

## **THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK: A study of Alienation and Unification.**

*Dr. Celine E.  
St Teresa's College, Ernakulam*

**D**oris Lessing (1919) is a well-known personality in the world of literature for more than half a century. She is one of the few writers who shot into the limelight of fame with the publication of the first novel itself. "**The Grass is Singing** (1950), her first novel still remains one of the best first novels, for the intensity of emotion exposed" (Walter 277). But Lessing is widely known as the author of **The Golden Notebook** (1956), a book rich in the complexity of theme and design. Lessing has a special power to pulse the most contemporaneous situations and treat them with an insight unfamiliar to most of the writers. She is undoubtedly the most gifted among the contemporary writers. According to Dorothy Brewster, her work depicting the people and ways of life of Southern Rhodesia before, during and after World War II has acquired something of the significance of social and political history (cited by Clare D. Kinsman, 509).

In the Indian academic scenario Lessing has not yet become a known figure. Hence a sideline glance into her biography will be highly profitable to students and scholars of literature, more so because Lessing writes herself in her works. Lessing was born to British parents, Alfred Tylor and May Tylor. She spent her infancy and part of her childhood in Kermanshah in Persia, then a British Colony and afterwards moved to Southern Rhodesia where her father, a first World War amputee, brought

a large piece of land for farming. But the family could not make much profit out of the land. They lived a life of poverty according to the British standard and a life of plenty according to the native standard. This dichotomy between the two standards find expression in most of her short stories and her first novel **The Grass is Singing**. At the age of fourteen she left school without Matriculating and later took up a job as a steno in a private firm. She started writing at the age of sixteen. She wrote and destroyed about six novels in the early years. In 1949 when she left Southern Rhodesia after dissolving her second marriage (but retaining the second name -'Lessing') and came to England she had with her the manuscript of the novel **The Grass is Singing**. The favourable reception of the first novel established her claim as an intelligent writer who had something to say about the world and its ways especially about the post-war period and the colonial sufferings of the colonized. One specific feature of her writing is that she concentrates on the predicaments of the colonized natives and colonizers. Both experience differently the trapped situation of the colonies.

From the very beginning of her publication critics have been busy trying to find a fitting niche for her by classifying her as a Marxist, Feminist, Psychoanalyst, Meta-fictionist, Realist, Science fictionist, Sufi-fictionist and so on. But Lessing refuses to be classified, in fact she proves to be beyond all classification. She is no theory's exponent, but a writer of the humankind. As said earlier she pulses the most contemporaneous situations. She moves forward with humanity facing and expressing the multifarious problems faced by man at the various stages of his progress. In the 50s she was a voice talking of the problems of apartheid, in the 60s the cause of women, in the 70s and 80s cosmic and ecological problems threatening the existence of universe, in the later part of the 80s and the 90s the problems of old age and alienation. She writes passionately and profusely about the cause that is most demanding the attention in society. Her worldview is eschatological with the vision of renewed humanity possessing the new heaven and the new earth as expressed in the final volume of the children of violence series, **The Four Gated City** (1969).

**The Golden Notebook** (1962) written amidst the work of the children of violence series is markedly different in design and theme. It

was received by the public as a triumphant expression of feminism and as Confessions of Doris Lessing. In the interviews given to Roy Newquist in 1964 and to Florence Howe in 1966 Lessing described the book as "a failure" because people had failed to read it in the right context. This prompted her to include a preface in the 1971 edition of the book, which was meant as a check to the unwarranted criticism that was being given to the book since its publication. In the preface she states clearly the theme of the book as 'breakdown' (GN 8) and 'crack-(ing) up' as a way of self healing. Ever since many critics began to look at the novel from different angles and to write sensible criticism on **The Golden Notebook**. John L. Carey's "Art and Reality in the Golden Notebook" being one such. **The Golden Notebook** in Lessing's own words "is a highly structured book, carefully planned". The novel is a combination of two projected books, a fictional work dealing with a novelist suffering from a "writer's block", and a book of literary criticism which would employ various styles so that "the shape of the book and the juxtaposition of the style would provide the criticism" in such a way that the completed work "would make implicitly a statement about 'alienation' both in theme and structure. The Golden Notebook, she says further, is "an attempt to break certain forms of consciousness and go beyond them" (C.L.XIV, 4. 436). Hence the structure and the content of the book are highly important in **The Golden Notebook**.

John L. Carey in his essay "Art and Reality in the Golden Notebook" gives the coverage of the time and duration of the period portrayed in the novel, which would also suffice as a study of the structure of the novel.

