

Female Identity and Gender Dynamics in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*: An Analysis of the Female Characters

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the female identity and gender roles, major themes of *The Golden Notebook* written by Doris Lessing, through critical analysis of women's roles based on societal expectations in a mid-20th-century society. Lessing explores the sociological forces that mold female identity via Anna and other female character's experiences, touching on issues of fragmented self, motherhood, female autonomy, and sexual freedom. The text, in addition to reflecting Anna's internal conflict, highlights the conflict that exist between an individual's desires and societal norms, criticizing the traditional gender roles that are imposed on women and the unique true identity that each female character possesses. Various articles, texts, and journals were used for secondary data besides *The Golden Notebook* text, which was the primary source for data findings. This paper aims to identify the underlying factors that contribute in formulating the identity and entity of the female characters and how gender dynamics functions in the marginalization of women and sexual oppression in society.

KEYWORDS

Female, Identity, Gender Dynamics, Autonomy, Oppression.

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1. Introduction

Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) is a renowned work in feminist literature, presented in a fragmented narrative that explores female identity and gender dynamics through its protagonist, Anna Wulf, and other female characters, Molly Jacobs, Marion, and Ella.

Doris Lessing who is a significant fiction writer emphasizes on serious societal complications arising out of disregarding the role women in a society controlled by men (Hossain, 2018). *The Golden Notebook* is an analytical work of Anna Wulf's consciousness, entity and identity, describing "the fragmented consciousness of a woman" having different roles in society and the struggle of attempting to unify her personal and professional life (Schlueter, 1973). However, the text is not limited only to the female protagonist. The search for identity or the struggles of the women of the mid 60s is represented through all other female characters like Molly, Marion, and the fictional character Ella. As noted by Elaine Showalter (1991), the novel critiques the traditional gender roles existing in society and highlights the inherent conflicts between personal desires and societal expectations among the female characters (Showalter, 1991).

The text depicts the construction of gender roles based on societal standards and challenges women face in the search for their identity and independence in the patriarchal world. The study aims to scrutinize the female characters individually to find the differences or similarities in the struggles of womenfolk in a 'male dominated society', the search for female autonomy, and the gender roles leading from societal expectations. Lessing examines how women navigate their roles and fight with their entity in both private and public spheres through their interconnected stories.

1.1 Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

The Golden Notebook (1962) is a complicated and non-linear narrative of Anna Wulf who is a writer, struggling with her multifaceted personal and professional life, that created an obstruction in her writing ability. The novel is appreciated for its unique, innovative structure, divided into sections named "Free Women" and 'The Notebooks," which are represented by different colored notebooks, each reflecting different aspects of Anna's life. Through Anna's experiences, Lessing critiques the societal expectations placed on women, exploring themes of sexual liberation, identity crisis, and disillusionment. The novel's fragmented form itself can be seen as a metaphor for the raptured identity of Anna, the protagonist, echoing the experience and struggles of many women under patriarchal pressures.

The story revolves around Anna Wulf, a writer coping with personal and professional breakdowns, who attempts to reconcile her experiences by keeping four separate notebooks, each representing different aspects and stories of her life. The black notebook records her life experience she received in Africa and struggles with media; the red colored notebook details her political opinions and philosophy; the yellow notebook is a manuscript of her fiction resembling her life; the blue notebook is a personal record of events; and finally, the golden notebook is her efforts for integrating her disparate selves into a coherent whole. This fragmented narrative structure highlights the challenges women face in integrating their multifaceted identities within a coherent self.

Other female characters in the novel, such as Molly Jacobs and Marion, further illustrate the varied experiences and roles of women, one being an actress while the other a housewife. Molly, Anna's friend, is portrayed as a fiercely independent single mother and actress whose life choices defy traditional gender norms. Marion, on the other hand, represents the conventional domestic role of women struggling within the confines of marriage and motherhood. Through these characters, Lessing critiques the limited roles available to women and emphasizes the importance of solidarity and understanding among them.

In examining the female characters in *The Golden Notebook*, this research aims to unveil the ways of Lessing to articulate the struggles, contradictions, and resilience of women. By analyzing the interplay between individual experiences and broader societal contexts, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of gender roles and female identity in the mid-20th century.

