

## **Alienation of the Female Protagonist in Doris Lessing's novel *The Golden Notebook***

**Leena Gautam**

Ph. D. Research Scholar  
Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University,  
Agra, Uttar Pradesh  
&

**Dr. Sulekha Jadaun**

Asso.Prof.  
K. R. (P.G.) College,  
Mathura, Uttar Pradesh.

**Article History:** Submitted-01/08/2021, Revised-26/08/2021, Accepted-30/08/2021, Published-31/08/2021.

### **Abstract:**

Alienation is the most outstanding attribution of the present age. This paper throws light on the alienated life of Anna Wolf; the female protagonist of Doris Lessing's novel *The Golden Note Book*. Most of the characters of Lessing's novel are alienated figures either in some way or the other. Alienation is the greatest predicament of human life and Alienation is a pervading theme that runs throughout the novels of Doris Lessing. This research paper is attempted to focus on the problem of Alienation that Lessing endeavours to present in this novel.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Predicament, Estrangement.

### **Introduction:**

In the present era of the twenty-first century our life sometimes nothing but seems to be an illusion to us. We are living at a time where professionalism and excellence in every sphere of human life are demanded and to meet this ordeal task, we are converting ourselves into nothing but machines. And a machine knows no emotion and without emotions, we are nothing but alienated objects.

The notion of alienation is very wide and has a spectrum of interwoven ideas. Alienation can be well observed and felt in our day-to-day life. There is not even a single sphere of human

life where there are no traces of alienation and it is witnessed in our life. And when the meaning of sense is absent from life is marked as alienation.

Finkelstein defines alienation as “a psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a hostility felt towards something seemingly outside oneself which is linked to oneself, a barrier erected which is actually no defense but an impoverishment of oneself.”<sup>1</sup> According to Robert T. Tally, “The term alienation has its simple meaning—a condition of being estranged from someone or something, but it also has technical meanings.”<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson's famous rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are linked to the essence of mankind to be immutable. In social psychology, alienation refers to an individual's psychological withdrawal from society. In this sense, the isolated person becomes isolated from other people; Taken to the extreme, such psychological isolation expresses itself in neurosis. In critical social theory, alienation has an additional meaning of separating an individual from himself, the fragmentation of himself through work.

Before understanding the interpretation and origin of this word ‘Alienation’ and its gradual development and conceptualization, let us look at its main definition which has been given by contemporary scholars from time to time. The origin of the English word ‘alienation’ dates back to the sixteenth century in the writings of Seneca and Cicero. From a linguistic point of view, the term alienation has been used in medieval English even before Hegel and Marx; it has its origin in the Latin language.

The word originates from the Latin ‘alienus’ (alienare) and ‘alienatio’. Both these words were used by Latin authors in their writings denoting the sale or transfer of right to someone. And similarly, an alienated person abandons his ideas and even denies his existence and it leads to estrangement.

Before understanding the interpretation and origin of this word and its gradual development and conceptualization, let us look at its main definition which has been given by contemporary scholars from time to time.

The Oxford Companion to Philosophy defines the term alienation as “a psychological or social evil, characterized by one or another type of harmful separation, disruption or fragmentation, which sunders things that belong together”.<sup>3</sup>

The Oxford English Dictionary explains the term Alienation (the noun) as “The state or experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved.”<sup>4</sup>

Hegel and Marx’s discussion about alienation is very important and it reveals a contemporary view of alienation. Many social scientists have also defined alienation in different contexts and have widely anticipated its nature and function. Alienation may have different dimensions, but even after this, similarities can still be seen in its implementation.

Doris May Lessing is supremely a multi-oriented writer. She was a British novelist, poet, playwright, biographer, and short story writer. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for her writing in literature in 2007. Her fictions depict late-twentieth-century consciousness like racial conflict, conflict of generation, the psychological dimensions of male-female relationships, disturbed psyche of woman, Sufism, women’s predicaments, etc. Doris Lessing became involved in radical politics and engaged herself with the communist party.

