

## Paradox of Identity in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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### Abstract:

Doris Lessing (1919 –), Nobel Laureate of 2007, portrays the characters in some of her novels, particularly the female ones, in a continual, struggling world problematized by environment, politics and sex. Her most famous novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962) exposes its protagonist Anna Freeman Wulf, caught in a whirlwind of traumatizing idiosyncratic tendencies concerning her identity. The adverse situations that challenge Anna tend to disintegrate her very self. In the midst of this order of life she subconsciously looks for ways out and becomes successful, thanks to the support of her American lover Saul Green. She essentially maintains a life corresponding to her divided self in her four notebooks. It is *The Golden Notebook*, her fifth book, which unites all the dismantled realities of her self. Although critics have labelled *The Golden Notebook* as a major feminist novel, Lessing herself disapproves of the appellation as she presents Anna dependent on both male and female for realizing her true identity. This paper attempts to illustrate how Anna overcomes the eccentricities of her surrounding, practical, internal life and reasserts her position in the society not merely as a woman, but as an individual human being.

*The Golden Notebook* is a novel about disintegration. It is divided into two parts. The first one begins with the third person narrative – *Free Women*, which is divided into five sub-sections. In between every two sections the second part is organized with the four notebooks of four different colours – Black, Red, Yellow and Blue. Incidents are paralleled in the two parts, which divulge the theme of disintegration. Another notebook is compartmentalized before the final section of *Free Women*. It is *The Golden Notebook*, which is the integration of Anna Wulf. This integrity is hard-earned, whereas *Free Women* is a unified presentation of Anna's life, her sorrow, sufferings, dream, nightmare, passion, joy and anxiety. The notebooks present a torn up Anna who tries to find her identity.

Anna is a writer by profession and an author of the novel *Frontiers of War*. After its publication, she decides not to write any other novel. She finds that people misjudge its literary value. To her, it is a failure as novel, full of sentimentality and inaccuracy regarding life's dilemma, but her readers and film-makers think otherwise. Although she passes her days depending on the royalty she gets, she is not interested in the book anymore. It is because of the theme of the novel. However, people in general see it as a milestone regarding colonial Africa and the battle of sex. This is where Anna objects. The incidents in her novel *Frontiers of War* are related some how with those in the Black notebook. Such similarity also extends in the Yellow notebook, which is the manuscript of Anna's another novel, *The Shadow of the Third*, a parallel picture of *Free Women*. She admits it in the third phase of the Yellow notebook, "I see Ella, walking



slowly about a big empty room, thinking, waiting. I, Anna, see Ella. Who is of course, Anna. But that is the point, for she is not. The moment I, Anna, write: Ella rings up Julia to announce, etc., then Ella floats away from me and becomes someone else" (404). Separation enables Anna to meticulously examine what she is. Her own creation lets her look at her own reflection. Being the single parent of one daughter, Anna continues relationships with her friend Molly who is also suffering from the same sort of crisis. As they have something common regarding their breakdown, which occurs for a number of reasons, both of them are common visitors of Mother Sugar, Anna's psychoanalyst. The Blue notebook vividly tells us about her frequent visit to her and a revelation of her strange dreams of a deformed old man, who "smiled and giggled and sniggered, was ugly, vital and powerful, and again, what he represented was pure spite, malice, joy in malice, joy in a destructive impulse" (419). She continues dreaming it at regular intervals for a few months. It is so frightening that the moment she realizes that the dream begins, she gets startled and wakes up with a scream. What Mother Sugar tells her is what Freud interprets about dream, "The dream-thoughts which we arrive at by means of analysis reveal themselves as a psychical complex of the most intricate possible structure" (104). Like the Anna-Ella parallel picture, this is a depiction of a disorganized, frightened Anna. It takes a long time for her to restore her scattered self, her psychic integrity. Mother Sugar helps her realize the nature and strength of her dream.

Lessing echoes the feelings of Anna when people misunderstand her novel. The author decries in the Preface of her novel, "But nobody so much as noticed this central theme, because the book was instantly belittled, by friendly reviewers as well as by hostile ones, as being about the sex war, or was claimed by women as a useful weapon in the sex war" (8). The central theme is the disintegration of the self through breakdown. The novel deals with sex issue, but that is certainly not the key concern. Rather, the term sex is fixated here with the term gender. These two terms are different, and so cannot be synonymous. *The Golden Notebook* is not a mouth-piece of the feminist writers. It is a novel of persona, of integrity.

