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DETERMINING GENDER: THE PROBLEMATIC OF QUEER MASCULINITY IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK*

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Abstract

The paper attempts to study Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* in association with the homophobic representations in the novel. The book deals with a number of themes which range from humanism, communism, female psychology, motherhood, to the responsibility of a writer as a social reformer. The book is widely known for its minute and delicate treatment of diverse female psyches and experiences. The article will focus on how the novel portrays, the attitude of a 'free women,' who holds a dignified position in her society as a respectable middle class female writer with her humanist involvements and yet fails to comprehend the position of the group of people whose sexual orientation diverts from that of her own. There are many instances in the novel where the general panic associated with homosexuality is portrayed as being justified. In sum, the paper showcases the conflict existing between acceptance and rejection of homophobia and how, due to this conflict, the comprehension of queer masculinity becomes more complicated and problematized.

The Golden Notebook was published in 1962. The novel brought many insightful responses as soon as it was published but due to the misinterpretation of critics, Lessing called it a "failure" (Florence Howe, 429). Commenting on the intention behind her writing of *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing says, "My major aim was to shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped" (Introduction, xvii). Margaret Drabble says, "Here was a writer who said the unsayable, thought the unthinkable, and fearlessly put it down there, in all its raw emotional and intellectual chaos. She managed to make sense of her material, but at enormous risk." (The Guardian). Commenting on Lessing's frank expressions Drabble says: "No wonder Lessing's work was described as ball-

breaking and "castrating", a word she often invokes. Experienced women had not written openly like this in the history of literature. It must have been terrifying. The pact of polite silence had been broken for ever" (The Guardian). Diana Athill says, "Although Lessing writes with feeling about the uncertainties and frailties of her women characters, there is a slightly pompous solemnity- almost didacticism- in the atmosphere that prevails in *The Golden Notebook*..." (The Guardian)

The study of the novel in association with its historical context brings to the surface many insightful interpretations. 1960s and 1970s are the periods when "the GLBT and feminist movements gained momentum and challenged dominant perceptions of gender and sexuality". (Renzetti 338). But it was only after 1980s that "news media finally

began to cover the GLBT stories that should reach the level of national attention” (Renzetti 338). The subject of homophobia has been a major concern of these transgender people who have been “targeted by heterosexism because of the common thread of nonheterosexual identity they share[d]” (Adams, 198).

Homophobia is the irrational fear and hatred of homosexuality. Without sufficient knowledge of sexology, ordinary people tend to rely upon their commonsensical belief of a normal sexual behaviour, in other words the behaviour aligned with the heteronormative values and norms which are highly influenced by the conventional attitude towards human sexuality. Any person with an upbringing in a conservative society characterised by an acceptance of commonly held values against homosexuality, will easily inherit the widely spread homophobia. Commenting on the injustice caused by homophobic fears, Lori B. Girshick says, “Homophobia and Heterosexism are hurtful in that they lock people into rigid gender roles and expectations. People are unable to be their authentic selves and contribute their full potential to society. Homophobia silences and stigmatises people including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and nonconforming heterosexuals, because they are different” (Renzetti 338). *The Golden Notebook* was set in the post second world war society with the wake of the cold war and the suppression of the Hungarian uprising against Communist rule. It speaks about war, Stalinism Communism, Identity, Feminism as well as sexuality.

This paper attempts at examining the homophobic representations in Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* which focuses on the portrayal of homosexual individuals in the novel, a subject that has gained relatively fewer attention in relation to the novel, so far. This article attempts to show how *The Golden Notebook* perpetuates homophobic stereotypes with its suggestive indication towards subversive readings of sexuality but eventually moves to direct the reader to accept the fact that sexuality is “fundamentally provisional, tenuous, mobile, igniting in unpredictable contexts with often unsettling effects” (Elizabeth Grosz 208).

