



THE HEGEMONY OF SEXUAL OPPRESSION AND THE QUEST FOR SEXUAL IDENTITY IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK*

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ABSTRACT

The Golden Notebook (1962), written by 2007 Nobel Prize laureate in literature, Doris Lessing the well-known contemporary British woman writer, is a complex and multilayered context which is molded around a series of colorful notebooks. It portrays numerous ideas and impressions regarding the prominent role of women in mid-twenty century western culture and contributes to controversial perspectives of feminism, even though Lessing has always denied the feminism essence of her novel. However the disputant themes which come under a meticulous scrutiny here are the women's oppression, subjugation, the actual position of women in society, women's struggle for establishing their identity and obtaining the self-assertion and autonomy. *The Golden Notebook* is a bold attempt which exhibits a colorful picture of a world which is patriarchal dominated and combined with a society which is marked by gender-based discrimination; a society that is associated with such a male-dominance prescriptions that shut the doors of autonomy to the women. Patriarchal ideology contrast, rebelling against the rigid social codes along with defying the prescribed roles by society and eventually attempting to provide a life of wider personal freedom than the one customarily granted to women are the main concerns of the novel. Lessing applies the suppression issue as a window through which the patriarchal panorama of society is depicted. Accordingly, this text scrutinizes the novel from a socialist feminist peephole to clear out the hardships and limitations that the patriarchal structure of that time society imposed upon women and demonstrates the struggle of women for establishing their confirmed identity. Based on the findings of this research context, we discuss that the main outstanding aspects of women's life including their sexuality, autonomy, motherhood and social freedom are oppressed and overwhelmingly exploited by the patriarchal society which inferiorizes the women to a second class inhabitant. On the other hand, the female personages of the novel stand against all the pressures and discriminative looks imposed by society's codes and institutions; and rely boldly on their own capability to gain their self-defined identity and autonomy which were intruded and snatched by the male trespassers.

Key words: Sexual Identity; Sexual Oppression; Autonomy; Patriarchal Society; Feminism

INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing's prominent novel *The Golden Notebook* is frequently cited as the Bible of feminism due to the wrapped complex feministic biographical sketch which is adopted in. But some critics are against this view and believe that there is not a hint in the book of any desire for political, legal, educational, or even intellectual equality between the sexes. Lessing's struggle to deal with her readers' misinterpretations about her work contributes to many interviews and reprinting prefaces of her books. Furthermore, she wrote a new Preface to her novel for the 1971 edition, explaining her resolutions and intentions "hardly any of my readers has seemed prepared to see the book as a whole". *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1994) 102. Lessing was personally in contrast to the vision that her novel is considered as "a trumpet of women's liberation movement". She turns a cold shoulder to this impression and writes in the preface of her novel: "I was so immersed in writing this book, that I didn't think about how it might be received... Emerging from this crystallizing process, handing the manuscript to publisher and friends, I learned that I had written a tract about sex-war, and fast discovered that nothing I said then could change the diagnosis." (*Golden Notebook*, P,10).

Apart from all the true or false critical impressions around, her novel is considered as an inseparable part of the psychosocial nature of the female world. *The Golden Notebook* showed up in 1960s' radical atmosphere and consequently nurtured the feminist movements and progressively a sexual revolution which was the intent of most of women as they were suppressed in the male-dominated society; it was viewed by Philip Larkin as "the liberating symptoms of the time" in his poem "Annus Mirabilis" (1963). A huge shift occurred in the popular culture and morality of people, and the mentioned decade witnessed "a post-Freudian receptivity" regarding sexual relationships. Such a concept as a source of pleasure could loosen the primitive impression of public prudery and accompanied with the tremendous popularity of female contraceptives and legislative liberalization which facilitated divorce and birth control and legalize abortion and adult homosexual behavior

with the expansion of women's perspective and opportunities in terms of education, job, profession and politics.

In the *Golden Notebook*, Lessing distances from the social realism and through the tunnel of "breakdown" as the received genuinely experience of her generation's women, scrutinizes the prone to shatter feminine condition of women. It is acclaimed as a fundamental text of Women's Liberation Movement. This thick, onion liked layered and aspirational book, which ties up and weaves psychic fragmentations as a fictional form, displays the individual's uneasiness as a symptom of the common disease of the day, and eventually demonstrates Lessing's reputation as a feminist author; specifically and noteworthy for the exceptional frankness and fair-mindedness with which she treats women's sexuality and emotional crisis. The novel analyses very sharply the staple issues of women in a male dominated society and "the extent of freedom they could expect to enjoy" (*Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook, A Critical study*, P, 14). She puts all the received impressions regarding the sexes' relations and the role of women in society under a critical question.