1.2 Objectives of the research:

This paper aims to examine the development of female entity, identity based on gender roles in *The Golden Notebook* of Doris Lessing, exploring the hardships of women in a patriarchal society. The objectives typically include:

1. To identify the ways female characters in the novel form their identity and shapes their entity in a world of male dominance.
2. To analyze the impact of the social and cultural expectations imposed on women
3. To examine critically the themes such as family relationship, marriage, freedom, and the quest for autonomy.

1.3 Research Questions:

The paper aims to search for answers to a few potential research questions related to the objectives:

1. How is the identity of the female characters of *The Golden Notebook* constructed within a male dominated society?
2. What is the impact of gender roles on personal and professional lives of the women in the novel?
3. How does Doris Lessing address themes of relationship, marriage, and freedom through the experiences of Anna and other female characters?

2. Literature Review:

According to Dogan (2012) as cited in Aziz (2018), the female characters are not free so the title 'Free Women' is ironical. Besides, through the discussion between Molly and Anna their limitations are highlighted (Aziz, 2018). Aziz (2018) further states that the failed attempt to achieve freedom is the core reason behind the protagonists' sense of disintegration and they are consciously trying to gain sense of wholeness. (He further added that all the women in the novel are in a position where freedom is not granted to them (Aziz, 2018). According to Zhang (2004), Anna's disillusionment of freedom was shattered when she found she lacked the right to speak when she joined the Communist Party with great expectations and ambition (Li Qinghua, 2004)

Similarly, in *A Literature of Their Own* (1999) Elaine Showalter presents that Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, along with other novels of 1960s reflected that women were not that free and they realized the disillusionment (Showalter 1999).

Mid-nineties, society was going through chaos and a problematic phase. According to Aziz (2018), Gayle Greene (1994) in his book *The Poetics of Change* talks about the societal impact on gender roles, and states that Lessing's shows how man and woman both struggle to adjust to the societal demands of a 'destructive society" where male are the more crippled ones and some men often trap women emotionally to gain economic favors, like Michael, Anna's lover (Aziz, 2018). Roberta Rubenstein (1979), in *The*

Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing, highlighted that another way of male oppression or male dominance over women is through exploiting them emotionally. (Roberta, 1979).

Simone de Beauvoir points women to be the cause of male destruction and terms them as maid servants, or cheaters and plotters and a toy for men (Beauvoir as cited in Qinghua, 2004). In a marriage, women were treated as subordinate, and the men were in charge. Richard and Marion's relation where Richard was in charge and Marion was just the maid of his children (Li Qinghua, 2004). Besides, Beauvoir also commented on the sexual oppression a female faces due to male dominance. In *The Second Sex* (1974), Simone de Beauvoir thinks women cannot disconnect sex and sentiment, which in feminine youth, seems to be directly connected. (Beauvoir, 1974). Aziz has similar viewpoint where he points that Anna could not feel the sexual pleasure after Michael left, besides, Richard was engaged in many relations and Marion who suffers from sexual oppression, did not like having sexual association with Richard. (Aziz, 2018)

According to Sparks (1997), Doris Lessing reflected the gender role determined for women in a traditional societal system (Spark 1997). Similarly, Morgan (2007) found that Lessing presents the actual picture of marriage life, job, love, parenthood, and male and female relationship in patriarchal society. He further asserts that the conflict between women's rising awareness and man's desire to maintain power in society is imitated in her novel (Morgan, as cited in Hossain, 2018).

Lalbahsh and Wan Yahya emphasized that Lessing challenges sexual taboos and makes bold statements about women's experience of sexual pleasure while making love is her 'absolute right'. and. Neither Anna nor Molly puts their sexual desires under control, as it is expected from women in the patriarchal tradition. (Lalbahsh and Wan Yahya, 2011)

3. Discussion:

The character of Anna Wulf who is the protagonist of *The Golden Notebook*, and other female characters provide a critical examination of gender roles and feminist themes through their experiences. Through the female characters in Lessing's novel *The Golden Notebook*, she critiques the roles imposed on women by a patriarchal society and highlights the internal and external conflicts women face in their quest for identity, autonomy, and freedom.

