

## A Critical study of the Golden Notebook by Doris Lessing



\* Sushma Devi

### ABSTRACT

Research Paper- English

*Lessing was born in Persia on October 22, 1919 and moved with her family to southern Rhodesia when she was five years old, she went to England in 1949, where she published her first book, The Grass Is Singing and began her career as a professional writer. In 1962, she broke new ground with her novel The Golden Notebook. She wrote more than thirty books- among them the novels Martha Quest, her last work Alfred and Emily, stories, reportage, poems, plays and several nonfiction works, including books about cats and the volumes of autobiography, walking in the Shade and under My Skin. She is the winner of Nobel Prize in literature 2007. She died on November 17, 2013. Her portrait hangs in London's National Portrait Gallery.*

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) is a major force of post war English fiction, holding a unique position as an iconoclastic, an outspoken critic of society and politics with a sage like almost magisterial status, for the sheer number, variety and scope of her work. She has rightly been regarded as:

**"The most fearless woman writer in  
the world unabashed ex-communist and  
uncompromising feminist."**

The Golden Notebook is regarded by the critics as the most important single novel written by a British author since World War II. The Golden Notebook appeared in the radical atmosphere of the 1960's. Her novel The Golden Notebook (1962) is understood to be a feminist classic by some scholars but notably not by the author herself. Assumed as a crystallization of information about the women's liberation movement, this large layered and ambitious book, very much like George Eliot's Middlemarch (1871-72) established D. Lessing as the most accomplished, versatile and illuminating white African writer in English. As Annis Pratt wrote in 1962 that:

"The Golden Notebook had been appropriated by many feminists as a document in the history of liberation because of its insistence on freedom. Its movement on aggression, its attack on the masculine world." The central theme of the book, which is breakdown went unnoticed in the unusual enthusiasm displayed by the feminists. The novel was claimed as a greatest satire on sex-war. Seeing its subject a lot of frenzied responses were received by the author. According to the critics its reception from the feminist point of view was overwhelming. Due to the success of this novel Lessing was hailed as a champion of the women's cause. Within a short period, the book was accepted as a central document of the liberation movement. Feminist critics in the 1960s and 1970s focused their attention on the novel because it was full of the content related to topic of 'the free women question' The theme is suggested of the very outset, with Anna's proclamation:

"The point is as far as I can see everything is cracking up and it is developed in a number of ways throughout the narrative." In this book feminists found a distinctive expression of a feminine consciousness a bold assertion of a woman as a sexual being, a stringent critique of the institution of marriage which is viewed as an entrapment and an enemy of free women. They found in this book powerful expose of gender inequity. They found in Anna Wulf a role model the inspiring figure of a highly conscious woman who insists on freedom, justice and equality. They found the woman, who calls for a radical change in people's attitude to put an end to sexual discrimination and oppression in the society. Anna Wulf's search for an individual identity reflects a major preoccupation of feminist literature. Her narrative examines deeply what it means to be a woman in the men's world.

The whole areas of love, sex, and motherhood have been explored in an uninhibited manner in the

novel. Margaret Drabble described Lessing as 'one of the first women to write truthfully about sex. In its frank discussion of female sexual from a woman's point of view, the novel raises some new issues. The honesty and candor of her sexual writing came as a surprise for many. Lessing's presentation of female sexual behaviour and attitudes evinces a consciousness of the body belonging to the imaginative domain of women.

The four coloured notebooks represent the four irreconcilable aspects of Anna's life. The Black Notebook deals with the success as a novelist. As a younger person she had aspired to save the blacks of South Africa from exploitation. Anna's plans never materialize because reality always works at cross purposes. The empirical wisdom derived from trauma leads Anna to subscribe to a kind of nihilism an angry readiness to throw everything overboard.

The Red Notebook registers Anna's failure in the political sphere because her ideals are mercilessly exposed as hollow. While her literary and political ideals are demolished in the Black and Red Notebook, respectively, in the Yellow notebook it is her ideal of love that is shattered. Anna on the other hand, responds by surrendering to frustration and despair. She discontinues the narration because it does not live up to her ideal of art. The Blue Notebook depicts Anna's efforts to analyze her self-deceptions and illusion. Anna begins this notebook with a resolution: "I shall keep a diary." For Anna, Saul stands for romantic fervor, idealism, belief, egoism and self-indulgence whereas Mathlong represents disinterestedness, realism, cynicism, humanitarianism and abstinence. It happened just because The Golden Notebook foregrounds the feminine point of view and thoroughly explores the issue of free women Lessing's narrative voice speaks not simply for herself or her sex but for the entire humanity irrespective of gender, class, race and creed. In her conversation with Florence Howe, Lessing admitted that she wrote this novel from the women's point of view but then she was intended to write about the right of the individual. The same views were expressed by her in the preface,

