

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN BRITISH NOVEL – “THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK” BY DORIS LESSING

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Received: Oct. 2018 Accepted: Nov. 2018 Published: Dec. 2018

Abstract: “The Golden Notebook” is a novel which seems to provoke extreme reactions in its readers. It draws on Lessing’s experiences in Africa, participation in politics and observations about the ‘sex war’. Lessing’s works deal with the major issues that feminism has voiced in the twentieth century. The term “feminism” is a relatively modern one. After reading “The Golden Notebook”, one can understand that there are plenty of instances that support the statement “The Golden Notebook” is a feminist novel. Anna, the protagonist of the novel, desires to be an independent woman throughout the novel. Even though we notice that men are the ones the most power in society and at home, especially power over their inferior and opposite sex, there actually times in the novel when female power over men is mentioned as well.

Keywords: Child Rearing, Communism, Feminist, Free Women, Sex War, Wholeness.

Introduction: Doris Lessing’s works and life have always shown her to be a feminist, even if she is one of an unusual kind of authors. *The Golden Notebook* is one of the most popular novels of Lessing. In her autobiography *Walking in the Shade*, Lessing says apropos of *The Golden Notebook* “... such is the hunger for readers for the autobiographical that one has to repeat: no, it did not happen just like that”. Nevertheless, the book is clearly autobiographical, it draws on her experiences in Africa, participation in politics, and observations about the ‘sex war’. The publication of *The Golden Notebook* in 1962 was extremely significant in the history of feminism. The novel shows the power of the female imagination working at full throttle. It doesn’t bear a simple political message, but it does rip off the masks that women were accustomed to wear, and it shows up the dangers and difficulties that women encounter if they try to live a ‘free life’ in a man’s world.

Feminist Perspective: Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* is widely considered a feminist classic, expressive of female and emotional freedom. Attacked by unfeminine as its publication, *The Golden Notebook* was identified as a foundational feminist literary work by the Swedish Academy which mentioned that it belongs to the handful of books that informed the twentieth century view of the male-female relationship.

Lessing’s works deal with the major issues that feminism has voiced in the twentieth century. Her works explore the articulation of feminism through a study of her characters, predominantly women. Lessing’s women characters belong to the twentieth century and their journeys map the dilemmas of women’s life at the personal culture, and ideological levels. Her works also examine how Lessing negotiates the shifts in feminism from a predominantly white middle class movement in the first half of the twentieth century to a more widespread and diffuses global movement.

In general ‘feminism’ is a theory of political, economic and social equality of the success. It is an organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests. If you go in detail, feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies and social movements that share a common goal; to define, to establish and achieve political, economic, personal and social equality of sexes. This includes seeking to establish educational and professional opportunities for women that are equal to those for men.

The history of the modern western feminist movements is divided into three **waves**. Each wave dealt with different aspects of the same feminist issues. **The first wave** comprised of women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, promoting women's **right to vote**. **The second wave** is associated with the ideas and actions of the Women's Liberation Movement in the beginning of the 1960s. The second wave campaigned for **legal and social equality for women**. **The third wave** is a continuation of, and reaction to, the perceived failures of second wave feminism which began in the 1990s.

As a matter of fact, if it is difficult to define feminism in terms of a set of core concepts, then feminism can be defined better of further in terms of its historical origins and development. The term 'feminism' is a relatively modern one – there are debates over and over, when and where it was first use, but the term 'feminist' seems to have first been used in 1871 in a French medical text to describe a cessation in the development of the sexual organs and characteristics in male patients, who were perceived as suffering from 'feminization' of their bodies. Then the term was picked up by Alexander Dumas, a French writer, republican and antifeminist, who used it in a pamphlet published in 1872 entitled *L'homme – femme* – on the subject of adultery to describe women in a supposedly masculine way. Thus, as Fraisse (1995:316) points out, although in medical terminology '**women**' was used to signify a feminization of men, in political terms it was first used to describe a civilization of women.

In a word, the novel, *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing can be described as complex. It is structured in a complex form, intended to mimic the complexities of the life of the main character, Anna. Although complex, the form is actually an attempt by Anna to simplify and compartmentalize what she sees as disorder and chaos in her world. The main plot discusses on Anna's quest for "wholeness" but at the same time addresses difficult issues such as gender relations, love and marriage, suicide, child rearing and politics.

The novel is comprised of a frame story interrupted by excerpts from Anna's four notebooks - **Black, Red, Yellow, and Blue**. The frame story, **Free Women** details a portion of Anna's life. The story begins shortly after Michael, Anna's married lover, ends their five-year relationship. Anna's friend Molly has just returned from a yearlong trip and is dealing with her son's lack of direction in life. Anna is attempting to deal with this loss as well as trying to raise a daughter on her own, deal with a friend's suicide attempt, and overcome her **blocked writing** ability.

