

The Subversive Feminine: Sexual Oppression and Sexual Identity in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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Abstract

Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* adopts a complex profile to present its characters' complex lives. However, of all existing novel's themes it is women's oppression and subjugation that come under scrutiny here. The world this novel pictures is a patriarchal capitalist world highly unfavorable to women, and the society it portrays is marked by male-dominance and gender-based discrimination; a society in which – no matter how capable women are – their identity is defined by men and male-defined relations. Accordingly, this paper is looking at this novel from a socialist feminist point of view to identify the facets of sexual oppression and to show how the female characters resist, fight back and rely on their self-defined identity to subvert the oppressive structure they are living in. Based on the findings of this paper we argue that in the novel's world sexuality, motherhood and mothering are outstanding facets of oppression through which women are overwhelmingly oppressed and exploited by the male-dominated society that discriminates against women as a secondary inferior class. To our understanding, while female characters of the novel have to deal with a lot of pressure imposed by society's institutions (family and family-like circles) they are capable enough to shrewdly rely on their power and self-defined identity to fight back and subvert the patriarchal capitalist systems that intrude women's lives in a variety of ways. As we conclude Lessing confirms

socialist feminism's argument that mothering and motherhood are facets of women's oppression, but she also believes that these two aspects of feminine life can be a part of feminine power to subvert the oppressive systems that are designed to define and enfeeble women's genuine identity.

Key words: Sexual Oppression; Sexual Identity; Doris Lessing; The Golden Notebook

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INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* adopts a complex profile to present its characters' complex lives. In this novel Lessing has "incorporated a broad spectrum of ideological, political and psychological issues, not only those primarily of concern to women" (Rubenstein, 2010, p.14). However, of all existing novel's themes it is women's oppression and subjugation that come under scrutiny here. The world this novel pictures is a patriarchal capitalist world highly unfavorable to women. Its society is marked by male-dominance and gender-based discrimination; a society in which – no matter how capable women are – their identity is defined by men and male-defined relations. Accordingly, this paper is looking at this novel from a socialist feminist point of view to identify the facets of sexual oppression and to show how the female characters resist and fight back.

To achieve this aim an exponential approach is adopted; exponents and moments of sexual oppression come under scrutiny to make it clear how each character,

when she is overwhelmed by oppressive relations, relies on her power to trespass false ideologies and appearances to subvert the oppressive order these ideologies try to create. After analyzing and scrutinizing each character individually, we will compare and contrast them to disclose the shared implicit subversive power they possess.

Comparing and contrasting Lessing's female characters in the light of socialist feminism and in terms of their subversive power, this paper will be a contribution to the existing literature on Lessing's art since it foregrounds qualities that will further the present literature on Lessing by showing important issues she discusses in her attempts to re-create a glorious Marti-culture she believes women are able to restore.

DISCUSSION

The story is a portrayal and an analysis of Anna Wulf's consciousness and identity, but it is not limited to her only. Delineating "the fragmented consciousness of a woman whose impulses as a writer, a socialist, and a person are to unify her personal, social, and fictive experiences" (Spilka, 1975, p.223) the narration presents female characters, New Women, that standing as separate and unique, as they are, have many experiences in common. They are interchangeable, experiencing the same kinds of oppression and subjugation, but "increasingly aware of their status in an essentially masculine world" (Schlueter, 1973, p.77).

The oppressive systems of this world are marked by patriarchal and capitalistic relations that dominate society and define the identities of its members. Men are portrayed, here, as animal-like creatures that oppress women in different ways and through every means possible. Oppressive sexual relations along with mothering and motherly care are among the most important contexts in (and through) which women's consciousness and identity are molded. Here these contexts are scrutinized and analyzed in detail to show how oppressive relations work and how they affect women's consciousness and identity.

A. Sexual Oppression

One visible facet of women's oppression and exploitation in the novel is their sexuality. Sexual oppression and sex-based discrimination are omnipresent phenomena both at home and work. In the novel's society, women are only a second-class inferior race unprivileged and unvalued. In this society women are defined "in terms of relationships with men" (GN, p.26) who are the superior class, emphatically privileged and highly valued.

