

AN EXPLORATION OF FEMININE PSYCHE IN THE DORIS LESSING CANON

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The term 'feminism' tends to be used for the women's movement, which began in the late 18th century and continues to campaign for complete political, social, and economic equality between women and men. In other words, it is a "social movement that seeks equal rights for women."¹ It broadly refers to a philosophy of life that seeks to discover and change the mere subtle and deep seated causes of women's oppression. The feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimization by the dominating men of the society relating to women's subordinate status and oppression. According to Gerda Lerner,

Feminism is not always a movement for it can be a level of consciousness, a staunch attitude, as well as the basis for organized effort.²

In the West different aspects of feminism emanated. Mary Woolstonecraft and Margaret Fuller³ practised *democratic liberal feminism* that accepts the argument that men and women are rationally equal. It is an individualistic form of feminism, which focuses on women's ability to show and maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. Since both men and women have equal standing as merely agents both are qualified to fulfill social and political roles at any level. In Russia *Socio-Marxist feminism* was practised by feminists like Alexandra Kollantai who saw a definite demarcation between the private and public activity. The dichotomy between private and public is to be brought down so as to make women more equal like men. In fact, this line of argument is seen in Marx, Engels, Gilman, and Eisenstein.

Another type of feminism called *radical feminism* outside the whole sweep of culture is male dominated. The accounts of the pervasiveness of misogyny and violence against women constitute radical feminism. Among the radical feminists may be included the names of Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Germaine Greer, Kate Millet, Susan Brownmiller, Juliet Mitchell and Adrienne Rich.

Some women turned to a study of women's psychological responses in relation to man. Inspired by Freud and Lacan they turned to studies of madness. They feel that a woman who speaks outside male culture has to be either mad or an artist who creates fiction. Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous called upon women to use a different thing for themselves best on the experiences and sensations of their bodies.

Simon de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* created a stir in the realm of feminism. In the words of Charvet,

The goal is not so much to claim that man has his rights, nor to participate with men in a common socialist liberation, but to win her existence as free subject by defying her own identity, giving herself a past and creating for herself solidarity with her women.⁴

Cultural Feminism is another aspect of feminism vastly practised by Kathryn Cirksena and Lisa M. Cuklanz. According to them 'since women were thought less mentally capable than men and were normally associated with nature and thus with animal and physical world they were devalued as less human than men.' They argue that the body cannot be so separated from the mind and that the body should not be seen as a physical limitation of thought. They also see that different people undergo different experiences; therefore all cannot agree on one objective truth. This insight has been termed by cultural feminists as Standpoint epistemology. This theory is almost another form of feminism called *post-modern feminism* which describes the body as a site at which important identity forming, yet contradictory experiences occur. These feminists attempt to theorize the body. Besides the logic of equality or sameness and difference between men and women that is dealt with by the liberal, psychoanalytical and cultural feminists. Julia Kristeva suggests a third space for feminism to operate a space which deconstructs all identity, all binary oppositions which constituted the post-modern feministic theory. Alice Jardine's *Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity*⁵ illustrates post-modern feminism as a movement from the point of view, by and for women. Gayatri Spivak and Elizabeth Cady Stanton also come before us as the practitioners of post-modern feminism.

It is not very easy to formulate the concept of modern feminism but for the sake of convenience one can boldly say woman's and girl's lives became visibly detraditionalized. The earlier concept of women's subordinating themselves to their husbands has gone and there is a commonsense assertiveness across the globe against the male violence. Relations between men and women are conceptualized now not as the dull terrain of politics, but instead of a battlefield or else a great drama featuring a range of fascinating and glamorous experiences.

It is here Doris (May) Lessing (Original surname Taylor), a South African expatriate writer, the winner of Nobel Prize for Literature 2007, comes before us as a major woman novelist who has written eloquently about women's lives. She is often considered as an outspoken post-modern feminist who has probed the inner lives of women and spoken out against political injustice. She depicts the world as a terrible place, people by terrorists, in which the women can be as violent as the men. Through her 50 books, she has always been intensely committed to active persuasion to reform society. As a novelist, she has enthralled as much by ideas as people. Several of her novels are numbered among the modern classics. Central themes in Lessing's works are feminism, the battle of the sexes, individuals in search of wholeness, and the dangers of technological and scientific hubris. She has been described by the *Swedish Academy* in Stockholm as

An epicist of the female experience whose books – most notably *The Golden Notebook* – have delved into the human psychological experience and subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny.⁶

The heroines who populate the work of Doris Lessing belong to the [avant](#)garde of their day. Leftist, fiercely independent, feminist, her characters, like Lessing herself, are social critics rebelling against the cultural restrictions of their societies. And like their creator, Lessing's heroines populate two geographies: Southern Africa and England. Lessing's fiction closely parallels her own life. Her characters have experienced her experiences; they know what she knows.

