



The female quest for freedom in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

Kavita Mahali¹, Abha Shukla Kaushik²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, NKBMG College, Chandausi, MJP Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, India

²Associate Professor, A.K.P.G. College, CCS University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to reveal the women's quest for freedom, an exploration into the female psyche, the awareness of the mysteries of life and the protagonists place in it. The present work focuses on the issue of freedom and how women struggle to free themselves. The present novel *The Golden Notebook* of Doris Lessing about women's self-search and struggles to free themselves from the restrictions imposed by society, custom, and tradition. In western society, women are suppressed in different ways and the present work shows the condition of women and their struggle to achieve an identity of their own. The objective of this research paper is quest for freedom in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. One point of focus in this research paper is the investigation of the quest for freedom that form together the constructed self of the protagonist, Anna Wulf in Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*.

Keywords: female quest, freedom, Doris Lessing's, *The Golden Notebook*

Introduction

The most famous novel *The Golden Notebook* is written by Doris Lessing published in 1962. The book describes literature, politics, love, sex, and candid discussion of female sexuality. It raised some basic question about the condition of women and the kind of freedom they could expect to enjoy in the complex, mid- twentieth century world. It articulated their desires and frustrations and their struggle to achieve an identity of their own. Anna Wulf's search for an individual society outside her role as wife, mother and mistress reflected a major preoccupation of feminist literature. Her narrative examines deeply and in minute detail what it means to be a woman in the men's world particularly a woman who is seriously involved in politics, writing, love and sex. The novel is frank discussion of female sexuality from a woman's point of view. In the preface Lessing describes the shape of the novel:

"There is a skeleton, or frame, called Free Women, which is a conventional short novel, about 60,000 words long, and which could stand by itself. But it is divided into five sections and separated by stages of the four Notebooks, Black, Red, Yellow and Blue. The Notebooks are kept by Anna Wulf, a central character of Free Women. She keeps four, and not one because, as she recognizes, she has to separate things off from each other, out of fear of chaos, of formlessness – of breakdown. Pressures, inner and outer, end the Notebooks; a heavy black line is drawn across the page of one after another. But now that they are finished can come something new, *The Golden Notebook*". (GN 7)

The central character of *The Golden Notebook* is Anna Wulf, a novelist who lives with her younger daughter in a flat. She lives on the proceeds of her first book, *Frontiers of war*, a story about the racial situation set in central Africa during World War II. Throughout the period covered by *The Golden Notebook* Anna's writing efforts are concentrated on four

separate notebooks which she keeps hidden in her room and which only Tommy, the son of her friend Molly, ever reads: "I keep four notebooks, a black notebook, which is to do with Anna Wulf the writer; a red notebook, concerned with politics; a yellow notebook, in which I make stories out of my experience; and a blue notebook which tries to be diary. In Molly's house the note-books were something I never thought about; and certainly not as work, or a responsibility." (3). All four notebooks describe the struggle of women with the conflict of works, politics, maternity, sex, and love. Anna views her life from these different angles and then manages to unify her identity in one note book *The Golden notebook*. Anna also interlaces a short, conventional novel, entitled free women, which examine her life from the omniscient narrator's point of view. It deals with the problems and plight of emancipated women and reveals the precariousness of their freedom written after Anna's release from the writer's block, the novel represents a creative re-shaping of Anna's fragmented experiences in the notebooks.

Anna Wulf and Molly Jacobs are close friends and former communists, who lead what is known as free lives that is, lives like men. They are free of men and marriage but have children and professions and seek an identity of their own outside their roles as mothers and wives. After the separation from their husband, these two women developed several affairs. But they were disappointed and deserted by the men who came in contact for sexual gratification only. Divorce enabled them to enjoy a greater degree of sexual freedom than a married woman and has liberated them from the entrapment of marriage and domesticity, but it does not solve their problems. As "free women" they fall victim to the images of men who regard them as sex-hungry and easily available. They not only suffer from feelings of loneliness, futility and disgust but also crave for love and companionship more desperately than before. Their search for freedom thus

renders them “fragmented and helpless creatures, still locked into dependency upon me” (GN 23). With the realization of their failures in love and of politics and the fact that complete emancipation—the question of leading lives like men—is an illusion, Molly decides to marry again while Anna takes up a job in a marriage welfare centre and joins the Labour party. Anna and Molly, both separated from their husbands, one lived together in Molly’s house, providing security, support and company to each other without encroaching upon each other’s privacy. But after her involvement with Michael, Anna moved out to a separate flat. This, however, caused no ill feeling between them. They have remained as close as ever, participating in each other’s life, adventures and needs. They are called “free women” since they “lead what is known as free lives, that is, lives like men”. (59) Despite their emancipated status they are defined by people in terms of their relationships with men. But they know that they are not as free as men: Despite their emancipated status they are defined by people in terms of their relationships with men. But they know that they are not as free as men: we aren’t the same, Molly says, they are aware of the irreducible differences between the genders. As Anna says:

“Men. Women. Bound. Free. Good. Bad. Yes. No. Capitalism. Socialism Sex. Love”. (59)

