

A Study of Free Women in Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook



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ABSTRACT :

The Golden Notebook is Doris Lessing's masterpiece, which was considered as the monumental feminist novel after World War II. This paper studied and summarized the novel "The Golden Notebook" from the perspective of feminism, further exploring the causes of the confusions of the modern women and the female's "The Other" status, as well as the heroine character: Anna's approaches in realizing "Free woman," based on the comparison and analysis on the female characters in the novel. Through the re-rendering of the heroine Anna's image of free woman, the article discussed how modern women fight against their fate in a male-dominated society. Aiming at this specific question, this study also pointed out how the character Anna changed her "The Other" status by struggling to look ahead in the bitterness and overcoming the inner nature. Although Lessing refused to attach a feminist label to her work, she had depicted a character, Anna, who has always taken initiative in many aspects of life to realize women's freedom and self-value.

KEYWORDS : *Feminism; The Other; Independent women; Self-value*



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RESEARCH PAPER

The Golden Notebook novel is Doris Lessing's masterpiece. In this work, Lessing breaks the old sequential narrative writing methods by showing the heroine character Anna Woolf's Freeman life from several different angles and aspects that help to describe the experiences of a young woman as a lover and mother. Hence, millions of people around the world have treated this story as a textbook for independent women. *The Golden Notebook* is a story of a writer, Anna Woolf, who wrote four notebooks in which she keeps record of her life, and her attempt to tie them all together in a fifth, gold-colored notebook. The book intersperses segments of an ostensibly realistic narrative of the lives of Molly and Anna, and their children, ex-husbands, and lovers-entitled "Free Women," which is excerpted from Anna's four notebooks; colored black (based on Anna's experience in Central Africa, before and during World war II, which inspired her own novel as bestselling novel); colored red (based on Anna's experience as a member of the Communist Party); colored yellow (an ongoing novel that is being written based on the painful end of Anna's own love affair); and colored blue (Anna's personal journal where she records her memories, dreams, and emotional life). Each notebook returned to four times, interspersed with episodes from "Free Women," creating non-chronological, and overlapping sections that interact with one another. The post-modernistic styling, with its space and room for "play" engaging, the characters and readers, is among the most famous features of the novel. This story demonstrates two Free Women's (Anna and Molly) in pursuing their independence. They are qualified with economic independence, open-mindedness, no shackles of marriage and the family, and living a life of freedom that is envied by many married women. Their life seems to give out a layer of the beautiful ring, but it is evident to find Anna and Molly's incommunicable bitterness, confusion, and helplessness when opening the mysterious aura.

There are many studies on Lessing in the west, which mainly focus on the perspectives of Lessing's literary techniques, feminism, political vision, philosophy, and others. In addition,



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there are also many masterpieces which are studying about Lessing and her works abroad. In the late 1970s, there were around 35 doctoral theses on Lessing in the United States. Further, Lessing won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007, which attracted more literary attention. However, the feminist theorists have just considered gender as an intersectional category for the purpose of grasping how the world is not only and simply shaped by gender relations, but also by intertwining power relations relating to other social categories, such as ethnicity and class. One of the originators of feminist literary criticism, Elaine Showalter for example, has cast monumental attention to Lessing's work [1], in her introduction to *The Golden Notebook* in 1971; however, Lessing resisted the reductive label of feminist and spoke out against those who claimed the multilevel novel merely as a useful weapon in the sex war [2]. In recent years, domestic scholars have begun to give more attention to the "Literary Flower" – Doris Lessing, and academic research about Lessing's works, which is mainly related to her female consciousness and writing skills. For example, Zhang [3] studied the writing skills in postmodernism novel in *The Golden Notebook*, mentioned that the text of the novel uses the technique of metafiction to subvert, and disintegrate the dualistic opposition between reality and illusion, and female psychology, such as the study of the dilemma and the way out of "Free Women" from the perspective of psychology [4], and concluded that Lessing's progress lied in her breaking away from the dual opposition, in return finds another possibility between them to establish a harmonious relationship between sexes. Clearly, the novel was not to aggravate, but to relent the relationship between the different sexes. This study analyzes the "Free Women" social aspect and Anna's image of fighting against her fate; it further discusses the different methods to despite the social stereotype and build harmony between sexes.

Whether in the West or in the East, women are in a long-term disadvantaged and oppressed position. For a long time, patriarchal rule has destroyed the woman's gender consciousness. Beauvoir, from the feminist standpoint sharply raises the issue, why a woman is "The Other?" [5]. She uses a lot of scientific knowledge and philosophical knowledge to study the aspects of women's physical, psychological, and behavior from the perspectives of biological psychology and philosophical, as well as proposes a profound interpretation of "The Other"



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status of women. Beauvoir's book "The Second Sex" has put an emphasis on the difference in physiology between male and female, indicating that all female characteristics of women are the result of society, in which the society are represented by men. She has raised in her book that, because women are given a fixed role as a vulnerable, protected, incompetent, weaker than men. However, man has fixed women as a low status in a legal system and use traditional invisible moral concepts to imprison women thought, which most of the women are willing to obey. Women should be given the freedom to choose, to work, and have a family instead of insisting them to become virtuous domestic helpers and should be given them a freedom to move out of the tradition, thereby they are not bound by society and themselves. Spivak, a scholar who breaks professional boundaries, has multi-disciplinary people's attentions and absorbs different schools of thought, because her works involve deconstructive criticism of helplessness due to women's multiple roles in society, and sexual relationships. Thereby, this study was mainly conducted for studying the women's confusions, and further finds the related approaches to realize the women's freedom. This article would contribute to the Feminism study and confirm the theory of Beauvoir's "The Other" status. Furthermore, this article will also delve the female characters' bitterness of heart, confusion and perplexity, and their different choices on their fate and life, to explore the secret of their inner world to attract concerns of women who come from different social community. Also, this study would make people have a consciousness of feminism, and make the women have a consciousness of independence and freedom. Meanwhile, this article would contribute to the study of *The Golden Notebook* from the perspective of Feminism, give suggestion to build harmony between the sexes and offer a study from a new prospect and more detailed information.

