

Resistance to Gender Identity in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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Abstract

Gender identity is defined as social and cultural conception of an individual as a male or a female. This concept is associated with certain gender roles and behaviour in patriarchal societies that want to develop power hierarchy between men and women. Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* came into existence as a feminist fiction that bewildered common readers' mind with its description about free women who were trapped in gender identity like other traditional women of Britain but slowly they resisted their femininity by acquiring social, political and economic equality with men and enjoying divorce and sexual liberty.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Resistance, Patriarchy, Motherhood

Gender identity is a social and cultural construct which forces man and woman to develop certain patterns of behaviour. Like other structures of the society, gender identities—masculine and feminine—are necessitated to maintain a power relation between man and woman. Men are facilitated to be dominant, powerful and abusive while women are oppressed to be silent and submissive. Simone de Beauvoir has beautifully described it:

One is not born, but rather become, woman. No biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. Only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as an *Other*. (Beauvoir 294)

Doris Lessing was the Noble Prize winner (2007) British author who became famous as a reputed novelist with the publication of her novel *The Golden notebook* (1962). This novel was reacted with a great surprise because up till now British literature had depicted women in specific gender identity. Lessing's efforts to resist women's gendered experience

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stood against the patriarchal society. She did not accuse women for their oppressed condition because she knew that women were so tuned to patriarchal hegemony that that any symptom of masculinity or unfeminine seemed insulting to them. This novel created a special space in the contemporary fictional world due to its emphasis upon women's problems in marriage, motherhood, divorce, new women's life-style and their resistance to gender identity imposed by patriarchy. She had totally dismissed the social, cultural, religious and class constructs that impose femininity upon women. Lessing's sole purpose behind writing this novel was to resist fixed gender identity for women and to create a space for their overall development.

Gender identities are nourished in the systems of marriage. The fundamental goal of men's life is economic success while women are supposed to be married even if they are economically independent. *The Golden Notebook* deals with the life of Anna Wulf who has resisted the oppression of gender identity at every stage of her life. In her youth, she suffers from the terror of being trapped in domesticity and her terror proves right when she experiences the gender role differences between her and her husband Max Wulf. The moral standard also differs for men and women. Like traditional women, Anna devotes her total personality and remains faithful till the end but Max enjoys sexual liberty and leaves her for another woman. It is her husband's immorality and Anna's subjugation in married life that she and her alter ego Ella to decide to live like divorcees and not to marry again otherwise in the words of Ella, "Every woman wants to get married" (GN 295).

Women are believed to be reliant on their husband for money. It is the requirement by which men put total control over women. After divorce Anna does not depend upon her husband for money and security. She works as a writer and as a member of Communist Party. She earns money by her novel *Frontiers of War*. She finds it nothing wrong in living a socially and economically independent life. She says, "What's wrong with living emotionally from hand-to-mouth in a world that's changing as fast as it is?" (GN 31). Her social and economic independence is challenged by her lover Saul who is unable to tolerate women enjoying success in their career. He himself accepts:

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. (GN 526)

She does not become discouraged by Saul's criticism and lives upon her own judgment. In the end of the novel, she also joins Labour Party as well as teaching classes.

In 1960s, when women were struggling for equal social, political and educational rights, Lessing advocated for women's sexual freedom. Anna's struggle for a free self is also manifested in her relationship with many lovers like Michael, Nelson, Richard, Saul and Milt. She knows that her love affair with married men is a transient world of happiness yet she wishes to live a life like men. As men choose their partners, she also prefers to choose than to be chosen. Like Martha Quest of *A Proper Marriage*, she enjoys freedom in her sexual life

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but unfortunately becomes prey to exploitation, nervous breakdown and fragmentation. We find that she has resisted the way of life style that a traditional woman is expected to live according to the gender identity in the society.