Exclusively, *The Golden Notebook* is a story of a divorced 'single mother' Anna Wulf who works as a novelist in 1950s London. Anna is worried that her bad experiences and relationship with wrong men are going to drive her crazy. This makes her record of her life and experiences in four notebooks. Of these notebooks, each details with one section of Anna's life.

The Black Notebook contains information about the time period in which she lived in Africa. An experience in Africa where a black woman was impregnated by one of Anna's friends became the background for Anna's award winning novel. In this notebook there is a brief incident that reflects Lessing's attitude towards conventional psychiatry. When Anna confesses her writer's block to her psychiatrist, the psychiatrist utters a cliché which she would not have used in the company of her friends, Anna feels distaste at the double standard of behavior, "One level for life, another for the coach. I could not stand it; that is ultimately what I couldn't stand. Because it means one morality for life, and another for the sick" (*The Golden Notebook*.76). Anna's psychiatrist, whom she calls Mother Sugar, because of her tendency to sugarcoat reality, is a compassionate healer of the souls. Still she also keeps the mentally distressed outside the realms inhabited by the 'sane'. Anna feels betrayed by the attitude of Mother Sugar and is not able to find an answer to her dilemma.

The Red Notebook includes the details of Anna's disillusionment with the British Communist Party, her growing misgivings about it and her ultimate withdrawal from it. In joining the Party Anna had hoped to become a part of the team that creates a new, liberated world. She felt "a need for wholeness, for an end to split, divided, unsatisfactory way we live" (GNB 157). Communism provided Anna with "a

kind of moral energy” (GNB 82), still she is conscious of the two personalities within her “the communist” Anna and the Anna who “judged the communist all the time” (GNB 82). She is divided in her loyalty to the party and feels split between the personalities of the “party fanatic who sounds literally maniacal” and “the dry, wise ironical political woman” (GNB 156). Like Martha quest, Anna also is betrayed by the belief that sustained her for a long time. Anna starts losing faith in the political jargon used by the comrades and when she is forced to use it, is afflicted with a stammer. Even language becomes inadequate and meaningless and she is not able to use it affectively to express her ideas. Like the ‘Black Notebook’, the Red one also becomes full of newspaper cuttings on violence in general and on current events such as the Rosenbergs and McCarthy.

The Yellow Notebook contains the manuscript of the novel, ‘The Shadow of the Third’ written by Anna Wulf. It is a fictionalised version of Anna’s love affair with Michael. It also includes ideas for short story, parodies and pastiche. Joseph Hynes in “The Construction of The Golden Notebook” says that the ‘Yellow Notebook’ is an attempt to set [Anna’s] public and private selves into fictional perspective (103). In the ‘Yellow Notebook’ her image of love is shattered. She searches for the reason for her failure through Ella. According to Mona Knapp, “Ella is not Anna, rather an imaginary surrogate through whom Anna explores the possible outcomes of certain lines of action or consequences of particular attitudes” (112).

The Blue Notebook functions as Anna’s diary in which she reports the events in a dispassionate manner. It consists of her associations with the British Communist Party, her prolonged love affair with and her psychoanalysis with a Jungian psychiatrist Mrs. Marks. It also deals with Anna’s relationship with her daughter Janet, her friend Molly and her son Tommy. There is a lengthy chronicle of her involvement with Saul Green, an American and the descent into madness that they undertake together. ‘The Blue Notebook’ gives a credible portrayal of her day-to-day life.

Anna makes a decision to integrate all sections of her life into one notebook – referred to as ‘The Golden Notebook’. The fifth notebook, **‘The Golden Notebook’ is the most important and holistic notebook** where all her experiences connect and she starts to understand her own life and search for a personal and political identity ends.

Summarizing the novel, *The Golden Notebook* portrays Anna’s life as bold and illuminating, fusing sex, politics, madness, and motherhood. ***The Golden Notebook is at once a wry and perspective portrait of the intellectual and moral climate of the 1950s ... a society on the brink of feminism.***

The Golden Notebook is frequently cited as a feminist novel, but R.B Martin’s statement about Jane Eyre from 1966 that “there is not a hint in the book of any desire for the political, legal, educational, or even intellectual equality between the sexes and also applies to this novel” yet the novel has plenty of feminist novel components, for instance “family and home, love and relationship which are two most important themes in many feminist novels, dealing with women’s everyday life since woman tend to be the sex that dominates within these areas. As an everyday life and in many other novels women are usually the ones who stay at home taking care of the household while men work outside the home, supporting the family. Moreover the women mentioned in the novel are mostly mothers and housekeepers, caring for their children and their home. This is the case with the main character Anna herself and her sister, Molly who have one child each whom they both care about and want the best for. They work to be able to support their children and give them a good life and a nice and safe home to live in. But, since they are both divorced, the fathers of the children are rarely present in the novel. The few times, Richard, the father of Molly’s child, is present, never acts as a father, instead he mostly talks about works and how his son is going to be as successful as he is, working for his own company and being his own boss.