3.1 Fragmentated Self:

The narrative delves into the fragmented psyche of Anna Wulf, a writer, mother, and lover's mental breakdown, or "crack up," grappling with personal, political, and artistic crises. Different colored notebooks symbolize the compartmentalization of her life and the ultimate integration of Anna's multifaceted identity. This fragmentation mirrors the struggle women face in reconciling their roles in a patriarchal society.

Beauvoir's discussion of women's internalization of inferiority is paralleled by Anna's psychological fragmentation. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir notes, "Woman is torn between the role of object, passive and alien, and the role of subject, active and autonomous" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 320). This duality is evident in Anna's use of the notebooks to compartmentalize her life, illustrating her struggle to achieve a cohesive identity. The golden notebook, in particular, serves as a metaphor for her attempt to integrate these disparate parts into a unified whole. Anna States:

"Everything's cracking up. I don't mean me. I mean everything. I feel as if the whole world's been wrongly connected together and is starting to come apart." (Lessing, 1962, p.211)

Her multiple notebooks represent different facets of her life, and her attempt to integrate them signifies her struggle to find a coherent self. Anna's attempt to balance her personal and professional life represents the gendered expectations placed upon women. The pressure of adapting to traditional roles along with pursuing a career is a central conflict in Anna's life, illustrating the broader societal struggle women face in asserting their identities.

Anna's attempts to write a novel within the novel reflect her desire for artistic and a sense of personal wholeness. This mirrors Beauvoir's assertion that women seek to transcend their immanence through creative and intellectual pursuits. Marion, was another female character who was going through fragmentation. Her feelings of emptiness and discontent, despite fulfilling the traditional roles expected of her, create a sense of fragmentation within herself.

Above and beyond, her eventual realization of her own needs and desires challenging the notion that women can only find happiness and purpose through their roles as wives and mothers echoes her search for wholeness. *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (1963) explores the dissatisfaction among women in the 1950s and 1960s who were trying to find fulfillment in the traditional roles of housewives and mothers. But resulted in a sense of identity crisis among women who even struggled to question

herself "is this all" she wants from life? (Friedan, 1963). The Character Marion is the representative of 1950s or 60s unsatisfied, unhappy housewives.

Her mental state reflects the breakdown of her sense of self, similar to Anna. *"She felt herself disintegrating, unable to hold herself together in the face of the demands made on her."* (Lessing, 1962, p. 300). This passage highlights how Marion's mental state is split, unable to maintain a coherent identity under external pressures. Her sense of fragmented self-rose from her inability to balance between her married life and her personal expectations.

3.2 Female Autonomy:

The Golden Notebook starts with the section titled 'Free Women:1', beginning with a scene where two women, Anna and Molly, were shown to be alone in a flat in London being introduced as 'free women' (Aziz, 2018). They relates being free to liberating oneself of marital obligation, and to involve in sexual pleasure whenever they desire, even with men who are married. However, this 'free women' concept is ironical. That is why when Anna questioned their freedom by asking, "Why shouldn't we use the same language?" wanting to have a similar 'voice' like a man or have a similar power of authority, Molly directly pointed "because we are not the same. That is the point" reflecting the concept of "other" given by Simon De Beauvoir. Likewise, Ella and her friend Julia, the female protagonists of novel in the yellow notebook, *The Shadow of the Third*, who were the alter ego of Anna and Molly, had the same realization of being women who are not literally free. The following quote highlights Julia's frustration with the social expectations and ideas about women.