Lessing’s writings are excruciating not because she is melancholic in nature but she seems to take delight in pointing out the shortcomings of human behaviour and lunacy. Alienation can be clearly seen in her personal life. We can see the pang of an internal isolation since her childhood. In very young age she left her school and worked as a nurse, shorthand typist and a telephone operator. She soon got married to her first husband but unfortunately the marriage did not last long. Lessing’s continuous break-up of her two marriages brought psychological alienation in her life. Her protagonist ‘Anna Wolf’ in *The Golden Notebook* suffers from the alienation of the man and woman relationship. The theme in this novel is human alienation and isolation.

### **Analysis:**

The most important solo work by an English author in the 1960s is *The Golden Notebook* (1962) by Doris Lessing. Since it was published, the novel's unique composition has drawn intense criticism and controversy. Many scholars considered it a feminist classic and made it a source of the feminist movement soon after its publication, but the author denied it to be so. Certainly, *The Golden Notebook* is connected to feminist conjecture, but it is similarly part of the psychosocial nature of a woman as an individual. Lessing considers women have been

dehumanized and ill-treated in large part because of the restrictions of their conventional social roles and their seclusion from the larger political context in which they exist. They have to learn to set up their relationship with the world without depending on men as middlemen if they are to appear as full-grown individuals. *The Golden Notebook* is regarded as an illustration exploring the social, political, and mental characteristics of a woman's consciousness in many aspects.

Lessing has also written two prefaces to the novel. In the first preface, she talks about the structure of the novel. She says: "there is a skeleton, or frame, called *Free Women*, which is a conventional short novel, about 60,000 words long, and which could stand by itself"<sup>5</sup>. But it is divided into five sections, namely *Free Women* and each section is separated by four notebooks, black, red, yellow, and blue steps. The central character, Anna Wolf, has a plan for the book. She writes about it in her black notebook as follows, "I keep four 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 experiences and the blue notebook to be a dairy"<sup>6</sup>.

*The Golden Notebook* is considered by some scholars to be a feminist classic, but the author herself denies that. She later mentioned that its theme is a mental breakdown as a way of curing. She also lamented that critics failed to appreciate the novel's extraordinary structure. Lessing doesn't like the idea of being a feminist writer.

As Lessing writes in her novel *The Golden Notebook*, the world's greatest empire is collapsing and no one can be sure of that new order (or chaos). People had a strange view of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Her language in the novel reflects the social change. Her dare to name a new experience is an essential first step towards understanding it, and the need to find a new terminology for one's new social existence is an important emphasis in the novel. This novel is about the kind of political rift they are seeing. It tracks Anna Wolf's inner and outer life as a novelist and member of the British Communist Party, through the final years of Stalin, the condemnation of Krushchev, and the domination of Hungarian. Anna herself is a new type of existence and she is the best example of the subtle transfer of Mrs. Lessing's allegiance to Communism in the novel *The Golden Notebook*. Hence Anna and most of the other communists mentioned in the novel undergo a thoughtful disenchantment, bitterly commented by Anna: "only a few months ago we believed that the world was going to change and everything was going to be beautiful and now we know it won't."<sup>7</sup> In one of her chronic dreams, Anna herself

tells of a particularly apocalyptic vision in which she ends the communist system for herself. Thus the communists depicted in *The Golden Notebook* are either disillusioned or hopeless like Anna and Maryrose, or like Willie Rode who become part of the post-war East German bureaucracy. There was no other option than devotion to the communist cause, as one can find in Mrs. Lessing's earlier books. Anna hates the deception of official party truths. Due to Ann's work one of her duties in the party office for John Butte, a communist publisher, is to decide whether to publish certain manuscripts, politically correct but artistically poor, as the committee is well aware, but they are 'healthy' art. Thus she can see the mode of such distortion. She is highly influenced by the publishing world to join the Communist Party. But Anna soon learns that the 'truth' in communist publishing is not a very expensive service. She is aware of her discrepancy in dismissing her imagination as unhealthy and in rejecting what she sees as 'healthy' art. Anna replies to Butte

“What you've said sums up everything that is wrong with the party. It's a crystallization of the intellectual rottenness of the Party that the cry of the nineteenth-century humanism, courage against odds, truth against lies, should be used now to defend the publication of a lousy lying book by a communist firm which will risk nothing at all by publishing it, not even a reputation for integrity.”<sup>8</sup>

Anna's sense of division required her to lead a more coherent, more integrated life through her devotion to communism. Anna, an enlightened, white liberal, hardly attends the fight for racial justice as others; whereas as a responsive, smart, and optimistic young woman, she cannot merge with the discrepancies and meanness of communism. Although party association and movement may be a worthwhile obligation, Anna realizes that this is a very limited obligation; too constricted in its rewards, and that the person is too dishonest in his demands, the kind of commitment she needs for her life to remain last long. Before making her final and most lasting commitment to verbal communication through writing for the public audience, she must move on to the second level of commitment, which is an open and free acceptance of her sexual nature.