The novel is a story about a female writer who suffers from a writer’s block. The book simply records her attempts and successful break away from this block, which is unconditionally linked with her sense of identity as a woman. The protagonist Anna Wulf, in order to escape the writer’s block, divides her writing into four diverse coloured notebooks: black, red, blue and yellow. In these four notebooks Anna writes about her experiences which are in turn divided into four different parts. Along with these four notebooks there is a short novella known as “Free women” which is further divided into five sections and installed fragmentarily between the notebooks. So, the four notebooks along with the novella are comprised together to form the complete novel, *The Golden Notebook*. There are many instances in the novel where the general panic associated with homosexuality is portrayed as justified. Throughout the novel, Anna is shown as a heterosexual woman who is unable to comprehend the position of the group of people whose sexual orientation diverts from that of her own. Despite being sympathetic to the condition of these transgender people, Anna finds herself shaken by their behaviours and lifestyle. Throughout the novel she is portrayed as a heterosexual woman who is torn between her humanistic ideals and homophobic fears. Eventually as a writer, she communicates the conflict with her written records which form *The Golden Notebook*. An insightful observation on the homophobic representations in the fictions is made by Nancy St. Clair in her article “Outside Looking In: Representations of Gay and Lesbian Experiences in the Young Adult Novel”. After reading approximately fifty young adult fictions containing homosexual themes Clair says,

“What I found in these books is that the representation of homosexual experience falls into one of three broad categories. In the first category are books that depict homosexuality as a “tragic flaw” (Jenkins, p. 89) and that promote a variety of negative stereotypes. Homosexuals are predatory, for example, in Janice Kesselman’s *Flick*, immoral in Judith St. George’s *Call Me Margo*, doomed to lives of isolation in Isabelle Holland’s *The Man Without a Face*, and prone to violence in

Larry Hulse's *Just the Right Amount of Wrong*. Adolescent characters who do engage in homosexual behaviour in these books are often assured that their behaviour is not an orientation, but simply "youthful experimentation" (Jenkins, p.86) caused by their membership in dysfunctional families, as in Jonathan Donovan's *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*".

The above passage is quite significant for several reasons. It shows the sets of values that are smoothly communicated through the texts to the readers subsequently influencing their notions regarding homosexuality. Interestingly enough the above mentioned negative stereotypes are also portrayed in *The Golden Notebook*. Anna's belief of homosexuality being just an experiment or phase becomes apparent in the following words while she describes her friends in South Africa in the following manner, "Willi had had the most conventional upper-middle-class upbringing imaginable. Berlin in the late twenties and thirties; ...a little conventional homosexuality at the age of thirteen, being seduced by the maid when he was fourteen..."(59). Commenting on Paul, Jimmy and Ted she says, "At Oxford these three had been homosexuals. When I write the word down and look at it, I realise its power to disturb" (60). Here, "the power to disturb" arises from the negative stereotypical understandings, associated with homosexuality. (60) Anna defends her friends by further explaining that

"When I remember the three, how they were, their characters, there is no shock, or moment of disturbance. But at the word homosexual, written-well, I have to combat dislike and disquiet. Extraordinary. I qualify the word by saying that already, only eighteen months later, they were making jokes about 'our homosexual phase', and jibing at themselves for doing something simply because it had been fashionable"(60).

Talking about Jimmy, Anna says that "Unlike the others he was truly homosexual" but she adds "...though he wished he wasn't. He was in love with Paul whom he despised and who was irritated by him" (63) Here Jimmy's sexuality is portrayed in a

fashion that hints at the notion that Jimmy's love for Paul was not due to the fact that he was attracted to him for his character traits as a human, rather it was due to the gender identity that Paul had which attracted Jimmy. So the "Free woman", Anna who has been found a number of times in the middle of advocating for the existence of true love between herself and her lover, fails to accept Jimmy's sexuality by not believing that his feelings for Paul were genuine.