"Free! What's the use of us being free if they aren't? I swear to God that every one of them, even the best of them, has the old idea of good women and bad women." (Lessing, 1962, p. 336)

The heroines' sense of fragmentation in their attempt to achieve freedom is expressed here. Both Anna and Molly realized that, in conventional marriages, which is common amongst their friends and acquaintances, men's work was appreciated, but women's emotions or even economic labor went unnoticed. While they claimed their autonomy, refusing to go through this discrimination and decided to be single mothers, they ended up being vulnerable and having a deeper recognition of not being completely free in this male dominated society. Another character, "stupid ordinary Marion" was the binary opposition of Anna and Molly, being a housewife and the caretaker of Richard's house and family. She did not have the courage to leave behind her husband Richard at the beginning of the novel, even though she was cheated and unhappy. Anna thought her divorce would "crack her up altogether," pointing to her fragmented self. However, her life was secured compared to the 'free women' Anna and Molly, yet it was chaotic and fragmented like them.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* (1974), elaborates how women are often reduced to their roles within the family and society, leading to a loss of individual identity. Marion character is a perfect example of De Beauvoir's statement that women are not born but rather become women through societal conditioning and expectations. Her desire for freedom is highlighted through her quote, *"you are what I want to be – you're free, and you have lovers, and you do as you like"* (Lessing, 1962, p. 204). Anna's reply to Marion's such remark on freedom was, "I am not free," and further added, *"Marion, I'd like to be married. I don't like living like this"* (Lessing, 1962, p.204), accepting her failed attempt to be free and making an analogy between marriage and order in life. Even the character Ella *"envies her"*, Paul's wife for her social security.

"She slowly, involuntarily, builds up a picture in her mind of a serene, calm, unjealous, unenvious, undemanding woman, full of resources of happiness inside herself, self-sufficient, yet always ready to give happiness when it is asked for" (Lessing, 1962p. 206-207).

Paul's wife was the woman that society would accept, and she was just a mistress or a 'free women' going through an identity conflict between convention women role and new women. Even Paul makes it clear to her that "you're my mistress, not my wife." (Lessing, 1962, p.212). So, he does not want to "share all the serious business of life" (Lessing, 1962, p.212) with her. He draws a line between a socially recognized women who was his wife and his mistress, whom he used only for sexual pleasure. Even Molly even admitted that she had married Richard for security and respect in the society, reflecting the fact that for security, stability, and status, women need men. That is why Molly married again at the end to a "progressive businessman."

However, the women in the book dreamt of freedom and Anna thinks that was possible only by accepting her failure. During a chit-chat between Anna and Molly, she confessed her mistake of being depended on men, and agrees it as her fault. Lessing portrays that her characters can truly be 'free women' only when they accept their entity as a women and compromise with their fragmentation and tried to cope with the societal pressure. Ella no longer felt sexual attraction and regained her writing ability, Marion involved herself in politics and found her purpose, Molly remarried, and Anna wrote a book towards the end of the novel.

3.3 Male Oppression:

In this novel, women are treated as second-class being who are not only exploited and suppressed but also unvalued for their contribution. This society denies women's relationships with men as equals. Here men are seen as superior, get privileges, and are highly valued (Lalbaksh and Yahya, 2011). Richard was a typical male who oppressed both his wives in the name of marriage and men liked to marry "nice ordinary deary women," and they are faithful to their wives giving birth to their first child, and Richard was no exception. He values Marion until she does not give birth to their first baby. As most men usually does. Later, her role transformed into a nanny, where he no longer cared for her. Molly, while confronting Richard for his attitude towards Marion, said,

"When the children were small, she never saw you. Except when she had to entertain your business friends and organize posh dinner parties and all that nonsense. But nothing for herself" (Lessing, 1962, p.25)

Even Paul, the lover of Ella had similar views about women, like Richard. That is why when Ella inquires him if his wife was happy ? He replies, "she's got the best house in the town. She's got everything she ever asks for for the house" (Lessing, 1962, p.238)

Lessing's female character echoed the oppression of the male dominating society through all her female characters. In her blue notebook, Anna records her daily activities, noting down how she continuously indulges herself with domestic works, like caring for her daughter Janet and lover Michael, working for free with the Communist Party and making special dinner for Janet and Michael all night. However, Michael never shows up, "the telephone rings and it is Michael. 'Anna, forgive me, but I can't come tonight after all'" (Lessing, 1962, p.268) and she ends up alone. Later, she "take all the food off the stove, carefully saving what can be used, and throwing the rest away-nearly everything," (Lessing, 1962, p.268) and she sit and thinks if he rings her thee next day, but deep down, she knows "he won't."