In *The Golden Notebook*, the main issue was the human relationship, particularly the relationship between men and women as a prominent image of modern humanity or inhumanity. Sexual emancipation on the female side and sexual restructuring on the male side was necessary.

But in 1969 according to Conrad Mrs. Lessing said: "I'm impatient with people who emphasize sexual revolution. I say we should all go to bed, shut up about sexual liberation, and go on with the important matters."<sup>9</sup>(Conrad, 85) The incredibly difficult question of male-female relations becomes sexual emancipation seems to be an act of conscious choice, while the all-too-familiar problems of identity and desire arise before the question of emancipation - it is women's free will.

The *Golden Notebook* begins with a conversation between Anna and Molly in the summer of 1957 after their separation. These two women are close to forty, and they are outspoken on all sorts of matters. In this opening dialogue, she has three other brief sections of dialogue, each preceded by four notebooks, and a closing dialogue - five in total. And what do these two experienced ladies do is often explosive. In the twentieth century, social possibilities are high and the image of the "Free women" often prides itself on being malleable, often intellectual, emotionally malleable, but still seen as castrating by male and female writers alike. Through her narration techniques, Lessing presents a psychological world of "free women" in her famous novel *The Golden Notebook*. From the perspective of society at large, Anna and her friend Molly lead free life like men. Anna is free from ambiguity, ignorance, stupidity, from traditional class definitions, from financial pressures and domestic pressures, from the blindly accepted restrictions of traditional morality. However, for these reasons, she is a suitable object for casual lust for men: when their wives go to hospitals to have children, they look forward to welcoming Anna to the bed. Thus, her freedom becomes an instrument of her oppression.

The world of *The Golden Notebook* is a female world but there is no sense of closeness or blindness in its feminism. On the contrary, it is audaciously depicting the internal world of contemporary female intellectuals. Through the complex relationship between the heroine Anna and her lovers, further reveals the situation people face within modern society and thus draws our attention to the severely imbalanced relationship between men and women. Of all the men Anna has engaged with, the only one is her boyfriend Michael who is meaningful to Anna. Anna has been living with him for five years. She is deeply committed to Michael. But this affection is also self-contradictory. He has no intention of marrying her. His words and behavior make Anna feel a kind of coldness and resentment. When he feels he must leave, he perseveres as if it is an insignificant experience. Anna knows that sooner or later Michael will leave her but she tries to

ignore the fact. She has enjoyed momentary happiness but has suffered deep sorrow and helplessness. She did not ask for marriage. All she wants is a kind of stability and true love. However, Michael succumbs to Anna's honesty. He is afraid of shackles, responsibilities, and the loss of his independence. We must say that the root of the relationship between Anna and Michael is not personal but social.

Anna Wolf volunteers for the British Communist Party that she has been part of the Communist Party in Africa and has taken a stand for the injustice of the color palette in Africa. She has fragmented life and spends some time with a Jungian psychotherapist to treat her growing dissatisfaction and her loss of sense of self and others in life. She has seen the devastation in the world associating it with the people of Africa and is afraid of this death and destruction. She says

Why is she frozen? She is Afraid. What of? Of death. She nodded, and I broke in across the game and said: No, not of my death. It seems to me that ever since I can remember anything the real thing that has happened in the world was death and destruction. It seems to me it is stronger than a life.<sup>10</sup>

This mental imbalance indicates that Anna is disturbed inside and out and has completely broken her. She has failed as a member of the Communist Party and a writer. This fragmentation in life has stopped the growth in her life as an artist and a person. Her separation is not personal, but social and is due to her disillusionment with the Communist Party. Anca puts this expression as