Anna also thinks of lesbianism as pathological. Reflecting on her friendship with Molly, Anna fears others' interpretation of what the relation of two free women living together in a flat might appear to others. Anna's concern for the "lesbian aspect of this friendship" (154) is quite apparent in the following words: "... in the silence of this discomfort, there is the thought, which follows naturally from the 'it is odd in itself, isn't it?'- is it possible they thought us Lesbians?"(332). As the closest friend Anna always confided in Julia who in turn, empathized with her particularly when their discussions were related to their relationships with men. But the bond of sisterhood collapses as soon as Anna brings negative stereotypes of homophobia and applies them to her friendship. Her irrationality is absolute when she feels reluctant to confide in Julia by saying that "to indulge in these conversations with Julia, thinking that two women, friends on a basis of criticism of men, are Lesbian, psychologically if not physically" (334). In the end Anna even feels suffocated by being around Molly in the same flat and decides to leave her. Later on when Anna buys a new flat she also hated the idea of sharing her flat with only women in it as she says, "Two business girls came around...then I realised I didn't want girls. Janet and myself, and then two girls, a flat full of women, I didn't want it" (393).

Furthermore, there are instances where we find that certain familiar homophobic stereotypes of homosexuals as deviant seducers, jealousy stricken freaks are portrayed in the novel. The narrative draws on a number of homophobic stereotypes in its portrayal of characters like Ronnie and Ivor, the two homosexual tenants. Ronnie was "a dark graceful young man with carefully-waved glossy hair, and a white flashing smile, carefully prepared" (285). It is

mentioned that, "Anna disliked him, but, realising she disliked the type rather than the person, controlled the feeling"(285) but could not escape from having conflicting thoughts. The appearance of Ronnie was quite disturbing for Anna. In one of the scenes Anna describes his appearance which proves how much conscious she was of the presence of this man, only because his sexuality and sense of dressing deviated from convention and norm. Anna says,

"Ronnie stood anxiously peering into the mirror over the shelf where she kept her cosmetics. He was patting lotion on to his cheeks with her cottonwool, and trying to smooth out the lines on his forehead...He was wearing an expensive silk dressing-gown in a soft hazy purple, with a reddish cravat tucked into it. He wore expensive red leather Moorish sleepers, thronged with gold. He looked as if he should be in some harem, and not in this flat in the wastes of London's student-land" (296).

The appearance of Ronnie in the feminine night gown contributes as a disturbing presence in Anna's flat. It indicates back to the conflation of sexuality and assumptions about proper gendered behaviour. Here is a man who deviates from traditional expectations of masculinity by wearing a flashy and feminine night gown, something that further indicates his deviation from the heteronormative expectation of dress code and appearance. Anna's aversion and horror at the sight of Ronnie are resulted by her blind acceptance of negative stereotypes regarding homosexuality. Later on, her reaction to Ivor and Ronnie's relationship also shows the prejudiced thinking she harbours underneath the cloak of a free woman. The conversation that follows the above scene with Ronnie provides a vivid description of the unease that Anna feels in Ronnie's presence. A very common possible conversation between a heterosexual woman and a homosexual man shows the discomfiture that remains dormant but an essential part of their interaction. The interaction commences as follows:

"Now he stood with his head on one side, patting the waves of black, faintly greying hair with a manicured hand, 'I did try a rinse,' he remarked, but the grey shows though.'

'Distinguished, really,' said Anna. She had now understood: terrified that she might throw him out, he was appealing to her as one girl to another. She tried to tell herself she was amused. The truth was she was disgusted, and ashamed that she was.

But my dear Anna,' he lisped winningly, looking distinguished is all very well, if one is-if I can put it that way- on the employing side.'

'But Ronnie,' Anna said, succumbing despite her disgust, and playing the role she was expected to play, you look very charming, in spite of the odd grey hair. I'm sure dozens of people must find you devastating.'

'Not as many as before,' he said. 'Alas, I must confess it. Of course I do pretty well, in spite of ups and downs, but I do have to take pretty good care of myself.'

'Perhaps you should find a permanent rich protector very soon.'

'Oh my dear,' he exclaimed, with a little writhing movement of the hips that was quite unconscious, 'you can't imagine that I haven't tried?'

