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## The Marginalized Woman Writer in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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### Abstract:

Worldwide the term 'marginalised' generally comes to be associated with those who are oppressed and suppressed on the basis of race, ethnicity, caste, creed and gender. Such persons or class suffer segregation not out of their own free will but by forceful imposition. In this context it is apt to add here that women has been treated as inferior and powerless, always the 'marginalised' irrespective of cultural or geographical boundary from ancient times. Hence 'she' is the typical example of 'marginalised' in the world community.

No doubt, the marginalized condition of women worldwide has been the most important topic of discussion for literary writers, thinkers and social activists. And naturally enough, the works done by female writers in this direction is bound to be more sensitive and authentic. In this regard Doris Lessing's presentation of the struggle and trauma of a female writer to gain a foothold in the male-centric world in the novel 'The Golden Notebook' (1950) is worth analysing. The life of Anna Wulf, a woman struggling for her personal and professional identity makes an eye opening and engrossing study material for any research work on a woman relegated to the fringe. The present paper is a sincere attempt in this direction.

**Keywords:** Marginalisation, Struggle, Trauma, Anxiety, Gender, Identity, Freedom.

The term 'marginalized', as a matter of fact, came into currency during the social revolution of the 1970s to describe the condition of those who lived on the fringe of mainstream America, especially, the Negroes. But now in the present world scenario where every domain of society is highly transparent and open to criticism, the most appealing topic of discussion is undoubtedly 'the voice of the 'marginalised' or to be more precise, 'the protest of the underdogs of our social construct. From the focal point of human rights also, the literary work about and by the socially backward, marginalized and oppressed classes have automatically acquired significant importance for perpetual discussion among philosophers, social scientists,

intellectuals, political pundits and literatures. In this regard, it won't be out of place to state that woman has always been the marginalised across cultural boundaries. Be it western, Indian, Afro-American, Asian, everywhere women have been represented as inferior gender in respective culture. She is the typical subaltern who has been continually oppressed and suppressed, made to struggle perpetually for her personal and political identity, negotiating the trauma of emotional rejection and sexual betrayal, professional anxieties and the tensions of friendship and family.

As a matter of fact the term 'marginalised' came into currency during the social revolution of the 1970s to describe the condition of those who lived on the fringe of mainstream America. It was implied that such people are excluded from full participation in the American dream. In other word such persons suffered the deprivation of opportunities to come in the mainstream. For example the Negro were kept aside, marginalized to become chronically poor. Now, worldwide the term has come to convey the sense of relegating one to an unimportant or powerless position. This often takes place on the basis of race, ethnicity and gender. Thus there is clear indication of imposing isolation on the person rather than the person opting for isolation upon her/his own volition. And it is an indisputable truth that woman has been relegated to inferior and powerless position worldwide, the typical marginalised, irrespective of cultural boundaries.

No doubt, the inferior condition of women who constitute half of the population universally has been the most important subject matter of discussion and representation by social activists and literary writers like Elizabeth S. Phelps ( *The Silent Partner*) Louisa May Alcott (*Little Women*), Jean Rhys ( *Wide Sargasso Sea*), Alice Walker (*The Colour Purple*), Doris Lessing (*The Golden Notebook*), Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*) Maya Angelou (*Autobiographies & Poems*) and many more. Among Indian English writers the names of Anita Desai, Manju Kapoor, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Mahashweta Devi are clearly associated with the depiction and discussion of women as marginalised section of society. It does not mean that male writers have not shown concern with this subject matter but as it is 'only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches'; it is basically the female writers who are naturally equipped to deal with this topic more sensitively. In the present article I shall be discussing the association of Doris Lessing with woman as the marginalised section of society with special reference to her work "*The Golden Notebook*'.

Doris Lessing, the British – Zimbabwean Novelist studied the effects of colonization on culture and society, the relationship between the white masters and black African servants in '*The Grass is Singing*', published in 1950. Her second novel '*The golden Notebook*' published

in 1962 is intimately associated with the life of a woman struggling for her personal and professional identity. 'The Golden Notebook' is the story of Anna Wulf, a divorced single mother and novelist, labouring against writer's block in 1950s London. It explores the struggle of Anna Wulf against the various forms of marginalisation which the complex and fragmented society of mid 20th century had imposed upon her, though not deliberately in all cases. Fearful of going mad she recorded her experiences in four coloured notebooks. The black notebook records her life as a writer, the red her political views and inclinations, the yellow notebook records her emotional life and the blue everyday events. But it is the fifth notebook- the golden notebook - that ties the strings of her life together as a whole and holds the key to her recovery and sanity.

Unlike women believing in conventional pattern of living, Anna tries to live like a "free woman" but fails miserably. Commenting on the cause of her failure Ruth Walker has remarked that 'The Golden Notebook'

...is not a treatise advocating autonomy for women, rather it is a lament for its seeming impossibility.