Women are supposed to bear all the responsibilities of children while men are kept free from it. In this way, motherhood is also one of the major features of gender identity. Women are repeatedly told that they are made to bear children. Juliet Mitchell states that it is the “role as mother and housekeeper that woman finds the oppression that is hers alone” (Mitchell 52). It is the gender oppression by which women are made conscious that they are incomplete and wicked if they are not taking the responsibilities of their children. The feminist Ann Oakley considers that feminine identity is based upon the myth that “all women need to be mothers, all mothers need their children, all children need their mothers” (Oakley 186). Doris Lessing’s modern women Anna, Molly and Marion are also caught in motherhood responsibilities. They have nourished their children alone even after knowing that mothering, being a twenty four hours job, is an impediment in their political roles and freedom. Anna rightly says:

Having a child means being conscious of the clock, never being free of something that has to be done at a certain moment ahead. An Anna is coming to life that died when Janet was born. (GN 480)

Anna gets irritated finding the vast difference of responsibility between husband and wife in bringing up children. She expresses her resentment:

I must- dress- Janet- get- her- breakfast- send- her- off- to- school- get- Michael’s- breakfast- don’t- forget- I’m- out- of- tea- etc- etc. With this useless but apparently unavoidable tension resentment is also switched on. Resentment against what? An unfairness. That I should have to spend so much of time worry over details... he will spend his day served by secretaries, nurses, women in all kinds of capacities, who will take this weight off him. (GN 298)

She feels herself crushed under her feminine responsibilities while her husband Max Wulf and lover Michael never cares about her daughter Janet. Even after carrying out her all household jobs, she remains dutiful to her zeal for writing and Communist party.

Molly Jacobs is also presented as resisting her gender identity. From the very beginning of the novel, she remains supportive towards her husband Richard but is cheated at the last. She met Richard in 1935 and took his responsibilities because he was rejected from his rich Portmain family. The wayward Richard leaves Molly for Marion. Unable to bear the patriarchal authority, immorality and gender biasness of Richard, Molly happily accepts the life of a divorcee. The need of marriage for money and security is shown to be diminishing in her eyes. She does not mourn for her husband and focuses upon grooming her talents. She engages herself in journalism, dancing, acting, drawing and cultural works of the Communist

Party. To free herself from the patriarchal identity of Richard, she again revives her maiden family name, Jacobs.

In the case of Molly, Lessing has always resisted the over protective nature of motherhood that imprisons women throughout their lives. She proposed to let children grow independently after a certain age for the welfare of both the mother and the children. Molly resists her gender identity by giving her son Tommy the freedom to live his life according to himself. She leaves him alone in the flat with all the facilities so that she may attend her political tour but her ex-husband Richard cannot tolerate her enjoy freely like men. When he accuses her to leave Tommy alone, she answers boldly:

I thought it all out and decided it would be good for him to be left. Why do you always talk as if he were a child? He was over nineteen, and I left him in a comfortable house, with money, and everything organized...I don't want him to grow up one of these damned mother-ridden Englishmen. I wanted him to break free of me. (GN 37)

Marion, the most traditional woman of this novel, also resists her feminine identity after a long duration of wifely and motherly duties. She is a good and a faithful woman who has devoted her fifteen years of married life to her husband and children. Like Anna and Molly, she is also "tied hand and foot to the boys" (GN 37). But when her desire for love is denied, she loses her psychological balance. She knows all about Richards's sexual relationships yet she does not dare to protest being trapped in her gender identity. In the context of Marion, Neena Arora's comment seems right:

Woman suffers not only by man's act of physical violence, but she is often emotionally hurt and crippled through his arrogance, cynicism and indifference. He never admires his wife's services and sacrifices for the family and takes them as guaranteed by the institution of marriage. She is belittled or silenced, and denied love, friendship and togetherness in marriage. (Arora 65)

Slowly, she develops her personality according to masculine gender identity. Her over drinking, making scenes, having love affairs and lastly the decision to join Communist party under the influence of Tommy are great resistances to the gender roles played by traditional women like her. Now she he wishes to live for higher purpose in life. She says:

Because I'm quite serious when I say I'm going to spend my life on bigger things. Tommy is showing me the way. I'm going to live for others and not myself...I told you, I'm not going to live for myself any longer. I want to write to the poor thing, and see what I can do for him. (GN 353)

Resisting their gender identities, these women are "increasingly aware of their status in an essentially masculine world" (Schlueter 77). They are not ready to submit to gender oppression and want to live as modern free women as Molly remarks, "Free. Do you know ... I was thinking about us, and I've decided that we're a completely new type of woman. We must be, surely?" (GN 26). These women think it better to earn their livelihood than to

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depend on their wayward husbands. They do not marry again just for social, economic and familial security. The comment of Darshana Goswami about the female protagonist Anna Wulf rightly sums up Lessing's women's resistance to gender identity in this novel:

We find that much unlike the 'New Woman' of Ibsen or Shaw, Anna Wulf has achieved a degree of personal freedom. In all the major spheres of life like professional, intellectual, sexual—she is as free as any man. (Goswami 85)

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