Richard is one obvious source of oppression in the novel. Under the spell of marriage he oppresses both Molly and Marion while he frequently bullies Anna on whom he has a crush. Being married twice, and still living

with Marion, Richard has a lot of extra-marital affairs. He is faithful to Marion "just as long as ... she [goes] into the nursing home for her first baby" (GN, p.45). He totally ignores Marion except for the times when he uses her to entertain his business friends at posh dinner parties that are always business parties. Ironically, to all Marion's complaints about his negligence and affairs Richard's answer is "why don't get yourself a lover" (GN, p.46), a suggestion that, when to his wonder, Marion listens to, Richard's jealousy and sense of defeat are aroused making him "all moral, rampaging like an Old Testament" (GN, p.46). This is a proof of the double standards in terms of women's sexuality and sexual life. Women are not supposed to have the same privileges that men have.

When faced with Molly's truthful accusations about his role in changing his wife to a drunkard, Richard puts all the blame on his wife and defends himself on the ground that most of the men have done what he has done. Here he defends himself based on the prevalent ideology that is sexually discriminatory and oppressive. If a woman drinks too much alcohol because her husband is adulterous it is her own fault, and not her husband's, because lots of men do the same thing but their wives are not alcoholic. This is just distorting the truth and fabricating a seemingly logical ideology.

Richard is preoccupied with sex and sexual pleasure but ignorant of women's consequent suffering and pain that he considers women's "own funeral". His only concern, "purely physical" as he admits, is "to get an erection with a woman" he is married to for years (GN, p.48). Richard naively sees women as sex machines, the newer the better. But he is ignorant of the deeply-rooted problem in his own character, something that, as Molly states, is "an emotional problem" having "nothing to do with physical" (GN, p.48). When disappointed by Anna who refuses to have sex with him, Richard protests arrogantly, like a sex maniac who only thinks about having sex with as many girls as possible. Encountering Anna's rejection he complains "I'm a very virile man ... and I either have a relationship with a woman or I don't" (GN, p.60).

This attitude towards sex is shared by almost all the male characters. Nelson, an American, leaves his wife because he feels she is 'neurotic' and gets himself a girl, though she too sounds 'neurotic', and "another girl who so far hasn't become neurotic" but probably will be soon (GN, p.64). Mr. De Silva leaves his wife because "She's much too good for him, he says, weeping big tears, but not too big for a woman stuck with two kids in Ceylon and no money", a fact that guarantees his being 'safe' (GN, p.65). Michael lives for five years with Anna as his mistress and then breaks up against Anna's will. Dick, Michael's friend, goes to Ghana, leaving his mistress in misery and disappointment. Men's exploitative view of women's sexuality is a universal and omnipresent phenomenon in

the whole story. It is a usual event that, as Molly says, "dear Tom, Dick and Harry come straight over ... want to sleep with one of their wives' friends ... it's a fact" (*GN*, p.45).

But it is also something that moves from one generation to another, and while it may change superficially it is the same thing in essence. Ella's father's answer to a question about her mother is another evidence to prove this claim: "She was a good wife. But ... all that sort of thing was left completely out of her ... Yes, sex, ... when I couldn't stick it, I went out and bought myself a woman. What did you expect?" (*GN*, p.407). This is in parallel with other men's views about sex and sexuality. The fact is that they look at women as assets they buy in the market, like the lands they colonize. After one piece is conquered and colonized they need to move to another piece of land and do the same thing again, no matter what happens to the previous one. This is what we see in Paul too. He leaves Ella while his sexual relation with Ella has "pulled her out of herself, unbalanced and diminished her, and proved altogether a destructive experience with regard to her self-respect and firmness of identity" (Morgan, 1973, p.476).