This unequal division of labor in a marriage transforms it into a cage, where women are tapped emotionally and have no choice other than doing domestic work. However, they are never compensated for their work and finally they lose their husbands' romantic interest in them for fulling the roles imposed on them by the society. Roberta Rubenstein, in *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness* (1979), pointed to such emotional abuse men used to dominate women. She emphasized that Anna's split psyche is due to her five-years of unresolved relationship with Michael, her lover (El Aziz, 2018). Ella's character had gone through similar emotional oppression during her relation with Paul. Ella was ready to trade her career and writing just to be the wife of Paul, who was already married and who never valued her or took her seriously ever. The following quote indicates Ella's submissive attitude:

"Suppose Paul had said to me: I'll marry you if you promise never to write another word? My God, I would have done it!" (Lessing, 1962, p.314)

This quote also portrays the parody of a 'free woman' who would accepts male domination and give up her independence and identity for a stable relation. Attempts to change Anna's story, *Frontiers of War* is another example of male domination. According to Lalbaksh and Yahya (2011), Anna goes through numerous interviews with directors and film-makers with the urge to change her novel into a film with modifications according to their taste. They want to change the issue of racism and portray it merely a love story face, while others send brochure reminding her that they "will not consider screenplays dealing with religion, race, politics, or extra-marital sex" (*The Golden Notebook*, p.263), because these subjects portrayed the prevalent and relevant forms of oppression and discrimination in society at that time (Lalbaksh and Yahya, 2011). Anna, being a female writer, could not be accepted by the male dominating media.

The novel highlights the sterility of the man's emotions and the fuller feelings of a woman's emotions. Even in Anna's conversation with Saul Green, he admits to her of his patriarchal mentality where he enjoyed being superior to top women. Saul says,

"The truth is, I resent you for having written a book which was a success. And I've come to the conclusion I've always been a hypocrite, and in fact, I enjoy a society where women are second-class citizens; I enjoy being boss and being flattered. (Lessing, 1962, p.437)
Anna replies, "'Good', I said. Because in a society where not one man in ten thousand begins to understand the ways in which women are second-class citizens, we have to rely for company on the men who are at least not hypocrites". (Lessing, 1962, p.437)

Anna does not confront him for such superiority but praised him for accepting his hypocrisy because most men do not realize it. All the women in the novel resides in a society that does not offer women with any sort of independence rather treated them like male subordinates.

3.4 Motherhood:

Motherhood is an important aspect of a woman's entity and her identity, as reflected in Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. However, it is also a weapon for patriarchal society for confining women name of family and responsibility and exploiting them emotionally. According to the socialist feminist point of view, motherhood confines a woman to the house and family. Lessing's female characters in *The Golden Notebook* is in charge of their family, accepting the societal norms of motherhood imposed on them as their female identity. Besides, this pressure of children's responsibility is on the women only, who are obliged to raise the children according to the society's established rules and standard.

The patriarchal mindset wants women to be bound to family and children. That is why Richard does not acknowledge the work of Marion as a house wife and his children's caretaker. Besides, he criticizes Molly for leaving his son, a 19 years old boy, alone, with all requirements made for his comfort. Molly was 'tied hands and foot' to the boys, and this was only her responsibility while her husband Richard cheated in the office.

Women are not only held captive in the name of 'motherhood,' but also, they are the ones often presented as guilty for their child's problem. Though Anna and Molly were responsible mothers, Richard put all the blame on Molly for Tommy's suicide. On the contrary, "for a week, the two women had sat by Tommy's bed in the hospital; waited in side-rooms while doctors conferred, judged, operated" (Lessing, 1962, p.269). Molly, being his mother, sat by his side throughout and waited for his recovery, and later, after he became blind, initially she even "refused a part in a play so as to be able to nurse Tommy" (Lessing, 1962, p.272) prioritizing her child over her career. Nonetheless, the society, especially Richard and Molly's acquaintances, accused her of his tragedy saying 'of course it was a pity that Molly went off and left the boy for that year. (Lessing, 1962, p. 272)