'I didn't realise that the market was so badly over-supplied,' said Anna, speaking out of her disgust, and already ashamed of doing so before the words were out. Good Lord! she thought, to be born a Ronnie! to be born like that- I complain about the difficulties of being my kind of woman, but Good Lord!- I might have been born a Ronnie" (296-297).

Furthermore, after this encounter with Ronnie, Anna felt the need "to assure herself of the possibility of normality...I feel as if the atmosphere of this flat were being poisoned, as if a spirit of perverse and ugly spite were everywhere" (287). Another disturbing concept in the novel, based on the negative and homophobic stereotypes arises with the representation of homosexuals as not being

“normal” or real men. (286) Anna says that “the defence of the homosexual, was nothing more than the polite over-gallantry of a ‘real’ man, the ‘normal’ man who intends to set bounds to his relationship with a woman, consciously or not. Usually unconsciously” (286). Anna’s prejudiced beliefs contribute to further her concerns for the healthy upbringing of her child. The concept of homosexuals, not being men in the real sense is further mentioned by Anna in relation to her parenting. As a single and divorced mother, Anna says, “Janet needs a man in her life, she misses a father. Ivor’s very kind to her. And yet because...he’s not a man- what do I mean when I say he’s not a man.? Richard’s a man; Michael’s a man. And yet Ivor isn’t?” (285). Anna says that Ivor and Ronnie “were disturbing her peace of mind” and yet as a socialist and humanist she could not ask them to leave “because they were homosexuals, and they, like a coloured student, would find it hard to get a room” (295). She hated feeling “responsible” for them and says, “... as if one doesn’t have enough trouble with ‘normal’ men”. For Anna, Ivor and Ronnie and their sexuality was not “normal”(295). They were disturbing her, just by being around and were harmful for her daughter as Anna feared that Janet will grow up surrounded by “men who are little boys and homosexuals and the half-homosexuals...”(295). Gaspig, Anna says: “By God, there are a few real men left, and I’m going to see she gets one of them. I’m going to see she grows up to recognise a real man when she meets one”(295-296). As a parent Anna thinks that the refusal to adhere to heteronormative gender and sexual codes of behaviour could be a destructive force in her daughter’s life.

Another powerful and yet very general stereotypical fear from homosexuality is indicated in the representation of homosexuals as “sexual predators” (Sharpe 269). Anna seems to be accepting certain familiar homophobic stereotypes like the homosexuals being a child molester or the assumption that homosexuality is “dangerous to children”(Wilton 191). Commenting on such fear, Fred Fejes says that the “homosexual threat to children” is apparent in the homophobic statement that “[h]omosexuals don’t reproduce, they recruit” (137). Although Anna has a daughter and Ivor is a gay

which means the child is not expected to be harmed physically by Ivor who was like a “big friendly dog” (286) to the kid, Anna fears the damage could be done mentally. The negative stereotypical notions associated with homosexuality contribute to the condemnation and censure of homosexuals. The indication of Ivor’s homosexuality being harmful for the healthy mental growth of Janet is automatically held on the baseless grounds by a worrying mother. Furthermore, the concerned mother had up until now prided herself for being a very open-minded and rational humanist and yet the excessive parental concern combined with homophobia contributes to further pathologize Ivor’s sexuality. Anna believed that the gay man’s incapability to become a woman causes him to be jealous of women and she concludes this notion by saying that eventually “the obsessions of jealousy being part homosexuality” (425), turns into bitterness and causes them to misbehave. In one of the scenes, Ivor was engaged in telling a story to Janet. Anna claims that “...there was a new quality in Ivor’s voice: mockery. The mockery was aimed at the world of girls’s school, at the feminine worlds, not at the absurdity of the story”(286). Anna further observes, “...the child’s face showed a delighted but half-uneasy grin. She sensed the mockery being directed at her, a female”(286). It should be made clear that Ivor’s mockery could have been directed at Anna, the landlady who partially believed in the negative stereotypes related to homosexuality but Anna’s assumption that Janet sensed Ivor’s mockery as directed at her and her gender identity, appears to be quite irrational and forced. The shock on Janet’s part could just be the result of the fact that the child sensed the tension between her mother and Ivor, the tension between a prejudiced heterosexual woman and a homosexual man. As a mother Anna laments, “...my poor child...you are going to grow up in a society full of Ivors and Ronnies, full of frightened men who measure out emotions like weighed groceries...” (396). Anna’s interpretation of the child’s unease appears to be manipulated to support her arguments against homosexuality because the very “mockery” in Ivor’s voice that Anna talks about stops as soon as she “was well removed

from the scene, Ivor's voice had lost its element of parody and gone back to normal" (286).