The Golden Notebook is thus a criticism of society's attitude toward women's sexuality. Commenting on men's behavior towards Maryrose, Anna says that Maryrose's allowing men to touch, hold and kiss her seems to be some sort of "fee [she has to pay] for Providence for being born beautiful" (*GN*, p.109). This means that women (especially beautiful women) have a seemingly 'natural' obligation to society that considers them an object for men's pleasure. Willi encourages Maryrose to "go to bed with one of [them]. As soon as possible", reasoning that, doing it or not, she will finally have to "marry someone for the sake of marrying ... [to] be one of these dissatisfied matrons we see all around us" (*GN*, p.111). To surprise us this really happens to Maryrose who marries an elderly man with lots of children to care for. Ironically, her boyfriend, who enjoys having sex with her, is not willing to marry her; a fact that helps us visualize women in a catch-22 situation.

Therefore men's insatiable desire for women is nothing to be forgotten by Lessing; it is a desire that hurts Anna, Maryrose, Marion, Molly, Ella and other women. Lessing shows that women are not taken seriously by men who see them as God-given treasure (sex machines) at their disposal. While Whittaker reminds us of these "men's sexual inadequacies ... from lovers who are technically efficient but emotionally detached, to those who are simple inept" (1988, p.69) all are exploitative in their sexual relations. Perhaps George's words describe the situation much better when he says, "All the beautiful women there are in the world, and we only have two of them here, it makes me want to cry" (*GN*, p.112). The irony hits us hard when Anna informs us that George has been continuously unfaithful to his wife.

A delicate point in *The Golden Notebook's* view of sexuality is that even homosexuals oppress Anna and become a source of frustration and annoyance. Her homosexual tenant projects mockery and contempt onto the story he reads for Anna's daughter. His mockery gets plainly worse when Anna sees, through the room's open door, that he and his mate are calling women "Fatty buttock cows ... Sagging sweaty breasts", completing their mockery by "obscene noise" and "the sound of vomiting" (*GN*, p.358). In short, the novel's world is an intimidating insecure place for half of its population. Because of their bodies and sexuality, women are always in danger of being ridiculed, bullied, harassed, exploited and oppressed.

But despite all oppression they experience Lessing's female characters succeed in using their sexuality in a subversive way. Ignoring patriarchal codes and standards the female characters in *The Golden Notebook* follow freedom in sexuality and sexual relations. Lessing makes it clear that experiencing pleasure while making love is an absolute right for women. That is why we see Ella, who does not enjoy sex with George, "[gives] herself up [to Tanner], and in confidence, because their bodies understood each other" (*GN*, p.182).

The subversive sexual freedom that these characters adhere to is manifested by the frequent sex scenes and frequent talks about sex and sexual taboos. As Whittaker reminds us, it is an unprecedented freedom to have women talking "about their attitudes to men; menstruation; vaginal versus clitoral orgasm" (1988, p.132). Neither Anna nor Molly puts a curb on her sexuality as it is expected in the patriarchal tradition. When Ella is "sexually repelled by" her husband she leaves "his house, to put an end to" a life that is more a "nightmare of self-contempt and hysteria". Lessing appreciates this escape and acquits Ella from her self-accusatory initial secret fear "that she might be doomed, by some flaw in herself, to some unavoidable repetition of the experience with another man" (*GN*, p.173), on the ground that she has escaped from a "man who suffocated her, imprisoned her, apparently took away her will" (*GN*, p.172).

In a nutshell, the world that Lessing depicts in her novel is a sexually dangerous world for women. In this world almost all men show the same attitude towards sex and women's sexuality. As Morgan describes them, they are "a threat to their [women's] dignity and self-respect" (1973, p.474). They are all abusive and exploitative, trying to benefit as much as possible without having any idea that those whom they exploit are not machines but human beings. Yet, the female characters' trespassing the codes and red lines of patriarchy makes them subversive agents in a society that is dominated by capitalist and patriarchal relations. Anna's freedom in sex and sexual relations along with her decision not to yield to male-defined ideology that values marriage and housewifery are

subversive features that change her into a revolutionary agent in favor of change and women's emancipation.

B. Mothering and Motherhood

Confirming socialist feminism's point of view about mothering and motherhood Lessing, too, considers them as bonds confining women to the boundaries of house and family life. As she understands it they are aspects of female life that are under society's omnipresent scrutiny that expects women to indoctrinate children according to the established rules and standards. That is why women are questioned and attacked if children deviate from the established norms.