(D.L.p.71)

The fact that Anna Wulf is not a run-of-the-mill type of woman but a writer by profession adds a special dimension to the problem of discussion.

Whether Anna herself is responsible for her marginalisation or the society, is a matter of critical analysis. However, the fact that Anna has an acute realisation of this condition is evident from the very opening line of the novel:

The point is ... that as far as I can see, everything's cracking up.

By the word 'everything' the heroine refers to the ideals which are supposed to give stability to her life but they fail miserably to her expectations. She feels traumatized and relegated to the brink, Her marginalisation can be studied and analysed through following heads:

**a. Role of Max Wulf:**

Irrespective of economic independence a man or a woman still look for a compatible life partner; if not for biological reason, still, for mental support. Anna Wulf's relationship with Max Wulf has to be analysed also from this point of view. She came into contact with him during her stay in Africa and who is fictionalized as Willie Rodde in her 'Black Notebook'. But their marital relationship turned into disaster on account of temperamental and sexual incompatibility. Their loveless marriage though resulted into parenthood, Anna started finding him more repulsive after conceiving the child. But as to a woman maternity is a matter of

identity, she also continued her marital state for the sake of the unborn child. As expected they got divorced after the birth of their daughter. Now Anna has to bear the scar of a divorced woman and treated as marginalised among the 'normal' married woman of the society who conform to the whims of the patriarchal set-up. Her social ostracisation forces her to look for economic stability for herself and her new-born child. Her 'divorced' status proves to be a stigma only for her and not the husband, her partner.

Not only in 'The Golden Notebook' but also in novels like 'Martha Quest' and 'A Proper Marriage' Doris Lessing has attacked vigorously the institution of marriage which works as an enemy for women looking for freedom.

#### **b. Relationship with Michael**

Anna's divorce from Max creates further problems for her as she suffers from loneliness, emotional vacuity and disgust. She longs for companionship and love more desperately than before. She also realizes that for a woman, love outside marriage is more impossible than within it. Through her affair with Michael, who is an ex-communist revolutionary and an East-European living in exile in London, she realises bitterly that permanent commitment and love is nearly impossible. Though her relationship with Michael lasts for five years yet he exchanges her for another woman. Anna's long affairs with Michael had resulted in her dependence on him and also hankering for fixity in life but his defection leaves her utterly dejected. Before this, her "sisterhood" with Molly, though, gave her a period of mental peace and satisfaction, her break-up from Michael leaves her wholly unnerved, vulnerable and sick in the face of masculine aggression and opportunisticism. She finds herself now in a "chaos of discomfort and anxiety" (343) and face to face with a "new frightened vulnerable Anna" (358) who is born after the desertion of Michael. She finds an objective correlative in a dry well:

.... she had a mental image of a dry well, slowly filling up with water. Yes; that's what's wrong with me – I'm dry, I'm empty I've got to touch some source somewhere.

But her bitter experience with the "Source" Michael forces her to generalise men in the following cynical way:

Now we free women know that the moment the wives of our men friends go into nursing homes, dear Tom, Dick And Harry come straight over, they always want to sleep with one of their wives friends....a fascinating psychological fact among so many...(45)

#### **c. Her fame vs trouble**

The right-hand side of her 'Black Notebook' headlined 'Money' suggests that "free woman" Anna wulf has achieved economic independence by reviewing books for journals and

newspaper and making translations. However, the triumph of her moment comes when she creates 'Frontiers of War' her first novel that gives her not only name and fame but also complete economic freedom to raise her child Janet. But with fame came the trouble and challenges to maintain her integrity and originality. She is suddenly surrounded by various television and film companies who want to adapt her novel for production. They want to make alterations in terms of story, dialogue, characters and their relationships but to keep the title intact for its sale value. Everyone wants to mould it according to their need in terms of royalty payment to "the author." In short, they want Anna to sacrifice her integrity and ethics as a writer for financial gain. This gives a severe jolt to her sense of superiority as a writer. She starts suffering anxiety pangs:

what would emerge in the completed film would be something Quite different from what she remembered, (461

Even the assurance of the directors that they will be 'creating something' out of her story doesn't comfort her. In self-disgust she decides to shelve 'The Black Notebook' and choose a life of isolation and self-segregation. Thus instead of expanding her abilities in the cultural world she is forced to a voluntary isolation cum marginalisation.

#### **d. Conflict resulting from 'true nature of a novel'**

Anna might have achieved success as an extraordinary novelist but later on she feels dissatisfied because the story adheres to typical colour problem in Africa by showing a love affair between an idealistic Englishman and a primitive 'black' woman. She feels that the novel utterly lacks the "quality of philosophy" which a true novel should uphold. Though she belonged to the community of colonizers she hated emotionally and ideologically the notion of empire and white domination. Actually, she supported those who fought against this system. After deep introspection she concluded that what prevented her from expressing her philosophy of life in the novel is her "way of living, education, sex, politics class". (46) So rather than continuing with this kind of hypocritical existence she chose a phase of literary inactivity. She could not sacrifice her artistic ideology for financial gain. Even the psychoanalyst's encouragement fails to extricate her out of this phase of "writer's block" or Self- Imposed Marginalisation.