The patriarchal capitalist world which is portrayed in this novel is marked by its male-dominance and gender-biased nature; a society in which the women's identity is defined through a male-defined relations. Hence, Lessing intends to stand against the patriarchal sexual ideology that prevents women from enjoying and feeling the sexual phases of life while considering sexual appetite in men was taken natural. Accordingly, this context attempts to display the facets of women's sexual suppression and their resistance and attacking back. The protagonists have a strong will for gaining their autonomy and wish to liberate themselves from the conventions of their male-dominated community; their approach is deeply scrutinized in this paper through a fleshed out description. The characters are overwhelmed by the oppressive relations in their society and desire to escape from the confines of their man-oriented life and trespass the false ideologies of their society; eventually they try to rely on their own power.

Comparing and contrasting Lessing's female and male personages through socialist feminist

point of view and taking into account the female character's subversive power, this point will be declared that the reason of female characters rebel is finding themselves tied in the family and community, not only to the role of a wife, but also to the role of a silent obedient woman. The aforementioned part determines that the novel's strength lies not in harmonizing of four colorful notebooks and its writing literary quality, but specifically in Lessing's honesty regarding the description of modern society's people who are tied up with their gender-biased thoughts and like to endorse a servile existence to the women

DISCUSSION:

The Golden Notebook revolves around the life of Anna Wulf, a half-hearted former communistic writer who lives in post-war London in accompany with her small daughter Jannet. Anna is suffering from writer's block and the chaos of confined life. In order to control and deal with her psychological crisis, she keeps penning four colored notebooks—black, red, yellow and blue while working on her fictional novel entitled "Free Woman". In her chronological novel, Anna Wulf puts her life compartmentalized into various roles --- woman, lover, writer, and political activist. Her colorful diary notebooks corresponds and classifies to a different parts of her inner and outer life: her black notebook addresses Anna's issues as an author and the recording of her African experiences which she was going through and it contributed to *Frontier of war*. Her political life and moments which lead her to a proceeding disillusionment with communism are penned in a red notebook. The yellow notebook revolves around Anna's emotions and relationship which is considered as a fictional draft by name *The Shadow of the Third* in which Anna's alter-ego, Ella acts out significant sections of its scenario. The daily routine and Anna's disappointing love affairs with men, motherhood emotions, mental agitation, sexuality dilemma along with her irritating dreams and psychological recovery sessions with Mrs. Marks are molded as a dairy blue notebook. Eventually, in a dexterous manner, towards the end of the novel, "she abandons this rigid compartmentalization and writes in the single golden notebook. Due to Lessing's brutal honesty and sweeping prose, the

book retains a great measure of its initial power." (Alienation and Isolation Problems of the Modern Society in Doris Lessing's....)

The female characters of the novel are presented as unique and independent figures with common experiences; they are interchangeable since they have experienced the same sort of subjugation and inferiorization in the society, but "increasingly aware of their status in an essentially masculine world" (Schluter. 1973, p.77)

Men in the novel are pictured as lecherous, stubborn and animal-like oppressor creatures. Due to this, the women's identity and consciousness is molded with their sexual oppression and motherly care. Hence the women feel like a prisoner in the small world of their shattered hopes. Lessing emphasizes that what drives Anna to her mental breakdown, void emotion and fragmentation in life, is her sense of the impossibility of living a fulfilled life after many failed struggles to achieve it. She experiences many affairs as a means to fulfill her desired life. Instead of seeing her dreams fulfilled, she encounters a grim and pessimistic situation in which she is required to be dependent emotionally and physically on her lover and play the role of a silent bed-mate whom is misused sexually.

As it is quite noticeable, the novel includes plenty of feminist novel components, for instance *family/home* and *love/relationship* are considered two of the fundamental themes in many feminist works. Likewise, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1953 depicted a frank and nude discussion about sexual pleasure, unwanted motherhood and abortion for the society and stimulated the current assertive feminism move which turned to a revolution with the publication of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962). *The Second Sex* applies similar themes to describe and clarify various perspectives of women's lives and these two themes are taken the most fundamental elements since women are mostly associated to family and love than their opposite sex. But the atrocity of patriarchy which is perpetrated on women in the story of novel has affected on these two bases of family and has loosened the firm tie of them. Consequently the female characters of the novel seek for a constant attention and someone who valorize their identity and autonomy, as they fail to

find someone therefore they suppose the only means of deliverance from the misery of their servile and oppressed life is staying unmarried and apparently enjoy their single life.

1. Sexual oppression

One of the vivid perspectives of women's exploitation and inferiorization in the story can be considered the female characters' sexuality. The female personages of novel encounter severely with sexual oppression and gender-biased discrimination in the society (including at home and work). The women are depicted in the novel as the second class inferior that the men are privileged to them; they are determined and defined "in terms of relationships with men" (*Golden Notebook*, P, 26). In contrast, the men are emphatically privileged. Although Lessing has created female characters that are considered as "female" rather than "feminine," since they are close to nature, and due to their numerous affairs with whomever they feel is worth, therefore are looked the women who are suffering from the absence of moral feeling.

