

## Feminism in Doris Lessing's Novel *The Golden Notebook*

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### Abstract

Doris Lessing is a prominent author and a feminist campaigner of all ages. She is one of the most successful writers in the 20th century. In her renowned novel, *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing aims at showcasing women identity in Europe and other aspects related to them, i.e. their psychology, political lives, relation to men and children, their place in a male dominated society and their frequent attempts to escape from the social and political oppression. The novel is regarded as a classic that highlights the growth and liberation of women, and Lessing is also known as the earliest and most powerful voice in the history of women's liberation, a feminist who never compromised.

**Keywords:** Feminist, women identity, oppression, liberation, Male-dominated society

### 1. Introduction:

#### 1.1 Doris Lessing:

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) is regarded as "one of the early voices of the feminist movement" by many scholars and critics. She is an influential fiction writer for all ages, focuses on seriously social problems arising out of the marginalization of women in male-dominated society. She is for all of us and for all the times. She shows her keen observation on women's personal problems, which bear the testimony of universal dealing and appeals. As a feminist critic, Lessing has enabled to portray women's social position in the bourgeois family. Her literary works expose an in-depth exploration of familial, social, cultural, economic, political, psychological, racial conflict, and sexual harassment faced by women in the patriarchal system. Doris Lessing is considered to be an unusual kind of feminist. She has focused on the position of women in society and improving their role. The other feminist writers focus on the equality between genders, Doris Lessing is concerned with the social pressure that

women go through in the society and defending women in every manner.

#### 1.2 The Golden Notebook:

With the translation of her novels into various languages from Spanish to Turkish, Doris Lessing has gained international fame. One of these novels is *The Golden Notebook* (1962) which is believed to be a key text in the feminist movement of the 1960s including marriage, motherhood, politics, and professions. Her adoption of the feminist movement is due to tackling the politics of gender. Moreover, she focuses on the role of the family and the individual in society, the struggle inside one's self and the conflict between the individual consciousness and the collective good. It is her own life experiences that leads her to gather all these issues in her autobiographical fictional works. *The Golden Notebook* was seen by many feminists of the 1960s as an influential work that revealed the experience of women in society. The protagonist of *The Golden Notebook* is a female writer, Anna Wulf. It is about a writer and a single mother Anna Wulf who is negotiating her

life in Britain around 1950s. Through Anna Wulf, the novel deals with different thoughts, feelings, beliefs and emotions of a woman that are present throughout her life, who keeps four notebooks to record different aspects of her life.

Lessing portrays women in various social problems and with various perspectives of male against female. She wants to highlight social forces which shape women's activities and aspirations, where they are the "New Women" (like Ibsen's women) categories in search of power, identity, and freedom. She allows modern readers to behold the arguments concerning women's perspective, both her own and those of characters, some of whom are mature from the romantic dependence on man as a fictitious vehicle of fulfilment to achieve both a sense of self and freedom from a male ego's limited perception.

The novel *The Golden Notebook* uses a large number of realistic descriptions, symbols and details description, with a degree of relaxation and being full of timeliness. Lessing's experience of never giving in to marriage, objection to racial segregation, and seeking equality between men and women, made her an admirable but controversial figure. The novel explores themes such as feminism, politics, mental health, and the creative process. Through Anna's experiences, the novel delves into the complexities of identity, relationships, and societal pressures.

## **2. Feminism:**

Feminism is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. It is, the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. There is a scant evidence of early organized protest against such circumscribed status. In the 3rd century BCE, Roman women filled the

Capitoline Hill and blocked every entrance to the Forum when consul Marcus Porcius Cato resisted attempts to repeal laws limiting women's use of expensive goods. "If they are victorious now, what will they not attempt?" Cato cried. "As soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have become your superiors." Although largely originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. Throughout most of Western history, women were confined to the domestic sphere, while public life was reserved for men. In Medieval Europe, women were denied the right to own property, to study, or to participate in public life. At the end of the 19th century in France, they were still compelled to cover their heads in public, and, in parts of Germany, a husband still had the right to sell his wife. Even as late as the early 20th century, women could neither vote nor hold elective office in Europe and in most of the United States (where several territories and states granted women's suffrage long before the federal government did so). Women were prevented from conducting business without a male representative, be it father, brother, husband, legal agent, or even son. Married women could not exercise control over their own children without the permission of their husbands. Moreover, women had little or no access to education and were barred from most professions. In some parts of the world, such restrictions on women continue today also.

### **2.1 Doris Lessing's Feminine Consciousness:**

"Feminine Consciousness" refers to the understanding of women's social and economic situations, as well as of relationships between their personal

experience and social economy, politics and society. The novel depicts the situation of women in the 1960s. Lessing supported women's rights, realized racism and class differentiation, and clearly observed women's difficulties and needs. She promoted feminine consciousness and value system, and the female characters in her novel strive to build social, political and material reality.