### e. Inadequacy of Marxism

Anna's dream of individual freedom and a better world drew her towards Marxist ideology because, "the leftist people were the only people in the town with any kind of moral energy, the only people who took it for granted that colour bar was monstrous. (82)

In her eyes she considered it better not only for black people but also for women in general. In the 'preface' to the novel 'The Golden Notebook' even Lessing has written;

Marxism looks at things as a whole and in relation to each other ... an event in siberia will affect one in Botswana. (14)

Similarly, the heroine Anna justifies her joining the British Communist Party when she writes in *The Red Notebook* that somewhere at the back of my mind when I joined the party was a need for wholeness, for an end to the split, divided, unsatisfactory way we all live (157)

The party which she initially disliked on the grounds of 'dishonest' and 'contemptible' people became her saviour when she felt disillusioned by the "commercial side, so blatant" of the writer-publisher world. She is moved by the powerful sense of service among the party. But after getting involved in the party work she realised to her utter dismay that the split far from being healed has only widened, she found:

... an organisation whose every tenet, on paper, contradicts the idea of the society we live in; but something much deeper than that (157)

The gap between the communist, theory and practice, the element of hypocrisy, fragmentation among the groups over irrelevant issues led her to utterly dislike the party. Thinking of the loss of individual freedom she writes In 'The Red Notebook'.

I am leaving the Party. It's a stage of my life finished off. I'm shedding a skin, or being born again. (315)

The result is that Anna once again-finds herself isolated; grappling helplessly for ideals, roots, an anchor in life which could sustain her. As a matter of fact 'The Golden Notebook' was written at a time when Marxism was going through the process of both engagement and disillusionment.

Through the bitter and fruitless experiences of her life, Anna Wulf realises that complete 'emancipation' for woman is nearly impossible to achieve. Her insecurity and up rootedness, the loss of her original ideology make her to confess;

I'm not free ... I'd like to be married. I don't like living like this. (251)

How ironic! A free woman like Anna considering the security of marriage tag. Actually, women are marginalized universally and "free women" like her and Molly are traumatically marginalized." because not only they are limited in number but also because they come to

realise bitterly that their efforts at economic independence from men paradoxically pushes them toward the same men for emotional dependence. The chaos they have to face in the process is “too terrifying” (448) as Molly herself confessed. Again, Anna strikes a note of surrender when she utters:

... it's possible we made a mistake. Perhaps, the novel under review tries to point at the impossibility of complete emancipation of woman. To quote Florence Howe;

The free woman is free only in a most limited sense. She is free to choose between her divided selves: free to attempt the precarious balance of living with both of them; free to be a ‘female’ or to be a ‘free woman’. Finally free comes to mean divided.(p. )

Pitted against this dilemma, Anna finds herself both psychologically and socially marginalised, completely drained so much so that she writes her epitaph like this;

Here lies Anna Wulf, who was always too Intelligent...,she let them go. (570)

This might sound like Keatsean philosophy but here it is from the woman who is experiencing death in life, paying a heavy price to remain free.

Nevertheless, life has still not ended for Anna Wulf. There is still light at the end of the tunnel in the form of Milt, the leftist writer, staying in her house for few days. Milt rescues Anna from her emotional turmoil and helps her regain her psychic balance. He pulls her out from her obsessive compulsion of “newspaper cuttings” and makes her see that ‘fragmentation’ is not an individual but a general human condition:

That's the dark secret of our time, no one mentions it, but every time one opens a door one is greeted by a shrill, desperate and inaudible scream. (p. 574)

The two become good friends and thus the healing care of an understanding man enables Anna to recover from her mental breakdown. She shakes off her loneliness and starts her work of social service again at a welfare Centre.

On a broader level, it has also been critically observed that Anna's struggle to write a big novel packed with ideas, experimentation and new moral order is in fact, an expression of Doris Lessing's own anxiety. The heroine is never successful in writing such a novel but ‘The Golden Notebook’ undoubtedly, proves that Lessing did succeed in producing "a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life. (p. 76)

## Conclusion

According to the conventional, typical meaning of marginalisation, Anna Wulf's case might appear to be singular one, more of the type of post-modernist fragmented intellectual one, yet, what the novelist herself thought about her projection of Anna as a marginalised woman in the novel "The Golden Notebook" is worth quoting here:

I was simply trying to understand what was happening to us, who refused to live according to "conventional morality". And who all encountered nevertheless, many difficulties, submissive to the point of absurdity in our need to proclaim our freedom.

Thus, Anna's marginalisation is justified on the grounds that she belongs to a complex and fast changing mid-20th century world, where no single world-view can define it absolutely.

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