Richard, Molly's ex-husband can be considered as one obvious source of oppression in the story. He clearly and brutally oppresses Molly and his new wife Marion Under the spell of marriage. Besides, as he like the other men of that time twenty century have a possessive look to the women around, therefore manhandles with Anna, as he shows his crush on her. His extra-marital affairs along with being married twice, depicts his sense of sensuality and lack of family commitment, faithfulness and bond. He is faithful to Marion "just as long as ... she [goes] into the nursing home for her first baby" (*GN*, p.45).

Richard's ignorance and looking down to women position which consequently contributes to endorsing a servile existence of women in society is very apparent in his treatment with his wife Marion Ironically, to all Marion's complains about his negligence and affairs Richard's answer is "why don't get yourself a lover" (*GN*, p.46). Richard believes that women are not supposed to have the same privileges that men possess, and this is proved when he encounters with Molly's true accusation regarding his main role in turning his wife Marion to a drunkard woman, Richard puts the accusation finger on Marion and justifies this issue by saying

that his act is very normal as the other men in society do treat the same. His defence is the prevalent and undoubted sexual discrimination. "If a woman drinks too much alcohol because her husband is adulterous it is her own fault, and not her husband's, because lots of men do the same thing but their wives are not alcoholic. This is just distorting the truth and fabricating a seemingly logical ideology." (*PedramLalbaksh*, P, 2).

Richard has a naive look to women as sex machines, but he is ignorant of his fundamental character problem that as Molly believes: it is "an emotional problem" having "nothing to do with physical" (*Golden Notebook*, p.48). Furthermore, when he is rejected by Anna to have sex, he arrogantly protests like a sex-crazy maniac "I'm a very virile man ...and I either have a relationship with a woman or I don't" (*Golden Notebook*, p.60)

It seems such an aforementioned attitude towards sex is common and natural by almost all the male characters in the novel. For instance, Nelson, an American political activist, abandons his wife since he assumes she is suffering from a 'neurotic' disease and gets himself a girl, although he feels again she sounds 'neurotic', either, and "another girl who so far hasn't become neurotic" but probably will be soon (*Golden Notebook*, p.64).

Mr. De Silva leaves his wife since "She's much too good for him, he says, weeping big tears, but not too big for a woman stuck with two kids in Ceylon and no money" (*Golden Notebook*, p.65).

Michael, Anna's lover lives with Anna for five years as his mistress and suddenly breaks up with Anna without concerning her will or the emotional consequences.

As it is quite noticeable according to the aforesaid description, *The Golden Notebook* is a sort of society's attitude criticism toward women's sexuality.

2. Society and feminine identity

Owing to the vivid evidences penned in the novel, it is apparent that the society and the oppressive institutions usually shape the women's identity. In such a society exploitation and suppression occupy and dominate the people's life and creates a superior and inferior gender. It doesn't give any possibility or chance to the women to expose their real being. The women try to put their

own ideas and beliefs into action, but the dominant society contrast them, since they run counter to the conventional structure of it.

Lessing demonstrates this precious point in her novel that it is impossible to feel any women's issues with a gender-based mind in society. She stands against the patriarchal social scripts which are imposed and inflicted upon women rather than self-definition and gaining autonomy and independent identity. Therefore, a woman has always been and remain a woman, but the dominated society with its prejudiced and patriarchal conventions doesn't allow her to succeed in turning her status from a suppressed human to a free one in society, since changing social institutions, customs, and public impressions in a community for turning a truly equal human beings is considered very tough and complex task.

Doris Lessing brings to fore various feminine issues related to women's subordination and servile existence. She portrays a submissive female character like Marion who attempts to be happy with what she has but because of her husband's unfaithfulness she turns to an alcoholic wife, and the realistic woman Anna who pushes back the limitations imposed upon her by the society and finds her way of independency after many failed affairs.

CONCLUSION

The discussion provided on Doris Lessing's influential book *The Golden Notebook* Disclose a numerous means of oppression and exploitation via which women are subjugated and oppressed. As it is apparent the female characters in the novel not only in their family, but also in their society were discriminated through the capitalist, gender-biased and patriarchal conventions of society. The other aspect of women's life which is associated with their role as a mother, wife or mistress is exploited and consequently the women became the victim of the patriarchal conventions. Furthermore their feminine identity is forged via the society's male-dominated institutions. However, although most of the women characters in the novel are exploited and mal-treated by the male characters, but Anna seems that could survive and possess the winning traits of

identity revolution and gains her final and superior position in contrast to other female casualties

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