To realize this point, terms like sex and gender should be clarified. Ann Oakley, a feminist writer, defines the two terms:

'Sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender', however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine'. (cited in Freedman: 15)

Anna in *Free Women* is afflicted with her issues of femininity and sex. The latter cannot be separated from her biological existence, her total selfhood, as she shares her bed with Michael, Saul and Milt. But so doing she hefts her feminine strength. A communist activist earlier in Rhodesia and now living in London, she is disenchanted with this political ideology. Her frustration is a reflection of her separation from Michael, who treats her as her mistress. She is



deeply satisfied with him regarding sex. When Michael decides to break up with her, she hopelessly accepts the fact, yet prepares herself for a pseudo-surprising comeback of him. After it, as she makes love with some other persons, she finds herself not satisfied: she does not feel any orgasm. Anna bisects herself in an analogy with Ella in *The Shadow of the Third*, which has a theme of naivety. But with this theme in mind, Anna becomes conscious that her relation with Michael is going to flounder. She is in love with him, and this naivety of Anna, this essence of her self is bound to get a jolt eventually. But she is afraid and wants to remain detached from this feeling. When her fear comes true, she shrinks to such an extent that she does not find any satisfaction during intercourse. She feels the presence of Michael all the time, as Ella does about Paul, and so the absence of her lover makes the presence a ghostly appearance, always haunting her, especially in the presence of other bedfellows. A comparison between two men forces her to remain inert during sex. This is not so with male partners. They become procedural, whereas women are strongly emotional regarding sex, as Lessing writes in the Yellow notebook, "Sex is essentially emotional for women" (199). Experiences like these flood the Yellow notebook, where Ella is profoundly satisfied with her bedmate Paul, and enjoys orgasm, as Anna writes about her, "And she could not have experienced it if she had not loved him. It is the orgasm that is created by the man's need for a woman, and his confidence in that need" (200).

This mutual confidence gives rise to the hope of a bond, perfection, a satisfaction of love. Freud defines love in this way, "Love is derived from the capacity of the ego to satisfy some of its instinctual impulses auto-erotically by obtaining organ-pleasure. . . . It becomes intimately linked with the activity of the later sexual instincts and, when these have been completely synthesized, coincides with the sexual impulsion as a whole" (215). This is how sex and gender come together: they are not two alienated realities of life, but mutual phases in the same individual. Femininity is not above sex, nor can sex deny the gender quality of a woman. De Beauvoir argues about women's freedom:

Surely woman is, like man, a human being; but such a declaration is abstract. The fact is that every concrete human being is always a singular, separate individual. To decline to accept such notions as the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that Jews, Negroes, women exist today – this denial does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality. (14)

Anna's dependence on Michael, her lover, gives her the vitality to tolerate the inevitable female physical condition, "When I have my period I rest on the knowledge that Michael will love me, at night; it takes away the resentment against the wound inside my body which I didn't choose to have. And then we will sleep together, all night" (324).

Lessing presents Anna in a bipolar state. Following the conventions of society, she maintains both sex and gender relationships with a number of men. However, she remains indifferent about the incestuous relationship between Maryrose and her brother, but treats with caution the



gay relationship between her tenant Ivor and his friend Ronnie, for she has Janet, her daughter in the house. Being a single parent she knows she has to look after her daughter until she finds her way in the lonely world. Such duality of responsibility, such warp and woof in life, makes her individuality vacillate to a traumatic breakdown. She likes the smell of sex, but cannot tolerate the dull odour of her period. Michael's departure from her life makes her feel humiliated and betrayed. Heartbroken though, she prepares herself for him again. Anna in *Free Women* does not feel free after all; she needs to rely on someone whom she can trust and love. It is not organic alone, it is psychic as well. Michael, on his part, needs to discover himself, as does Saul Green in the last part of *The Golden Notebook*, and so he leaves for Africa. This interdependence stirs up questions of gender issue in her, reflected in the Yellow notebook when Julia shares her feeling with Ella about an impotent man she has gone to bed with, "you know how it is – it's always that moment, when a man looks all wounded in his masculinity, one can't bear it, one needs to bolster him up" (398). Femininity thus leads and guides masculinity, though they depend on each other, as Freud defines, "Maleness combines subject, activity and possession of the penis; femaleness takes over object and passivity. The vagina is now valued as a place of shelter for the penis; it enters into the heritage of the womb" (394).