'The four Notebooks', making up the greater portion of the novel are all written in the first person, and they cover the years from 1950 to 1957. In addition (to the four notebooks mentioned above) the novel has a fifth notebook, itself called 'the golden notebook' also written by Anna in 1957 and relating only the events taking place that year. Besides the notebooks there are five sections entitled 'free woman' written in the third person in 1957 or early 1958 about events that took place in the summer and fall of 1957, in which Anna Wulf serves as a central intelligence. **The Golden Notebook** opens with a "free woman" section describing a conversation among Anna and her friends Molly,

Tommy and Richard Molly's ex-husband (GN. 25-68). Then the notebooks themselves begin with excerpts from the black, the red, the yellow and the blue in that order (GN. 69-230). Another "free woman" section follows. This pattern is repeated four times so that there are four "free woman" sections, all objective, all written in 1957 and 1958. Following each section are excerpts from the four notebooks, written during the years from 1950 to 1957. After the last of these four repetition of the pattern comes the section called "golden notebook" and then a final "free woman" section ending the novel. Even from this brief outline the intricacy of Lessing's design reveals itself. Clearly her structural plan depends on the "free woman" sections and the notebooks. (Carey 438).

Since the novel begins and ends with the free woman sections it gives us the impression that the four books are the writings of this free woman Anna who keeps the book hidden in her room and which only Tommy ever reads. Anna has a definite plan about the book. She writes in her black notebook about it thus: "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 a diary" (GN.418). Time and again the necessity of keeping the four notebooks comes up and each time Anna confirms her faith in the purpose of keeping it thus. In the free woman section of the novel to Tommy's queries about its purpose she says: "I had been afflicted with an awful feeling of disgust, of futility. Perhaps I don't like spreading those emotions" (55). So she keeps writing them in her notebooks and keeps the notebooks hidden. (The only person who read the notebook was Tommy and he attempts suicide, which goes to confirm her fear). A few lines later to Molly she says:

What are those diaries then?

They aren't diaries.

Whatever they are

Chaos, that's the point. (56)

And in the second section of the Free Woman too she tells Tommy that

she keeps four notebooks to express the chaos in her life, which she fears would overpower her if she does not express (247). In the preface Lessing speaks of its purpose as: "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" (7). This sense of chaos and alienation is woven in the very texture of the book making its theme - alienation and unification - evolve out of its very structure.

Lessing confesses in the Preface that the book is intended to express the division the central character feels about life. The block that Anna the writer experiences is contributed by various factors. Anna is presented as a confused political activist, divorced mother with a daughter and as a woman who is abandoned by her lover and suffers actual emotional frustration.

After the first free woman section when the Notebooks begin Anna gives the design of the book, which goes to confirm the identity of the protagonist of all the notebooks. She writes:

The four notebooks were identical, about eighteen inches square with shiny covers, like the texture of a cheap watered silk. But the colours distinguished them-black, red, yellow, and blue. When the covers were laid back, exposing the four first pages, it seemed that order had not immediately imposed itself. In each, the first page or two showed broken scribbling and half sentences. Then a title appeared, as if Anna had most automatically, divided herself into four, and then, from the nature of what she had written, named these divisions (71).

The explanation of the very design speaks of the breakdown, the fragmentation, and the alienation of the character that keeps the notebooks. She is same as the first page of the four notebooks look when the covers are removed. Her political, literary, domestic and emotional life gets fragmented and the entire novel deals with her way of getting into terms with these experiences.

The central character of the novel as stated by Lessing in her preface is Anna Wulf a novelist who has not published for many years.

She lives on the proceeds from her first book, *Frontiers of War*, a story about the racial situation in central Africa during World War II. The story gets developed throughout the four sections of the black notebook. The story evolves out of her political involvement especially the politics of communism in the Southern Rhodesian camp. The story is about Peter Carey an Oxford scholastic who had to join the army in the World War II and who was got posted to central Africa. His involvement in left politics and his affairs with Mrs. Boothby, the landlord's wife and her daughter, with their cook's young wife (an African), his betrayal by the thwarted Mrs. Boothby and his deportation from the camp to the war front forms the texture of the story. Exposition of rivalry, jealousy and unfaithfulness mixed with the colour question and the white superiority takes the reader to the Lessingian climate of emotional intensity. *Frontiers of War* is a story within the story. The 'story within the story' has another angle of exposition. It is the political scenario of the communist world. The petty jealousies of the officials, the exploitation of the radicalism of the young and inexperienced party members by the group of high living lefts gets expressed here as in many of Lessing's novels. In her autobiography *Under My Skin* too she speaks at length about the development of communism in Southern Rhodesia, her involvement in it, her high idealism and the later frustration. Her disappointments and frustration with communism becomes so intense that in *The Golden Notebook* the central character Anna Wulf gets almost crippled to function like a normal human being. She undergoes psychological treatment to come out of her confusions. The black notebook is full of nostalgic memories that the Anna of the 1957 does not want to meet and shake hands with the Anna of 1950s.