Doris Lessing is known for having been a beacon of inspiration to a generation of feminists. Her *The Golden Notebook*⁷ hailed as the most important work that has left its mark upon the ideas and feelings of a whole generation of women. It is often considered by the critics as a later-day tract on

feminist literature due to its experimental style and explorations of self, creativity, and feminine identity. As Zerine Aklesaria rightly pointed out,

The Golden Notebook, her best-known work, brought her instant fame and a cult following as the high priestess of Feminism.⁸

Conscious of the limitations of realism, and dissatisfied with the possibilities that such a technique could offer, Lessing introduced a change of direction, a new turn of narrative technique which is meant to be adequate to the complex experience of being a 'free' woman in mid-twentieth century Britain – the frustrations and disillusionments, the disintegration and dissolution that go into the making of a self. Magali Cornier Michael argues:

The Golden Notebook pushes beyond both realist and modernist modes in its attempts to delineate an aesthetics that is not divorced from physical existence and yet is aware of the constructed nature of reality.⁹

The novel presents a body of experience acquired at the crucial frontiers of modern life. It takes a close look at patriarchal gender arrangements which distort the quality of human relationships. It also deals with the crucial problems of freedom and responsibility, the predicament of the free women in the mid-twentieth century in terms of a novelistic structure which may be called 'postmodern.'

The novel opens with the protagonist Anna Wulf, a 40-year-old novelist and single mother, who meets her friend Molly in London in the summer of 1957 after a separation. The very opening sentence "The two women were alone in the London flat,"¹⁰ easily spill out all the strands that make up the story. She tries to live with the freedom of a man. She is a writer, author of one very successful novel, who now keeps four notebooks. In one with a black cover she reviews the African experience of her earlier years. In a red one she records her political life, her disillusionment with Communism. In a yellow one she writes a novel in which her heroine relives part of her own experience. And in a blue one she keeps a personal diary. Finally, in love with an American writer, threatened with insanity, she tries to bring the threads of all four books together in a golden notebook.

The four notebooks reflect four facets of Anna Wulf's life. She herself is the central consciousness. She finds it difficult to reconcile the contradictory aspects of her personality. For example, her success as a novelist with the publication of *Frontiers of War*; her failure in political work registered in red notebook; her artistic difficulties as a novelist suffering from a 'writer's block'; her struggle to redefine her concept of self.

With these various threads of her story - her life - Anna weaves a shatteringly vivid tapestry of contemporary concerns. Never for a moment can you doubt the validity of her testament. Documentary precision combines with deep narrative art to reveal the truth of being an intelligent woman. Her conclusions are likely to be debated for generations. Margaret Reynolds aptly says thus:

The Golden Notebook comprises fragmented sections where Anna tries to come to terms with the different parts of her life, as mother, friend, writer, lover, politically-conscious being and person with an emotional life.¹¹

It provides a detached critique of Anna's attitudes about writer's block as expressed in 'Free Women.' Offering self-conscious critical detachment, 'The Golden Notebook' shows Anna's ability to create lives within herself, independent of any external factors. It serves as a logical outcome of Anna's quest for wholeness, freedom, and identity. As Ruth Whittaker observes:

The Golden Notebook acts as a symbol of Anna's psychic integration, just as the previous four notebooks symbolized her feelings of disunity.¹²

This realization of her complete freedom to writing produces Anna's sense of responsibility to create 'Free Women,' in which she can ironically treat her former belief system. Therefore, through her 'unremitting self-consciousness,' Anna reveals her 'complete freedom,' and finds the ability to generate writing.

Anna Wulf, the protagonist, is a novelist who experiences alienation and fragmentation of her consciousness in the disintegrated world. Jean Pickering offers a unique views of hers:

Anna, like Sisyphus, engages in an 'unceasing struggle' to confront the absurd where this mind and this world straining against each other without being able to embrace each other.¹³

The novel thus exemplifies the fragmentation of Anna's mind and personality, the problem of her blocked creativity, and the final psychic integration that restores the creative power in the protagonist.