Feminist theorists approach the subject of distinction between sex and gender and, as Jane Freedman presents, "argue against biological determinism of all kinds and to move the emphasis away from physiological differences between men and women and on to the social processes that shape masculinity and femininity" (15). Some critics even argue against the physical condition and the reproductive capability of women, and men's attribution of it on them. Shulamith Firestone describes liberation of women as a "struggle to break free from oppressive power structures set up by nature and reinforced by man" (cited in Freedman: 69). In Anna, we find a mother who wishes to give birth to her child from a man whom she loves. She is a very involved mother. She is infinitely caring about Janet, and for her psychic well-being and security she is even ready to endure any financial difficulty. Anna's hope of becoming the mother by means of her lover, not necessarily husband, takes the tone of Lessing to the point of Adrienne Rich, a radical feminist writer, who maintains:

We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children . . . but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence – a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed. This is where we have to begin. (cited in Freedman: 72)

Anna never ignores her responsibility as a mother, nor does she stop short of fixing the problems that always beset Molly, Richard, Marion and Tommy. Apart from it, she has her own life. It is the life of a writer, a political activist, but most important of all, it is the life of a person. Placed against the backdrop of sex issue, she is a woman. Placed against the backdrop of gender issue,



she is feminine. Her dilemma is to become a free woman out of all these features. However, the responsibilities she has to perform do not let her become a free woman. She wants to be liberated. This liberty does not come to her, as she wants Janet to live with her instead of sending her to a boarding school. The problem lies with her feeling. Biologically she cannot be liberated. People are coming to her and she also allows them to be near her, even though she may not be satisfied with them. Psychically, she does not want a free life that will subdue her *self*. Leading a lonely life is no guarantee of freedom for her. Besides, she does not understand from what she wants this liberation. She pays little attention to her society for this, as Freud argues about women's choice, "The determinants of women's choice of an object are often made unrecognizable by social conditions" (430). After the futile relation with Michael, Anna suffers from "psychoneurosis". At the last stage of the novel enters Saul Green, a leftist American, who is a masculine counterpart of Anna. Though at first Anna does not like him much, the way he stands arouses sexual curiosity in her. The difference between Saul and other men after Michael is that Anna does not feel the way she feels inclined towards him. She cannot help it. She is completely overpowered by her attraction for him. She even becomes jealous of Saul's other girlfriends. Though Anna describes it as her madness, it is not unnatural in the character of a person. Freud defines it in this way:

If a love-relation with a given object is broken off, hate not infrequently emerges in its place, so that we get the impression of transformation of love into hate. This account of what happens leads on to the view that the hate, which has its real motives, is here reinforced by a regression of the love to the sadistic preliminary stage; so that the hate acquires an erotic character and the continuity of a love-relation is ensured. (216)

As soon as Anna and Saul make love, they somehow remove themselves from the other's presence, as if nothing happened between them. This self-mockery is a reflection of their helplessness, both male and female. Anna hates Saul for the way he treats her. She knows that his emotionally uninhibited company helps to keep her sane. Being alone, she plays a childhood game, but fails to reach its goal. She loves and hates Saul at the same time. Anna functions as a mirror for him. He, on his part, goes out to take fresh air as soon as love-making is over. On bed, while asleep, he is like a dead man. This "psychoneurosis" of Saul helps Anna realize his trauma. Saul hates her, for she is like a mother-figure to him, "the jailor" (521). Yet, he admits he has never met any girl like Anna, who is intellectually superior to others. Anna, on her part, is entangled in three problems: fear, terror and anxiety about her identity. She needs someone to care for, since Janet, against her will, is gone to a boarding school. She is afraid that Janet has chosen a conventional path of life. Now that Saul is an imitation of her own life, she feels an urge to take care of him. But Saul, unlike Janet, tries to escape such entrapment. This anxiety of losing Saul brings her close to him. Their mutual madness abates her fear of losing sanity. This, on the contrary, gives her strength for life. A collapsed Anna tries to retrieve her sense.