Having examined the homophobic stereotypes showcased in the novel, it is also important to note that Lessing did not create a woman who was completely a slave of prejudiced beliefs against homosexuals. Whether Lessing supported the negative connotations of such stereotypes or not still remains ambiguous to the reader but at least in *The Golden Notebook* it can be logically concluded that the text itself moves from fixity and rigid stereotypes to an open acceptance of uncertainty, chaos and fragmentation which eventually can be viewed as affirmative and contributing enough for the acceptance of the diverse sexuality. There was another side of Anna's personality which empathised with the situations of Ivor and Ronnie. Anna's humanist beliefs were dominant enough to correct her again and again against the prejudiced thinking as she ponders over her hatred towards Ivor and Ronnie by saying that "...it's nonsense. The truth is, everything I'm thinking at the moment is wrong. I can feel it is..." (287). It eventually directs towards a liberated acceptance of the free flow of sexuality that is accompanied by the liberation of Anna's female selfhood, towards the end of the novel. According to Elizabeth Grosz, the "threat homosexuality poses to heterosexuality is its own contingency, and openendedness, its own tenuous hold over the multiplicity of sexual impulses and possibilities characterizing all human sexuality" (207-208). When Anna overcomes her writer's block after her constant affiliation with Saul Green's split personalities, she eventually sees multiple selves within her that contribute to her understanding of the true nature of female sexuality. She starts imagining herself in Saul's positions. In one of the occasions, after knowing about Saul's affair with another woman, Anna reflects, "I wondered if I wanted to make love with that woman he was with now" (425). In her ceaseless search for an authentic identity, Anna comes to a point where she manages to completely dissociate herself from her body and raises her imagination to the ultimate level where she frees herself from all the prejudiced beliefs and limitations. Although very briefly but the novel does provide an account of Anna's new found and

corrected understanding of homosexuality in the following words, where Anna says,

"This feeling of being alien to my own body caused my head to swim, until I anchored myself, clutching out for something, to the thought that what I was experiencing was not my thought at all. I was experiencing, imaginatively, for the first time, the emotions of a homosexual. For the first time the homosexual literature of disgust made sense to me. I realised how much homosexual feeling there is floating loose everywhere, and in people who would never recognise the word as theirs" (440).

By accepting the lesbian desires Anna escapes the constrained feeling that comes with conformity to heteronormative values while her sexuality is marked by a considerable liberation. Anna's acceptance of her own dormant homosexuality towards the end of the novel supports the undeniably transiency of sexuality which contributes to the rejection of previously underlined homophobic stereotypes through textual engagement with *The Golden Notebook*. Eventually it appears that Lessing portrays such homophobic stereotypes only to showcase their unpredictability and discordances while after opening up many conventional and baseless ideas she not only critiques but also ridicules them. Anna's acceptance of the transitoriness of sexuality and ease of such acceptance towards the end further contributes to the understanding of female identity.

Tracy J. Davis in "Homophobia and media representations of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People" comments that "Historically GLBT people have been made invisible, marginalised, demonised or portrayed as unrealistic stereotypes by the media" (Renzetti 338). The homophobic representations which follow the fixated notions of gender and sexuality are often disguised in the form of heterosexist feminism which can be both ideologically and culturally damaging for society. A text like *The Golden Notebook* holds much to say about homosexuality, female sexuality, homophobia as well as the lack of concern on the

part of the contemporary “free women”, for the subject position of transgender people.

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