Anna's writing block is related to her sense of alienation, but cannot be explained by it alone. To speak of her struggle to write in terms of a personal block is to dismiss the issue, to imply that it is Anna's problem rather than a social one. This is misleading, for Anna's refusal to write stems from deeply held reservations about the validity and meaningfulness of art in the post-war world. She is experiencing a creative drought, which manifests itself in her personal inability to write, but its origin is social.<sup>11</sup>

Maroula Joannou stated that this figure of an isolated woman ensnared in a suburb is a prominent figure that raises questions about the link between society and its impact on a woman's mental health. Women suffering a mental breakdown, like Anna Wolf, who eventually

collapses, are depicted variously in the literature of the 1960s and 1970s. Still, Lessing claims that insanity is a response to the pressures that all women suffer from, rather than an individual reaction. "Breakdown, in these novels and others, has a complicated relationship to femininity. What the fiction illuminates are the metonymic links between mental illness and the postwar feminine mystique"<sup>12</sup>

The *Golden Notebook* repeatedly shows that women in this novel are so-called independent, but they are not free. As a woman, Anna still has some domestic obligations that she refers to as the "housewife's disease". Irritated, Anna said:

The tension in me, so that peace has already gone away from me, is because the current has been switched on: I must-dress-Janet-get-her-breakfast-send her-off-to-school-get-Michael's-breakfast-don't-forget-I'm-out-of-tea-etc.- etc. With this useless but unavoidable tension resentment is also switched on. ... The resentment focuses itself on Michael; although I know with my intelligence that it has nothing to do with Michael. And yet I do resent him, because he will spend his day, served by secretaries, nurses, women in all kinds of capacities, who will take this weight off him.<sup>13</sup>

Anna is angry with Michael because he is not burdened with the same daily pressures as a woman. Still, she quickly changes her mind and forces her not to turn her resentment against Michael because, as Mother Sugar tells her, this resentment is impersonal. Anna says "The woman's emotion: resentment against injustice, an impersonal poison. The unlucky ones, who do not know it is impersonal, turn it against their men. The lucky ones like me -fight it".<sup>14</sup> According to Seiler-Franklin

Anna is not so lucky as she thinks she is, for if she could face the fact that she resents Michael because he holds the privileges reserved for the males in a patriarchal society, the pressures which keep her from writing would become much lighter. By turning her anger against herself, depersonalizing and depoliticizing it, she is entering into a self-destructive cycle, for deep down, she will never take men's higher status for granted.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

By reading Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, one can conclude that it is almost male oppression that leads women to Alienation. In Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, it is the political circumstances around her that give rise to a sense of alienation. The novel features Lessing's protagonist, Anna Wolf, who resembles her in every aspect except for writer's block, in which Doris Lessing is not harmed. Anna is portrayed in the novel as being subjected to physical as well as psychological isolation, a condition that results in political circumstances leading to the superiority of men over women.

## Works Cited:

1. Sidney Finkelstein: *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature*. New York: International Publishers, 1965. Print.
2. Tally, R. T. *Reading the Original: Alienation, Writing, and Labor in 'Bartleby, the Scrivener'*. In H. Bloom, & B. Hobby (Eds.), *Bloom's Literary Themes: Alienation*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009. Print.
3. <https://123docz.net/document/1610015-the-oxford-companion-to-philosophy-part-5-ppsx.htm>
4. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/alienation>
5. Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007, p. 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 148.
7. *Ibid.*, 132.
8. *Ibid.*, 310.
9. Conrad, Peter. *The Everyman History of English Literature*. London, Melbourne: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1973, p. 85.
10. Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. New York; Harper Perennial Modern Classic, 2008, p. 216.

11. Georgescu, Anca. Postmodern Metafictional Deconstruction and Reconstruction in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. *Studies on Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue* 3.7, 2013, pp. 712-23.

12. Joannou, Maroula. *Contemporary Women's Writing: from The Golden Notebook to The color Purple*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 16.

13. Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. New York; Harper Perennial Modern Classic, 2008, p. 298.

14. *Ibid.*, 299.

15. Seiler-Franklin, Carol. *Women in the Fiction of Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, and Iris Murdoch*. Boulder-pushers, 1979, p.143.