Molly and Anna, being single mothers, were often kept under criticism for their child's upbringing. Even Tommy, Molly's son, to some extent couldn't understand his mother. In the scenes where he questions Anna about relationship and divorce, he pointed his frustration towards his mother when Anna questioned him, "What's troubling you-that your mother didn't really care for Richard?" (*The Golden Notebook*, p.195). In Anna's blue notebook, Anna mentioned an incident from Jan 20, 1950, where it started with "Tommy appeared to be accusing his mother," and Tommy criticized his mother for being "communist and 'Bohemian.'" This hostility of Tommy was after his visit to his father's house. Tommy also expressed his depression for being termed as "a difficult phase by Molly. He quotes, "outside the door, I heard you say: How's Tommy, and my mother said, He's in a difficult phase" (TGN, p.195). He couldn't understand his mother's difficulties in bringing him up alone rather judged her.

A sensitive character like Anna also understands her role as a mother and what she needed to do. As Anna points it, "having a child means being conscious of the clock, never being free of something that has to be done at a certain moment ahead" (Lessing, 1962, p.480). However, she accepts her entity of a mother and does every possible thing to prevent her child from any trauma, like hiding the truth of Tommy's suicidal attempt and labelling it as "an accident," unveiling the emotional facet of a women's character as a mother. Anna looks at sleeping Janet and says to herself, "*she looks defenceless and tiny when she's asleep, and I have to check in myself a powerful impulse to protect her, to shut her away from possible harm*" (Lessing, 1962, p. 266) Even after Anna all efforts Janet decided to go to a boarding school away from her mother's daily care saying "*I want to be ordinary, I don't want to be like you*" (Lessing, 1962, p. 618)

Anna fulfils her duty as a mother; she does all the house chores, cooks' food, takes her to school, and even sings to her when she demands like a baby, "sing to me..... Tonight, I'm a baby. I'm a baby" (Lessing, 1962, p. 266). She even makes an effort to keep a balance between her role as a mother of Janet and mistress of Michael do want Janet to leave for school before he wakes, indicating his unwillingness to play a role in Anna's daughter's life and Anna willingly accepted it in order to keep him happy. She quotes,

"He prefers Janet to have left for school before he wakes. And I prefer it because it divides me. The two personalities -Janet's mother Michael's mistress, are happier separated. It is a strain having to be both at once." (Lessing, 1962k, p. 47)

In *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millet reflected on the power distribution within sexual relationships and how this imbalanced distribution of power between the male and female arises from the patriarchal norms which grants men greater freedom, authority, and power over their female partners (Millet, 1970). In *The Golden Notebook*, Anna and Molly, both being working women, independent, yet, after divorces, the responsibility of their children is solely theirs, and Marion is confined in her loveless marriage as a nanny for her children. Motherhood is acknowledged by the female characters, but it fixates them in specific position and is kept under continuous scrutiny by male dominated society.

4. Conclusion:

This paper titled of "Female Identity and Gender Dynamics in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*: An Analysis of the female characters" is an analytical study of *The Golden Notebook* (1962) in which she realistically portrays the chaotic lifestyles of the women of the 1960s and how their identity is formed in a patriarchal society. By creating a messy situation around the female characters and shedding light on their disillusioned concept of freedom, Lessing presents a paradoxical "free women" character whose identity was shaped by the male characters and their relationship with these characters. Anna and Molly's single status and being free from marital bindings does not free them from patriarchy. All the women's role as mothers were imposed by society and women were mostly criticized for their failure as mothers.

Critically analyzing the text, it was observed that the role of male emotional sterility in their relationship led the female characters to be vulnerable. The male characters exploited them emotionally and treated women as second-class citizens. However, the paper failed to analyze other minor female characters and what impact did gender roles have on their lives. Besides, the paper mainly focuses on feminist criticism as the theoretical basis for the paper, overlooking the psychological impact of the gender roles on the characters. Furthermore, the paper did not analyze the innovative writing style of the author, who used the fragmented narrative technique to highlight the split personality of the women in their mid-twenties.

The paper mainly focuses on critical social problems arising out of the challenges encountered by women in the society under male dominance and themes of relationship, motherhood in patriarchal society, and the tension arising from women's awareness. The female characters of the novel are presented as independent figures having common experiences; they are interchangeable as they experienced the same sort of subjugation and interiorization in society.

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