When Molly leaves his 19-year-old son alone "in a comfortable house, with money, and everything organized" (*GN*, p.37), she is harshly criticized by Richard, Tommy's father, who accuses her of being irresponsible and ignorant. In the dictionary of patriarchy, women's freedom from socializing and nurturing roles has no entry. Women are supposed to be bound to the house and children and this is what they all share. Like Molly, Marion is bound, "tied hand and foot to the boys" (*GN*, p.37) who are supposed to be her foremost life responsibility. This is what we see in Anna and Ella's lives too. Ella, for instance, is told by Dr. West, a representative of the male-dominated capitalist society, to write back to a mother with a sleep-walking child and tell her "to go to the clinic and suggest tactfully that it's her fault not the child's" (*GN*, p.207).

Therefore the novel's society holds Molly, Anna, Marion, Ella, Julia and other women guilty for children's problems. When Tommy commits suicide all the angry looks are directed towards Anna and Molly who are considered responsible and guilty. This is while "[both] Molly and Anna are responsible mothers" (Brewster, 1986, p.32) who have been good to their children. Besides Richard's criticism is the biting criticism of friends and acquaintances saying "Of course it was a pity that Molly went off and left the boy for that year" (*GN*, p.333). To exacerbate the situation Tommy's suicide throws Molly's life into a pit of bitterness, self-accusation and misery disconnecting her from all her relations with Anna and the men that she likes to be with. Yet, under the spell of mothering and motherhood Molly has to adapt herself to the conditions and get used to the routines.

The routines, however, are trifles that fixate women in specific positions and deprive them of the outside world. The point is that in the current flow of life they are not even conscious of what they do. Perhaps it needs a highly sensitive character like Anna to understand what she does. As Anna sees it "Having a child means being conscious of the clock, never being free of something that has to be done at a certain moment ahead" (*GN*, p.480). But in addition to being caught in the routines of life there is a big hidden danger in mothering practice. Motherhood and mothering are the very means through which capitalism

and patriarchy indoctrinate children to their own benefit. In fact they use mothers as indoctrinators, and through their socialization of children they raise agents who will promote the ideology of patriarchy and capitalism. This process of indoctrination to make people unable to think otherwise makes them subordinate to whatever they are told to think and to do. In this process, as Lessing shows it, women have an essential role, implementing the rules through mothering and socializing.

Ironically, Lessing's character's mothering is not limited only to their children. Men reserve their own share of emotional support and motherly care to maintain their pose. In Nelson's house Anna sees the fourth wife of an American film tycoon mothering him and preventing him from having more drinks; as Anna describes it "She [caresses] and [babies] him..." (*GN*, p.428). In one of Anna's stories a fifty-year-old man, a cuckoo in half a dozen families, "is like a child, dependent on women ... always ringing up some woman to do something for him ... making an impression on younger women for a week or so ... then [returning] to the older women who fulfill the function of kindly nannies or nursemaid" (*GN*, p.472). Saul Green too takes Anna as his mother, a substitution that makes her furious protesting "You have fixed on me for your mother ... I'm bored with the whole thing ... bored with nursery talk ... I feel nauseated with the banality of it all" (*GN*, p.507).

Despite all this, however, Lessing does not consider mothering and motherhood to be totally negative entities. Instead she identifies them as unique qualities of the female world, giving women the chance to undo capitalist's indoctrination process to their own advantage and to form a generation that favors justice and equality and acts according to humane standards. Lessing counts on children's talents and asks women to act before the male-dominated system takes advantage of children. She shows that, as she remarks in her preface to the novel, "the talents every child has, regardless of his official 'IQ', could stay with him through life, to enrich him and everybody else, if these talents were not regarded as commodities with a value in the success-stakes" (*GN*, p.15).

By this assertion Lessing argues that despite all the problems children may bring to women they can be gifts helping women to restore a part of their suppressive power. Hearing a baby crying fills Anna with "the feeling of continuity, of gay intimacy" (*GN*, p.323). She describes her daughter as the reason for "[banishing] the Anna who is listless and frightened," she calls her "my normality" and an anchor who "keeps her in what is normal in [herself]" (*GN*, p.476). Thus mothering and motherhood, despite all their possible problems, can be important means through which women can determine their freedom and emancipation in the long run. However, women should have a plan to direct and guide the children they

raise. Tommy is a good example to mention here.