Both Anna and Molly are self-reliant women who repudiate conventions to seek their individual identities in a male dominated world. They have ‘always refused to live by the book and the rule’ (32). They are not averse to marriage and motherhood. But none of them was ‘prepared to get married simply to give their children fathers.’ (32) They left their husbands and broke their respective marriages which had proved to constricting to them and a terrible hindrance to their independent way of life. They sought an identity their own outside marriage and family. Both of them enjoy a measure of financial independence and try to combine two equally demanding rules careers and motherhood. Both of them developed several love affairs after their separation from their husbands; but these affairs invariably ended either in a humiliating dependence on the men they loved or in a disappointing failure. The men they fall in love with ultimately turned and to be either bullies or betrayers who sought only sexual pleasure from them. In the novel, Lessing’s free women—Anna and Molly—who have been able to live “free” of men and marriage, are engaged in a ‘what’s-wrong-with-men session.’ (62) They discuss their failures in love, their problems as single women with children to raise and their disappointment as former communist. After her divorce, Anna had done a lot of complicated living, developed several affairs with men, and enjoyed more sexual freedom than married women. Yet, she realizes that complete emancipation the question of living like men—is impossible to achieve. For, whenever she enters a sexual relationship as freely as a man, she ends it in an embarrassing dependence. Her search for freedom has left her, like Molly, ‘insecure and uprooted’. (30) Though divorce has liberated them from the shackles of an unhappy relationship, it does not solve their problems. As ‘free women’ they fall victims to men’s sexist assumptions and their stereotyped images of women which define them primarily in terms of their sexual attraction or usefulness. They are usually regarded as sex hungry and easily available by men, who find them much more exciting than their dull,

dreary and domesticated wives.

As Anna says:

“Now we free women know that the moment the wives of our men friends go into the nursing home, dear Tom, Dick and Harry come straight over, they always want to sleep with one of their wives’ friends. God knows why, a fascinating psychological fact among so many, but it is a fact”. (45)

Anna’s bitter words reveal that the freedom, which women like her claim to enjoy, is more a constriction than an advantage. Their search for a separate identity outside marriage has turned them into unhappy, lonely and helpless creatures that, paradoxically, hanker after love and companionship more desperately than before. The knowledge of this dependence upon men makes Anna admit to Richard’s wife Marion, who is envious of her freedom “live as you like ... Do as you like... I’m not free ... I’d like to be married. I don’t like living like this” (251). This note of disillusionment and betrayal is also echoed by Molly. During a crisis in her personal life, when her blind son Tommy virtually turns her into a prisoner in her own house, She says despairingly to Anna:

“The generation after us are going to take one look at us, and get married at eighteen, forbid divorces, and go in for strict moral codes ... because the chaos otherwise is just too terrifying” (448).

Anna openly admits their failure in love: “it’s possible we made a mistake; (66) As “free women” they are supposed to be strong-minded, to be able to overcome the shock of broken marriages and betrayals of men. But three years after “Michael’s departure, she cannot forget him: ‘I don’t I’ve really got over Michael’. (66) The shadow of Michael has lengthened with every passing day and influenced her for relationship with other men. Throughout The novel, Lessing describes men who believe in marriage but practice an amazing degree of dishonesty and deception which they neither admit nor talk about frankly. Through the story of Richard and Marion, she exposes the hypocrisy, insensitivity and treachery of men, who are mostly opportunistic and exploitative in nature, and their indifferent attitude to their wives, desires and needs. After his separation from Molly, Richard married Marion, a tender and vivacious girl. But he started sleeping around after their marriage. As Molly says: “Richard was faithful to Marion just as long as most men are, that is, until she went into the nursing home for her first baby”. (45)

Lessing shows women suffering in marriage and then deciding to come out of the stifling bondage by opting for divorce. Martha, Molly and Anna all leave their husbands or break the marriage which does not allow them to be free and to live life in their own way. Lessing depict that though divorce frees from them from the agony and suffering of an unhappy or unjust relationship still it does not solve the problems and women have to continue to struggle and suffer on various levels—economic, emotional and psychological. As such the question arise: does a sexist society easily accept a woman’s freedom? Does a woman find real happiness in her new role as divorcee? Does she really become free after divorce?

Anna and Molly repudiate conventions to seek their own

identifies as women in a masculine world. They broke themselves free from the shifting enclosures of marriage to live an independent life. But their search for freedom ultimately leaves them fragmented, vulnerable and insecure. Though divorce liberates them from the suffering of an unhappy relationship and allows them a certain amount of sexual freedom, it fails to solve their problems. As free women, they not only suffer from loneliness, emotional vacuity and disgust but also, long for love and companionship more desperately than before. They develop several affairs in search of emotional contentment, but they are repeatedly disappointed by the men they love.

If love within marriage is impossible, as shown by their own failure as well as by the failure of Richard-Marion marriage, it is even more difficult outside wedlock. Lessing's free women are far from content and happy. As Molly, ruefully admits to Anna: "I can't remember ever being really satisfied. I've never said: Yes, this is it." (234) Anna, who suffered from a terror of enslavement in marriage of being trapped and tamed by domesticity when she was young, finally learns that she must pay a heavy price for remaining free. "That will be my epitaph. Here lies Anna Wulf, who was always too intelligent, she let them go." (570)

Lessing herself thinks that complete emancipation is a more delusion. For, even if a woman is free of marriage, she is still bound in many other ways: She is particularly bound to her biological needs and drives. So, "the free woman is free only a most limited sense. She is free to choose between her divided selves: free to attempt the precarious balance of living with both of them: free to be a 'female' or to be 'a free woman.' Finally, free comes to mean divided." They are free in one sense free of normal conventions like marriage, but they are completely bound by their relations with others, especially their lovers and children. They are dependent of men for love, sex and emotional fulfilment. I was simply trying to understand, Lessing late said in an interview, "what was happening to us, to all of us, who refuse to live according to "conventional morality." Their search for selves separates from their roles as wives, mothers and mistresses, and their consequent plight are symptomatic of the desires and frustrations for a whole generation of mid-twentieth century women who, waiting on the threshold of a revolutionary movement, experienced unprecedented freedom as well as unprecedented confusion and tried to understand what their freedom meant in the fast - changing post-war world.

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