without any doubt, it can be said that family and child rearing are the important gender stereotypes generally assigned to women. Most feminist theories also consider child rearing as a fundamental element in the construction of gender identity and the self and in the origin and replication of male-dominant gender relations.

In the game of power within marriage, children who are the blessing of a marriage turn into a device for securing more power over women. Men prefer a large number of children, as the greater the number of pregnancies, the fewer opportunity women had to compete for power. Children become a device for men to enchain women forcibly in marriage. In an incident in *The Golden Notebook*, the husband, De Silva makes his wife pregnant against her wishes and then mercilessly abandons her with two kids and no money at Ceylon and comes to live in London. Molly and Anna's talk about him is quite revealing:

He came back a couple of months ago. He's abandoned, his wife, apparently. She's much too good for him, he says, weeping big tears but not too big, because after all she is stuck with two kids in Ceylon and no money.¹³

Germaine Greer warns woman that man may ever determine to make her pregnant in order to break her self-sufficiency. During Lessing's time, husbands exploited wives by making them pregnant to keep them in marriage.

Lessing gives a psychologically realistic description of the behavior in which a man indulges when he learns that his wife is going to desert him:

When a woman left her husband, or threatened to leave him, that is, a woman of her type, who insisted on her rights to behave as a man would-then the husband went through certain actions like an automation, beginning with confiscating the contraceptives, threatening to make her forcibly pregnant, accusing her of multifarious infidelities, and ending in self-abasing weeping appeals that she should change her mind and stay...they were involved in a pattern of behavior which they could not alter.

The 'free women' in the *The Golden Notebook* Anna and Molly are without husbands after marital breakdown. However, they believe themselves to be free as they live outside the traditional family unit, in which the woman remains in the home, and the man is the breadwinner. Molly and Anna are indeed 'free' women. They choose to be free of the traditional family obligations and of the domestic responsibilities that are expected of wives due to gender inequality.

Even in the case of divorce we find gender inequality. Woman often finds herself in trouble due to financial pressures, man's condition improves substantially after divorce, he becomes richer with practically no burden and responsibility on him. Overburdened with the responsibility of children and home, with no independent income of her own in most cases, a woman has to depend on the little alimony which the court of law-makers are men, so the law also works in the interest of men, and the woman who has to bring up children, usually gets no help from the father of children. In the case of a working woman, usually alimony is not granted on the grounds that she is earning on her own. But a woman's job is less paying than a man's because in the interest of family she cannot pursue a career and often takes up part-time or less

demanding, and hence less paying, jobs. As a result even though they are working, after divorce women find their financial position not very sound. After divorce, as Marilyn French puts it:

In an over whelming number of cases Men become singles and women become single mothers. Women's income decline by 73 percent in the first year after divorce, men's incomes increase by 42 percent. The father is better and the children are often hungry.¹⁴

In *The Golden Notebook* when Richard is contemplating a divorce from Marion to marry his young secretary, he delimit his wife's monthly expenditure and checks her accounts regularly. Germaine Greer also observes that the easy divorce laws have increased the financial insecurity of women. She writes:

Women are not signed up for life in the marriage contract because divorce is always possible, but as it stands, divorce works in the male interests, not only because it was designed and initiated by man, but because divorce still depends on money and independent income. Married women seldom have either.¹⁵

No doubt, women do two-thirds of the world's work, provide 45 percent of its food, earn 10 percent of its income, and own 1 percent of its property. A woman, thus, suffers in the purely economic terms in the world of male supremacy.

In Lessing's works, though women are not financially exploited yet they also do not get any financial help from the husbands whose children they have to bring up on their own. Anna lives on the royalty, she gets from her successful novel *Frontier of war*. Molly receives no financial aid from her immensely wealthy ex-husband Richard and, hence works in a theatre for her and their son Tommy's survival. Like marriage, divorce is also tied to responsibility. Man, however, detaches himself from all kinds of responsibilities, moral or financial, the moment separation takes place. Indeed, the old advice about how to keep a woman quiet and submissive – keep her bare foot in winter and pregnant in summer – has been adapted to the twentieth-century industrial capitalistic world – keep her poor.¹⁶

To sum up all the facts mentioned above from a feminist point of view Lessing's novels represent a complicated relationship between the individual female characters and the whole society with respect to their gender roles. This fact is of vital importance for the investigation and subsequent analysis of the characters who are searching for their self-realization, mainly outside marriage. Despite the fact that all her women conform to women stereotypes, they keep searching for ways of escape from their female roles predisposed by the patriarchal society.

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