While Tommy is capable of waging war against capitalism and patriarchy, lacking a plan and having nobody to help him with the paradoxes he sees in society makes him isolated and a victim of suicide. Tommy's status in life is much like that of women when he says, "I know what I don't want, but not what I do want" (*GN*, p.53). He needs a plan, not one that is suggested by patriarchal capitalism, but one designed by a socialist equalitarian agenda. That is why he decides to follow Anna's advice to be a teacher or a writer, jobs that are illuminative and constructive, jobs that have raising consciousness as their most important part. This shows that a mother has the ability to raise a child in a certain way, paving the way for change and revolution; it is that child and his/her like that can determine the future of mankind.

In short, Lessing's portrayal of mothering and motherhood proves socialist feminist's view that knows them as facets of oppression in patriarchal capitalist societies. Yet, Lessing believes that such a threat and facet of oppression can be an opportunity if it is used politically by women as a part of their exclusive power – the power of reproduction. Lessing asks women to look at pregnancy, mothering and motherhood in a new way, to look at them as means to overthrow oppressive relations and oppressive systems.

C. Society and Feminine Identity

The evidence taken from the novel's world show that society and its oppressive relations intend to shape women's identities. In a society in which suppression and exploitation dominate people's lives, women do not have the possibility to be what they really are. They have to fake identities to conform to male-defined codes and standards for survival. While trying to find a way to get along with the oppressive institutions they need to cave in themselves and hide their genuine emotions and thoughts. This very process ends in individuals' alienation and fragmentation that is artfully demonstrated by showing Anna being "split by the conflict within her ... symbolized by the four notebooks" (Brewster, 1986, p.35). The novel "explores fixed, fragmented, double variable and multiple identities" (Sprague, 1987, p.6) and follows characters' struggles to redefine themselves in a chaotic patriarchal capitalist society.

One noticeable example of the effects that cause such frustration and disappointment is film companies' attempts to change Anna's story *Frontiers of War*. Anna is repeatedly interviewed by directors and film-makers who want to change her novel into a film, but after it is changed into something new, in accordance with the tastes of the "boys at the top" (*GN*, p.258). One wants to strip the story off its color bar theme and give it merely a love story face, on the ground that, "It would be impossible to do *Frontiers of War*" on the ... magic box, as it is written

(*GN*, p.259). Another sends a brochure to Anna reminding her that they "will not consider screenplays dealing with religion, race, politics, or extra-marital sex" (*GN*, p.263), subjects that must be on the agenda because of their prevalence and relevance to all forms of oppression and discrimination in society.

Besides the media which are vehicles of the "boys at the top", men are determiners of women's identities. Richard defines women like Molly, Marion and secretaries who work for or have affairs with him. In an attempt to free herself from any relation to Richard, Molly adopts her maiden family name, Jacobs, after she is divorced. This preference for Jacobs over Portmain infuriates Richard, because he still thinks he is the center of power and Molly's master. However, Richard's tendency to fabricate women's identity is not limited to Molly and Anna, whom he calls naive and savage. He does the same thing to Marion who "as it happens ... is a good person, not stupid at all, but ... married for fifteen years to a man who makes her feel stupid" (*GN*, p.44). The dominator, thus, needs to change women's identity to what he can afford to rule over, and this is done in the most delicate way ever. Ironically, the men who are not like Richard, a capitalist, do the same thing to women. Saul Green, the most sophisticated and humane male character in the story, has his own share in trying to mold Anna's consciousness and identity.