## **2.2 Traumatic Experiences in Anna Wolf's Life:**

*The Golden Notebook* upholds feminist classic, expressive of female anger and aggression of female desire for bodily, intellectual, and emotional freedom. The novel is considered as a foundational feminist work which belongs to the handful of books through focusing on the 20th century view of the male-female interactions and the fragmentation of society in the modern age. It also focuses on the theme of art by exploring the problem of female subjugation and marginalization. This inevitable fragmentation of individual consciousness is linked with the striking image of a bomb-exploding inside the mind and leading to dissection and death according to Lessing's unique vision. (Krouse, 2006, p. 39)

The world of the novel is a female world, but its feminism gains no sense of closeness, or blindness. It intends to signify an inner world of the contemporary female intellectuals. Through the complicated relationship between men and women, Lessing presents a psychological world of the modern free women in front of her modern readers through her narrative techniques and the women character's self-analysis. She maintains her concern in the female issues as a vent through which the panorama of the current society is fundamentalized, especially women's

psychological conflicts. (Schlueter, 1986). Anna Wolf's psychological conflicts mirror the sickness of the world beyond for which she has to face hurdles and barriers. In order to remove her lunatic crisis, she decides to reflect the cruel pictures of her bitter experiences through writing four different Notebooks: 1. The Black Notebook, 2. The Red Notebook, 3. The Yellow Notebook, and 4. The Blue Notebook. (Bently, 2009, p. 40). Each notebook is related to 4 times with episodes of a novel called "Free Women" creating non-chronological sections that interact with one another. The four notebooks make reference to the Cold War, the theme of Stalinism and women's struggle with work, politics, love, sex, and maternity.

**The Black Notebook** focuses on Anna's psychological conflicts as an author and records her African identities as reflected in the very first novel, *The Frontiers of War*.

**The Red Notebook** consists of entries regarding politics and chronicles her continual disenchantment with communal order and system.

**The Yellow Notebook** fosters Anna's physical unions and feelings through the fictitious mode. It is a draft of a novel, entitled *The Shadow of the Third* in which Anna's alter-ego Ella reenacts a substantial part of her traumatic experience.

**The Blue Notebook** is a diary of daily occurrences and it shows factual accounts of Anna's melancholic love relation with Mr. Marks.

Anna's quest for autonomy and integrated selfhood bear the testimony of political, psychological and sexual dimensions.

The feminist theory rejects art and literature being expressed in a traditional form and structure. In the patriarchal

society, men and women have conflicts and solitary attitudes in interests. Women look for security and protection while men refuse the role in which women have a faith. In the postmodern society, women need men's understanding and sincerity. The self-knowledge, which seems to be the heart of Lessing's theme in *The Golden Notebook*, is indispensable for mental equilibrium and emotional stability, and is, in the case of a female protagonist; Anna is capable of gaining a psychological and mental descent into the chaos. (Henke, 1994).

### 2.2.1 Free Women/Liberal Women:

Anna had ideals, living a relatively stable life. The profession of being a very writer made her independent. Anna defined herself as a typical image of an independent liberal woman, and divorce made her free to fall in love with other men. However, these men chose Anna not because they liked her, but to satisfy their needs. Anna believed that her four notebooks could help her escape from the chaos of reality and maintain the integrity of life. Love is important to both traditional and liberal women. Anna could not tolerate the relationship without love, so she chose to divorce. After the divorce, Anna lived in a beautiful house, wearing fashionable clothes, and she even dared to actively lure men. Anna's attitude towards sexuality was different from that of men in her novels. She focused on the combination of sex and love, while men tended to ignore love. When she realised that she was only Michael's venting tool, she was very painful. Even so, she decided to give up and return to herself.

With the desire for freedom, Anna joined the political movement and joined the Communist Party with great political ambitions. However, Anna found that she had no right to speak at all, and freedom

was nothing but fantasy. In the end, Anna decided to leave the party, and the pursuit of freedom also ruined.

### 2.2.2 Confusion of Liberal Women:

Lessing vividly showed the life of liberal women, depicting the pain and confusion in their hearts from many angles. Although they strived for freedom and equality in work, life and marriage, social reality set various obstacles for them. They experienced various confusions: the confusion in love caused by dependence on men, their mental confusion caused by different roles in life, confusion on female roles caused by raising children and political confusion caused by the restrictions imposed by patriarchal society on women's political ambition. Life experiences affected them to get rid of dependence on men and to make efforts to seek independence.

### Conclusion:

In *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing reveals the dangers and difficulties women encounter when attempting to live a free and independent life in a world ruled mainly by men. The novel vividly and truly describes women's life, mental state and behaviour. Feminists regard it as a "biblical" that everyone must read. The struggles experienced by the women of the 1960s and how these struggles lead to a conflict and a psychological breakdown in the female identity are the main thematic focus in the novel. That is why, rather than directing harsh criticism to the patriarchy, Lessing makes a critique of women who undermine their ability and reduce their identity to those of patriarchal codes. She sheds light upon the illusionary world of free women by problematising the concept.

In short, in a patriarchal society, women who want to seek freedom and equality

need to overcome many difficulties. However, the most important thing for women in the gender war is not the final victory, but the accurate and sensitive self-cognition and the relentless pursuit of self

and freedom. Lessing uses and also abuses the conventional realism and feminist movement in order to make a statement on women's struggles in the sixties.

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