Furthermore, Richard frequently spends his free time playing golf or tennis with his business companions and he rarely has time for his son or his new family. Although both Anna and Molly work themselves, Anna as a writer and Molly as an actress, they still find plenty of time to spend with their family while the men in the novel are not interested in family at all. Their aim is instead to marry

beautiful women and get children who can inherit the fortune. It shows that women are mere machines to obey the directions of the men who always feel power over their wives or mistresses. This perspective of men raised a scope for demand for women empowerment.

The women in the novel are often seen as reserved and withdrawn compared to men who are more extrovert and noisy. This is especially true when it comes to love and relationships where woman often play an inferior role as we see with Anna. Her love for Paul makes her change from an independent woman to once again inferior to a man. Even though we notice while reading that men are the ones with the most power in the society and at home, especially power over their inferior and opposite sex. There are actually evidences in the novel when female power over men is mentioned as well. On the other hand this power is a more indirect power where women usually use their appearances to control the men.

A fairly clear argument that supports the idea that this novel can be read as a feminist novel is that the women rarely seen as individuals, at one point Anna says: “they still define us in terms of relationships with men” (26) meaning that a woman is nothing except from ‘something’ that is going to marry a man and belong to him for the rest of her life, which clearly shows us that this is a feminist novel build on real life where women are inferior to men, especially in a relationship but also when it comes to other things, for instance work and family life.

Marriage was after all a woman’s duty in life for centuries and it seems to be in the novel as well, in other words unmarried women were not as valued as married women. “Yes – and you call yourself Miss Jacobs. Miss in the interest of your right to independent on your own identity – whatever *that* might mean” (39) is an extract where Richard and Molly are arguing about the right for women to be independent and to be her own person and not something that belongs to a man. Moreover, the young woman in the novel are only regarded as marriageable daughters and nothing else; families with daughters have only one aim, to marry them of, preferably to rich and prosperous men who can support the daughter and give her a good reputation.

The women in the novel are not regarded as capable of supporting themselves since they do not have the same right as men, for instance, to get higher education or a well-paid job. “She knew now she had married out of a need for security and even respectability”(28) is something that Molly says about a friend, showing that women were more or less forced to marry to be able to have a descent life. Just as it was in real life, women in the novel are not represented within many occupations in society at all. The few women who actually are mention in the novel are mostly full-time mothers or teachers, secretaries, cleaners or as in this case novelist and actress, but more high positions are not available for women at all. Men are plainly the sex with the best privileges and they always seem ‘better’ than women in many aspects.

After reading *The Golden Notebook*, one can understand that there are plenty of instances that support the statement *The Golden Notebook* is a **feminist novel**. It is possible to analyse the novel through the frame work of home and family. For example the novel problematizes the idea that family and home are the woman’s domains in life, that is to say that her aim is life to get married and have children, and that work outside home is hardly permitted for her. Her husband is supposed to take care of her and the children which is his place in life, and woman should definitely not interfere within his area. This also means that he should absolutely not interfere within hers either even though women sometimes miss a loving father for her children, a father that cares and helps out with the children. The men in the novel are barely ever around their own children and they do not have so much interest in their families, the main thing is that they have one but being a real husband and father is not that important for them at all.

Conclusion: We can conclude that with the rise of the social movement, feminism started to change many things concerning women’s rights in society towards the end of the twentieth century, allowing more women into the working life and especially into the writing industry among other things. People could now for the first time read new kinds of novels, and also novels that were about women and their

real life. While there were authors who devoted their lives to intentionally write about the unequal society where women did not have the same rights as men, there were also authors such as Doris Lessing who did not intend to write a feminist novel. Instead she focused on writing about her own experiences, both good and bad, and what she saw was happening around her in the 1960s. Still there are arguments that her novel is a feminist one, built on her own experiences in her life. Nevertheless, since the praised works by Wollstonecraft and De Beauvoir who both have written about the reality in life and the injustice among women and men are regarded as two of the most praised feminist works that have ever been written, it is evident that *The Golden Notebook* also is a real feminist novel despite the fact that Lessing herself denies it.

Although Lessing's novel differs from Wollstonecraft's and Simone De Beauvoir's in the sense that the other two novels are more argumentative and analytical than her novel *The Golden Notebook*, there are still many similarities between all the three writers' works which substantiate that *The Golden Notebook* is just as feminist as the other two.

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