Anna feels something in Saul that she misses in Michael. Michael comes in her life, does everything he needs to do, receives every care he is to receive from her, and declares the end of their relationship. Anna has no choice but to accept this fate. She is terrorized by her demand as a



woman. Saul does almost the same thing. Still, the difference is gulf-like between them. Michael's separation leaves her broken-hearted, whereas Saul leaves her with the energy of a renewed life. Michael's role is that of a colonizer, as the Whites are in Rhodesia during Anna's early life. She is like the Black people, ready to give everything to her master, and when the master feels the necessity, leaves her. Anna's novel *Frontiers of War* is a story of such a love relation between a white man and a black married woman. But their disastrous relation is over as soon as the white pilot goes away from Rhodesia, leaving the woman to face her fate. Cynthia Enloe, a feminist writer, interprets such incident between the colonizer and the colonized as a feature of gender argument, "Colonized women have served as sex objects for foreign men. . . . Women as symbols, women as workers and women as nurturers have been crucial to the entire colonial undertaking" (cited in Freedman: 83). Anna feels being colonized by Michael, being left in a conundrum of what she is. As she searches for her identity, she gradually loses control over her mind. At that time appears Saul with his assumed madness. Realizing a similarity with him, Anna recounts her terror of insanity. She feels herself self-divided and finds herself split into two selves: one abandoning hope, the other sustaining it; one finds interest in Saul's behaviour, the other looks at itself with a renewed vigor. But she does not want to alienate one from the other: these are integral to her existence, as in the poem of Emily Dickinson:

Me from Myself – to banish –  
 Had I Art –  
 Impregnable my Fortress  
 Unto All Heart –

But since Myself – assault Me –  
 How have I peace  
 Except by subjugating  
 Consciousness?

And since We're mutual Monarch  
 How this be  
 Except by Abdication –  
 Me – of Me? (Poem 642)

Anna is bisected into two Annas. One is aware of the situation and is tormented; but the other is unconscious of everything and enjoys the moments. This crisis of identity Anna solves in a strange way. As she gains strength from Saul, he stops the four notebooks where she is disintegrated. He lets her unite under one tag, in the golden-coloured notebook. This notebook challenges her to be regular, to be integrated. The first entry by Anna, like the beginning of the Black notebook, is a composite image of terror, difference and essentiality, "It is so dark in this flat, so dark, it is as if darkness were the shape of cold" (531). When she tries to remove it with light, the hope is shattered with the "foreign" glow, so she lets darkness pervade the room, only



in a controlled way. This imagery again is a reflection of Michael-Saul dilemma, which gives Anna her real shape and makes her a free woman after all. The last notebook goes to Saul, who writes a story initiated by Anna. He ends it with imagery, where death comes with morning glow in contrast to Anna's dark imagery, "The Algerian soldier and the French student were shot together, on the hillside, with the rising sun in their faces, side by side, the next morning" (557). Anna and Saul are dead, or their madness, and a renewal of life comes out of the two dead bodies like the glow of an early sun.

Lessing continues the last part of *Free Women* as a revelation of the dilemma of the feminist writers, who, as Freedman explains, maintain that, "feminists take into account differences of all kinds between women and take seriously the challenge to the idea of women as a collective identity" (92). In this last part Anna is seen again in moments of physical intimacy with two men, whom she lets in her flat. Her mental disorder lies not in Michael nor in Saul, but in herself, whom she desperately needs to cure. Freud, repeated several times in Saul's story, focuses thus, "The aetiology common to the onset of a psychoneurosis and of a psychosis . . . consists in a frustration, a non-fulfilment . . . [which] . . . is in the last resort always an external one; but in the individual case it may proceed from the internal agency . . . which has taken over the representation of the demands of reality" (565). It is the last person, Milt, whom she wants to leave her house because Janet is coming and she needs the flat for the two. As he departs, she prepares the flat again for Janet, because she needs the house for both the mother and the daughter. And as Janet comes home, she finds her mother a normal human being, trying to live on her own, without any nuptial bond, and isolating herself from her sex-mates forever. Anna is free in this way, being an orthodox human being, a mother and a self-reliant woman:

She knew that Janet's mother being sane and responsible was far more important than the necessity of understanding the world; and one thing depended on the other. The world would never get itself understood, be ordered by words, be 'named', unless Janet's mother remained a woman who was able to be responsible. (564)

Such form in formlessness is Anna's paradoxical identity.

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