The social roles mean that particular individual experiences and shoulders various contents in the sexual role, in return the combination of those roles make women's life become tougher. However, if a woman wants to take care of each role with perfections, will make the women's life become tougher. But when the roles are rendered according to the principles and expectations of a society, everyone would be admitted by the society. In a traditional society, a man's call of duty means to seek success and find a suitable wife. Just as Jane Austen has written



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in her book that “an unmarried man in possession of a large fortune must be in need of a wife [9].” Meanwhile, as for women, being a “Good wife” and “Good mother” and staying at home is what has been fixed for them. The female characters in *The Golden Notebook* are all tied with different leader with different revolution belief (the men). Anna has dithered about quitting the party, but she had dedicated the party with a full heart. As a writer, Anna has written a well-known novel “Frontiers of War,” and by this she manages to obtain a considerate payment each month to balance her expenses, because she used to work for the party as a charitable job for no payment. Her novel was several times put in the teeth of the storm due to the critics, and many film directors were willing to buy the copyright for her novel to adapt the novel into a movie; for that, Anna always holds a positive reaction. So, it can be illustrated that the modern women’s confusion comes from the multiple identities or social roles, leading to self-division.

In patriarchal culture, women are always under the gaze and judgment of a man, while Anna often regards woman’s eyes as the criterion or criterion to measure and abandon man [11]. Anna does not like Willie (the male character in the novel), because he is the most ruthless person. Meanwhile, George needed a woman to listen to him, so Anna divorced Paul one year after he got married. Paul had tender love and compassion for women, but the other side of his personality was “a self-hating, unrestrained, and ruthless wandering public” [10]. Eventually, Anna found out that Paul had destroyed the intelligent and innocent Ella, therefore she decided not to maintain any kind of relationship with Paul. The seemingly calm and reliable man, Nelson, had a hostile attitude towards women, and in the hysterical curse against women, therefore, Anna no longer regarded him as a lover, and quickly ended their relationship. Sol is Nelson’s friend, a shrewd and indifferent American, which makes Anna feel uninteresting. In the conflict between Anna and Sol, Sol regards herself as the center, regards Anna as “The Other,” and keeps saying that with a strong tone, he constantly strengthens the importance of “I,” “Me,” and “Myself.” It shows that the firm male-centered consciousness strongly occupies the position of the ruler. Anna is very disgusted with this and feels unable to talk with him, so she has to use silence as a force as the instrument to confront him. Anna’s constant search for a real man in her life reflects women’s desire for an ideal man, and also Anna’s subjective



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When Anna is with her lover Michael, she is a beautiful and sexy lover; when she was with her daughter Janet, she became a responsible and gentle mother; and when she talked with publishers, she showed the independent and courageous character of a modern woman. Anna has been obsessed with these three identities, which makes her feel confused and almost collapsed. She didn't know who she was and what kind of identity she belongs to, leading to Anna's self-split state. There are several times in the book about a dream that Anna had, in which she was sleeping, and another Anna was watching and looking down at her. When she lay on the water of her dream and began to dive slowly, "Anna, you are betraying everything you believe in; you are trapped in subjectivity, you are trapped in self, you are trapped in your own needs," the voice also said to her, "To fight, to fight, to fight [11]," symbolizes Anna's self-split. Looking down at Anna, she is a "free woman" status of Anna, and downward adheres to the traditional sexual ethics of Anna. From the surface, "free" Anna ended her marriage and gained freedom and held the same status as a man. However, another voice representing traditional morality still held her back. In addition, she had a love-hate attitude and emotion towards her daughters, Molly, and Michael, because they hindered her pursuit of freedom, but she could not give up loving them, which made her even more confused, bureaucratic, and painful, completely plunging into a role-splitting dilemma. On the other hand, Anna was fighting for her inner self to be a more humanized independent woman. As a mother, she wanted to give her all love to Janet, to give her an independent education and not to grow up in limited and male-dominated world, and also, she didn't let Janet go to traditional abroad school, give the expectation to her daughter not to be a woman of the society want her to be. As a brilliant communist, she contributed her talents and juvenile hood to the independence of Africa. Communist was just her political aspiration; it was not her real job. Her full-time job was in fact a writer. Sandburg mentioned that women should lean and sit at the table and have their own business. Anna had made a respectable progress in writing, in which her most acknowledged novel is "Frontiers of War," which supported her living. She had something with a large fervor to do, and from where she realized her self-value and independence (economically).



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This study deeply analyzed the modern women's confusion, and mainly study women's "The Other" status in society by combining the modern feminist theory of "otherness" and the "subjectivity" to find the approaches to realize the real freedom. There are two main reasons which cause confusions; Firstly, modern women's emotional dependence on men; Secondly, modern women with multiple identities or social roles leading to self-division and their confusion of being mother. This study studied different life circumstances of the image of Anna and her approaches of breakthrough in the self-seeking. It's not complaining wives' passive resistance to the life, but Free Women's active struggle in life, is women's own voice to get rid of the object status of "Otherness," and to construct the way of female "Subjectivity" status. Therefore, the approaches to realize the freedom are firstly, by overcoming their inner natures, and have a consciousness of independence, not only in the economy, but also in psychology, and secondly, the women should despite the stereotype and stop tying themselves with the terms of "Good mother" or "Good wife" identity, and work on the harmonious relationship between sexes.

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