The black notebook is divided into two parts, the Source and Money. On one she writes the story and on the other she writes the account of the amount of money the novel has brought in. At the end of the fourth section of the black notebook she takes off this division and decides to write on both sides, which indicates that Anna has come out of her self-division.

The second notebook is the 'red'. This contains her political activities in London. Anna joins the British communist group well

knowing the politics of the inner circle. She writes very little in it and whatever she writes is highly critical of the party (154). Anna's feeling of dichotomy is seen in the tension she experiences in the decision making process. She decides to join the party but goes to attend the interview with Comrade Bill fully prepared to say 'no' to their invitation and comes back as a full pledged communist. To Molly she says, "The funny thing is I was going to say 'I wouldn't join', but I did" (152). Anna bemoans the party's decision to view its intellectuals as enemies and to execute them. The whole tone of the section is reflective of the atmosphere in the communist circle in the late fifties when thousands of party workers were hanged as "traitor to communism". Majority of the party members were dissatisfied and were disillusioned by the activities of the party, but they remained impassive to respond because like John they seemed to believe, "The reason why we don't leave the party is that we can't bear to say good-bye to our ideals for a better world" (156). But before long she decides to leave the party. She informs her decision to Michael, her lover, who against her apprehension supports her decision. In the third and the fourth sections of red notebook she deals again with activities in the communist circle. The idealized picture of Stalin as the man who works when the whole world is resting, and as a man who thinks and plans for the betterment of the totality of the men of the world (275) is projected in the notebook. The progress of the party after Stalin's death in 1953 and the commencement of the twentieth congress of the Russian communist party all get expressed in detail in the red notebook. One of the main features towards the close of the red notebook as well as the black notebook is the newspaper cutting. In the black notebook the cuttings were pasted in and dated, covering the years 1955, 56, 57. Every one of these news items referred to violence, death, rioting, hatred, in some part of Africa (461). Whereas in the red notebook the newspaper cuttings were for the years 1956 and 1957, these referred to events in Europe, the Soviet Union, China, and the United States. Like the cuttings on Africa in the same period, they were about violence (462). In 679 places Anna had marked the word "freedom" in the newspaper cuttings in the red notebook. It may suggest that the entire world goes violent to uphold the high ideals of freedom.

The third notebook is titled 'yellow notebook'. This notebook

contains the manuscript of novel, *Shadow of the Third*, which Anna writes about Ella, a journalist for the woman's magazine. The striking similarity between Anna, the protagonist of *Free Woman* and Ella, the protagonist of the *Shadow of the Third* compels critics conclude that Ella is Anna's alter ego. Ella like Anna is a writer, a divorcee with a child (Anna has a daughter, Janet and Ella, a son Michael), who has a lover who does not visit her and for whom Anna / Ella still cares and thinks about, a political activist and above all one who suffers from a sense of confusion and alienation. These fictional characters if we think one step further reflect the life of their creator - Doris Lessing - who herself is a writer, a divorcee with a son, and a political activist. Even though Lessing denies the elements of autobiography in the novel, the striking parallelism is too strong to ignore them.

*Shadow of the Third* as the title suggests is the presence of a third person in the life of Ella. Ella meets Paul, a doctor at a party and they fall in love with each other. But years later their intimacy is disturbed by Paul's reference of his wife, Muriel, to whom Paul always returns. Ella begins to think of her as a rival to Paul's affection. Without Ella realizing, a feeling of jealousy begins to dominate her. At first Ella does not think about her. Then she has to make conscious effort not to think about her. This is when she knows her attitude to his woman is despicable: she feels triumph over her, pleasure that she has taken Paul from her. When Ella becomes conscious of his emotion she is so appalled and ashamed that she buries it, fast. Yet the shadow of the third grows again, and it becomes impossible for Ella not to think. She thinks a great deal about the invisible woman to whom Paul returns (and to whom he will always return), and it is now not out of triumph, but envy. By constantly thinking of her, Ella builds up a picture of the woman, which has nothing to do with the real woman. It slowly becomes the shadow of Ella her alter self.