Saul's suggested opening sentence for Anna's novel, "The two women were alone in the London flat" (*GN*, p.554), is an example of the way that men define and determine women's consciousness. The flat symbolizes immobility and limitation while 'alone' symbolizes loneliness, isolation and fragmentation. Though Saul's suggested line helps Anna to overcome her writing block, this very sentence is both a representation and a definition of women's lives viewed from a male-defined point of view. Therefore, women are not determiners of their own lives and consciousness. That is why, as Brewster sees it, "there are no women doctors or lawyers or teachers or members of Parliaments" among the novel's female characters (1986, p.31). They are just 'minor actresses', as Molly describes herself, having no role in choosing their 'plays' (*GN*, p.40). There is a sharp irony and thought-provoking ambiguity in this expression. Women are puppets, playing their roles as the strings tell them to do. Anna is encouraged to write in a specific way because, to echo Krouse, "living as a 'free woman' in her personal life does not necessarily facilitate the easy translation of that freedom into her work as a writer" (2010, p.44).

Besides Molly and Anna there are other female characters, such as Patricia Brent, the magazine editress, who comes from a rich county family "kind, hearty, direct, full of a battling self-respect"; but like Anna, Molly and Ella, when this character is put in the system she says "things quite out of character..." (*GN*, p.170).

This is a shared experience among women who need to be always pretentious, a pretention that is, most of the time, internalized as the norm. Society defines Patricia with a new identity that “[well-suits] her work”, but it is a reason that ‘chagrins’ her in a secret way (*GN*, p.170). This happens to all female characters who, as Ella puts it, “In five year’s time ... will have [their] walls in solid bright colors, and curtains and cushions in tune” with what society advises them through media and magazines such as ‘Women at Home’ that she and Patricia are keeping in print (*GN*, p.171).

But hopefully these female characters are not blind submissive believers of the ideology that determines their consciousness. They have their own moments of resistance, trying to stay unaffected, assertive and subversive. Such resistance can be partially and occasionally seen in Molly, Ella and Marion, but the genuine resistance comes from Anna who does not surrender to the enormity of pressure she endures. Though she “is surrounded by chaos inside and out”, the important thing is that, “From this nadir, she tries to rediscover herself as a writer” (Hayles, 1989, p.318). She says no to the film-makers who want to change her novel into something else because she sees her book as a part of her identity, absolutely self-defined and highly valued. She wants to be the one who defines and interprets herself and to prove that “*The Golden Notebook* – the narrative the novel turns into – comes into being” (Hayles, 1989, p.318). She does not look at herself in men’s mirror. She has a modified version of Ella’s view, she does not want “to be like a man caring more for ... work than for people ... and take men as they come ... for bread and butter reasons” (*GN*, p.283). Anna wants to be Anna, uncensored and complete, a whole that Pratt calls “an intellectual, a political activist, an artist, as well as a lover, a mother – a woman” (1973, p.413).

CONCLUSION

As the discussion made on *The Golden Notebook* reveals there are various means of oppression via which women are exploited and oppressed. Both in the family (and family-like circles) women are oppressed and discriminated against by male-dominated and capitalist relations. This is while women’s sexuality and their roles in mothering and motherly care make them victims to an oppressive order of patriarchy. In addition, the society’s male-dominated institutions are all allied to forge feminine identities that are false and unreal. However, while most of the women that appear as main characters know the truth, they have to bend under the pressure and have no way to save themselves from oppression and domination. The one that seems to be different and superior to the others is Anna who possesses subversive traits of a revolutionary agent.

Thus, while Lessing’s novel is a portrayal and a critique of the oppressive relations of society, it is also a nudge for women to look at Anna carefully and educate themselves to be like her, a phoenix rising from its own ashes. Lessing shows that women’s personal problems, personal preoccupations and personal struggles are their common points and shared aspects of life. She encourages them to trust their own bodies and minds and not to yield to the socially-constructed identities imposed on them. Anna’s separation from Molly at the end of the novel is more like a call to women to follow her in the adventures she will have in her struggle against oppressive systems. While Molly marries to find partial security under the incomplete and exploitive protection of a man, Anna goes back home where, hopefully, she will write a subversive novel to raise a new consciousness among her fellow sufferers telling them to trust their power and to activate it to subvert the oppressive structure that hinders their essence development. Lessing invites women to follow Anna in resisting, fighting, and restoring the Matri-culture they have been deprived of for ages.

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