In this novel Ella and Paul represent two facets of Anna's personality. While Ella, Anna's autobiographical heroine, represents Anna's romantic and idealizing self, Paul represents her more conscious self – the disappointed idealist. Paul, a comrade, a snotty and manipulative Englishman of the upper-classes, is jealous of his mistress Ella and accuses her of having illegal relations with other men. While having an affair with Ella, Paul not only has his wife at home but also has another affair simultaneously with a colleague Stephanie. Even then he is jealous of Ella's affairs. With regard to his wife he is immune to her emotional needs. The husband here considers his wife as an instrument of delivering and nurturing babies. So he doesn't hesitate to have an affair with another woman. He wants Ella to be vigorous, healthy and chaste for him but cold to others. He even considers sexual pleasures as a male privilege and woman's claim to it arouse male anger. He doesn't believe in feminine sensuality. Here, one is reminded of Simon de Beauvoir, who says thus:

It is the duplicity of the husband that dooms the wife to a misfortune of which he complains later that he is himself the victim. Just as he wants her to be at once warm and cool in bed, he requires her to be wholly his and yet no burden: he wishes her to establish him in fixed place on earth and to leave him free, to assume the monotonous daily round and nit to bore him, to be always at hand and never importunate; he wants to have her all to himself and not to belong to her; to live as one of the couple and to remain alone. Thus, she is betrayed from the day he marries her.¹⁴

Richard, a business tycoon, is another character who abandons his first wife Molly and son Tommy and marries Marion and has three children from this marriage. He, in spite of his second wife, searches for amorous pleasures with the secretaries and has a succession of girls. He treats his wife just like a housewife or a hostess for his posh dinner parties without showering any genuine love and attention on her. With the result Marion is reduced to the status of a nurse maid for the children. She even complains about his girls and Richard asks her to have a lover. Richard's first wife Molly makes scathing attack on the hypocrisy of Richard. She says,

You worked really hard to make her in love with you again, it was all jealous scenes and love and kisses until that movement she broke it off with him finally. And the moment you had her safe, you lost interest and went back to the

secretaries of the fancy divan in your beautiful bio business office. And you think it's unjust that Marion is unhappy and makes scenes and drinks more than is good for her.¹⁵

The frustrated Marian starts becoming an addict to drinking Richard accuses her of being a bad influence on the children. And when she seizes to drink and devotes her energy to looking after her stepson Tommy who has become blind due to suicidal attempt, Richard feels wounded and blames her for not caring him. In fact, she is making lame excuses to abandon her to marry his twenty three year old secretary Jane which would be his third marriage, that too when he is already 50.

In this novel, marriage which is supposed to bring bliss to women turns into a trap, an institution of oppression and torment for women. It very ably projects the hypocrisy of men. Thus, the novelist gives an ideological feel of the mid century concept of woman. Victoria Bazin aptly says thus:

The novel has often been treated as an anomaly, an eccentric and essentially unreadable text written about sex war.¹⁶

While *The Golden Notebook* was hailed as a landmark by the women's movement, her latest novel *Alfred and Emily* – and, she says, last – also explores another aspect of feminism.

*Alfred and Emily*¹⁷ is an imaginative recreation of feminism in its moderate form. Part memoir, part historical fiction, the book mixes a biography of Lessing's parents (the Alfred and Emily of the title) with an imagined past, in which the two never met.

In Doris Lessing's latest – and, apparently, last – book, she looks back at her parents' lives and at her life with them, readers, too, might find themselves looking back and wondering: 'just where have I been? What exactly was that?'¹⁸

The novelist makes a record of the relationship of her parents after the shadow of the Great War (i.e., World War I) when they move to Africa. The novel also dwells upon the impact of her parents' marriage on her. Through her double vision she struggles to comprehend her parents, "a double throw of the dice."¹⁹ Firstly, she imagines the lives her parents might have had if the World War I hadn't intervened. Secondly she depicts the lives they had interpreted by a hawk-eyed child.

In the opening pages, *Under My Skin*, her first volume of autobiography, Lessing gives an account of the upbringing of Emily, her own mother, who ignoring her father's appeal, joined nursing. Alfred, a young gentleman, brought up in the Essex country side joined a bank and met with a ferocious shell that caused damage to his leg. He met Emily McVeagh at the Royal Free Hospital where she was a sister on his ward. She had just lost her husband, a young cardiologist at sea. But she mustered up courage and nursed Alfred and became closer to him. Soon they were married and left for southern Rhodesia – via Persia, Iran, and Zimbabwe – for new pastures. Doris was born during their life in south Rhodesia.