*"This attempt on my part assumed that  
that fitter which is a woman's way of  
looking at life has the same validity  
as the fitter which is a man's way."*

The Golden Notebook, a consciousness raising novel, makes a strong plea against artificial but unity and cohesion. It is not at all a coincidence that Anna's writing is lifted by a male, equally helped by her. Lessing's free women want to redeem their men so that they can lead a healthy and peaceful life. They want to work together to liberate the world from ignorance, oppression and exploitation. Although gender issues occupy a substantial portion of The Golden Notebook, it would be simplistic to consider this complex and multilayered novel simply as a feminist polemic.

This novel contains a perceptive analysis of what it means to be a woman in today's fast changing society. This book provides a moving account of an individual's quest for personal selfhood and political identity. The novel discusses racism and apartheid in Africa, anti-communist witchhunt in Russia and Eastern Europe, Mc-Carthyism and its intellectual fall out in America and Britain. More than any other post war novel The Golden Notebook examines the fragmentation of society in the technological age. It also deals with the theme of art exploring the problem of subjectivity. This inevitable fragmentation of individual consciousness is linked with the striking image of a bomb exploding inside the mind and leading to dissection and death according to Lessing's unique vision. As fear of destruction is reflected in the individual psyche, Anna wulf, Lessing's protagonist in The Golden Notebook moves towards disintegration. The novel depicts individual's mental breakdown as the representative experience of the generation. The novel depicts the various circumstances under which various developments take place.

**Christina Gosnell in her review of The Golden Notebook has rightly observed that the book offers:**

"An understanding fog issues such as political repression, sexual abuse, single parenthood, writer's block and the women's movement. These problems, presented with a quiet virility, give

strength to readers even today." The Golden Notebook is no mean accomplishment and has elicited not only praise but also disapproval from reviewers. At one extreme are those who considered the novel "as a most absorbing and exciting piece of new fiction" and praised Lessing for creating a work which has left its mark upon the idea and feeling of a whole generation of women." Some have criticized the novel as nothing but a record of physical and structural violence. The Golden Notebook as a lengthy and ambitious novel concerns itself with Lessing's own involvement with the politics of her times. The novel is an amalgam of racism, colonialism and the breaking up of society in the technological age. It is this politico-aesthetic vision which gives the touch of universality to this work of art Lessing not only presents situations and circumstances based on political strains, but also strives hard to mend the broken lines of their lives. This book illustrates a brilliant picture of the fear of annihilation that gripped humanity during the cold war years. This novel depicts the general disillusionment from various modes of political ideology. Now, more than four decades have passed since the publication of The Golden Notebook. The society depicted in it has undergone a sea change in the meantime. She does not write just because she finds herself incapable of writing the novel of her interest and choice. She thinks that such a book could be written by the 19th century masters of realism like Balzac, Stendhal and Tolstoy. In the 20th century, Thomas Mann also used the novel for philosophical statements about life.

After being unable to craft her ideal novel, Anna keeps her talent undiluted. She refuses to compromise her artistic integrity just for money and fame. This stand depicts her hatred for the people who wanted to buy the copy right of her novel to make a film based upon those. Her fear of chaos and formlessness in her life and in the world has promoted her to record her experience in four coloured notebooks black, red, yellow and blue: 'as if Anna had almost automatically, divided herself into four and then, from the nature of what she had written, named those divisions.'

#### **Conclusion:**

So we can say that notebooks provide her with a means of ordering her life into neat categories both public and private. These books track Anna's psychological movements through the past and the present. These books give us the complete account of her recollections of the wartime years in Africa, which she spent in the company of a group of amateur and rootless socialists.

Most of the critics and reviewers have looked at the novel as a truthful and structurally complex novel with fragmentation of life as its dominant theme. By exposing the creative spark in her characters, Lessing helps them combat bitter reality and regenerate themselves. All her characters are fully realized. They are all victims of controlling circumstances and situations which have abandoned them. Lessing has made it her goal to show the effects of the twentieth century experience on the individuals. By making Anna speak through her notebook; Lessing makes the novel highly stylized. The experimental notebooks are a record of Anna's struggle with the crisis in her domestic and political life.

**\*Asstt. Prof. In English, Gyan Bharti College of Education, Indri (Karnal)**

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