In Ella's mind the emotional tie up with Paul becomes so intense that she experiences a breakdown when she realizes that for Paul his wife is still the most important woman in his life. Ella tries to identify herself with Muriel. In her dreams Ella becomes Paul's wife. "The ugly house" and "the little rooms that were all different from each other", the disintegrating house due to the conflict between the rooms

symbolize Paul's life and the presence of two women who are entirely different from each other. Whatever she does to furnish the house and make it her own fails utterly. The room becomes Muriel's not Ella's. Ella somehow realizes that as long as Muriel's spirit was in it the house would hold together (208). Everything she sees become a reflection of her own fragmentation. After a conversation with Paul about his wife Ella while looking at the street she thinks: probably they were all like this, all in fragments, not one of them a whole family" (205). As years roll by she realizes that Paul has completely left her for Muriel. Yet she waits for him day after day, dresses for him, cooks for him still hoping that one-day he would drop in. She realizes that her frustrations are due to the absence of a real man in her life and that the cost of freedom - being a free woman - is emotional frustration. Ten years of her frustrating experience with Paul makes her think of the position of a free woman in the world.

She thinks nothing has occurred which has not happened all her life. Married men, temporarily wifeless, trying to have an affair with her - etc,etc, ten years ago she would not have even noticed or remarked on it. All this was taken by her as part of the hazards and chances of being a 'free woman'. But ten years ago, she realized, she had been feeling something that she had not then recognized. An emotion of satisfaction, of victory over the wives; because she, Ella, the free woman, was so much more exciting than the dull tied woman. Looking back and acknowledging this emotion she is ashamed (399).

The last section of yellow notebook contains a series - eighteen in number-of short stories of women who long for the right man. But every attempt fails miserably leaving her desperate and emotionally barren.

The fourth notebook is titled the blue notebook. It is Anna's personal diary. She records everything in it and turns them into fiction. She looks at fiction as an escape from reality. The material that goes into the making of this diary is all connected with her life. She keeps in it a record of her meeting with Mrs. Mark, the psychoanalyst who helps her to analyze the cause of the writer's block. A close study of the

entries of the blue notebook reveals the source of the novel. Anna is writing about Ella in the *Shadow of the Third*. Anna's long affairs with Michael and then his leaving her deeply affect her. For eighteen months she does not make any entry in the blue notebook except short scribbling. She wanted this book to be the most truthful of the notebook. The moment she realizes its impossibility due to her frustration with relationship she stops recording for time being. One of the special features noticeable in the blue notebook is the presence of heavy black lines. The reason that Anna gives for it is that "I drew that line because I didn't want to write it. As if writing about it sucks me even further into danger" (421). Her sense of fear of exposing herself through the most truthful notebook creates a confusion, which reveals itself in recurring dreams. Mrs. Marks suggests her to name the dream as a possible way to come out of it. However in the last section of the blue notebook she meets the American writer who enters into a meaningful relationship with her and that settles the problem in Anna's life. In the preface Lessing speaks about them in a very positive note.

In the inner Golden Notebook, things have come together, the divisions have broken down, and there is formlessness with the end of fragmentation - the triumph of the second theme, which is unity. Anna and Saul Green the American 'break down'. They are crazy, lunatic, mad - what you will. They 'break down' into each other into other people, break through the false patterns they have made to shore up themselves and each other dissolve. They hear each other's thoughts, recognize each other in themselves. Saul Green the man who was envious and destructive of Anna, now supports her, advises her, gives her the theme for her next book, Free Woman - which begins: 'The two woman were alone in the London flat'. And Anna, who has been jealous of Saul to the point of insanity, possessive and demanding, gives Paul the pretty new notebook, The Golden Notebook, which she has previously refused to do, gives him the theme for his next book, writing in it the first sentence: 'On a dry hillside in Algeria a soldier watched the moonlight glinting on his rifle' (8).

Saul helps her to come to terms with her ideological confusions regarding the role of the writer in society, with the problem of subjectivity in writing, with the frustrations of being a free woman in a male dominated society. The cured Anna binds up all her notebook and gets ready to write all herself in one book-The Golden Notebook-that is the unified self of Anna. The theme of fragmentation and unity thus achieves its finality in the golden notebook with a self-healed Anna deciding to write.

Lessing's writing is always remarkable for the intensity and the sincerity of her feeling expressed. **The Golden Notebook** can be considered as the last word on the problems of woman in a male dominated society. A free woman can relate only to a free man but the society possesses only a male code. With this code one cannot define a woman. **The Golden Notebook** is just an attempt to expose the emotions of a woman who chooses to be "Free". Does Lessing make her succeed? The answer is Yes and No. Since Anna comes out of her fragmentation and experiences unification through a meaningful relationship, the answer is 'Yes'. But Janet her only daughter brought up in the ways of Anna chooses to be the most conventional girl expressing her desire to study in boarding school, and the son of her friend Molly signs up to follow his father who is a 'capitalist', the answer is No. The younger generation is given the freedom to choose what they think is right. This is Lessing, exposes the problem, discusses it and moves on...

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