In the very opening pages of the novel there are references to the teenage Emily staying with her friend Daisy whose mother Mrs. Lane has become a surrogate mother to her. Mrs Lane was a woman with influence, friends in useful places, and she had been finding out from a dozen different sources just what Emily McVeagh was in for because Emily had defied her father, and said to him that, no, she would not go to university, she would be a nurse. But Mrs. Lane always comforts Emily at the time of distress. In rural Essex during the Cricket match she sees Alfred, a handsome sportsman smacking boundaries. Daisy is drawn towards him. But the cricketer is curious about Emily who is in a sorrowful face. The fact is that Emily lost the great love of her life, a doctor who unfortunately drowned in the Channel which

leads to tears in her. An aspect of feminism can be seen in Emily's choosing of the profession of nursing though her parents wanted her to send her to university as she was doing well in school. In traditional families by way of filial gratitude, children take up to the vocation chosen by their parents. But the new woman in Emily utterly ignores the orders of the parents as she chooses the vocation of nursing. Another form of feminism is seen when the sorrowful woman, even after losing her husband, makes some advances towards a new family life. She regains confidence in her vocation by serving Alfred, a bank employee. At least, there is a parallel situation that one encounters. Alfred has disappointed his parents by opting to work for the local farmer rather than joining a bank. His mother weeps. Mrs. Lane also weeps because her Daisy is away to train with Emily. These 'new' children under similar circumstances frustrate their parents' ambition for them.

In Lessing's real life Emily and Alfred do not lead a placid life. But in the novel they become closer and achieve peace and amity. As time advances, Alfred suffers a burst appendix. This happened to the real Alfred in France just before the battle of the Somme and probably saved his life. But here it is peace time and his appendix bursts in London where he is up seeing the qualified nurses. The brush with death makes him realize it is time to be wed. Instead of marrying Emily, or Daisy, he marries their friend Betsy, a pretty, a plump local girl. The marriage is naturally a happy one. Two strapping boys, good sportsmen like their father are born. Alfred proves a kind father as well as a good farmer.

Lessing gives her father a positive picture by reattaching his severed limb, erasing the events that caused his shell shock and allowing him to die a very old man. With regard to her mother she exhibits her negative attitude. As she must have thought that her mother was a complex woman, for whom a cosy marriage and simple life in the English countryside could never have sufficed. She is a woman who never had – not just the job of matron at St. George's hospital which she turned down in order to marry. She might have done all beyond that. In her own words,

I used to joke, as a girl, that if she were in England she would be running the women's institute. Or like Florence Nightingale, be an inspiration for the reorganization of hospital. (p.35)

But her ambition is not fulfilled as she becomes a formidable public figure.

Emily marries at first a cardiologist who expects her to give up work, nursing being too lovely an occupation for a middle-class life. As a moderate feminist she doesn't like to sit at home surrounded by servants as she experiences a sense of waste and frustration. Soon her feministic fervour is realized with her husband's sudden death. Convalescing in Essex she discovers a talent for telling stories to children, and remembers how important books were to her as a child. As a courageous woman she establishes charity and opens a number of schools. Remedying poverty and ignorance in the east end is the top of the agenda. Soon the schools spread nation-wide. There are many battles but her resolve is undaunted. She lives in London but doesn't marry again but fulfills ambitions her real life counterpart never could.

The latter half of the novel is a realistic presentation of the life of Alfred and Emily in Rhodesia. The fact is that Alfred continues as a healthy English farmer though he becomes a victim to diabetes and later to war where he is killed. But Emily becomes a driven career woman suppressing her innate desire of serving society in a larger perspective. She is insular in looking after her diabetic husband living amidst books, the food, insects all restricted to a room. Even the trunk carrying her mother's dresses are lying in the trunk only as her mother never put on them. Perhaps there is a conflict between her innate feminist ethos and her forced concern for her ailing husband. The protagonist takes pains to give an

account of the conflict between mothers and daughters on one hand and then the inner conflict in women who would like go out to work rather than suffering at home. The conflict certainly enriches the feminist flavour. Thus, both the novels explore the feminine psyche of the women.

To conclude, one may say that Lessing in her lengthy and ambitious novel *The Golden Notebook* that appeared in the early part of her career, explores the inner recesses of a true feminist, maybe a radical feminist. But some transformation took place in her as she presents a moderate form of feminism in her latest novel *Alfred and Emily*. Perhaps in her long career as a creative artist and also as a woman, she depicts a different and at the same time convincing facet of feminism in her apparently last novel.

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