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## دور المرأة في رواية "المفكرة الذهبية" لدوريس ليسينغ: مقارنة ما بعد البنوية

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### المخلص

يُنظر إلى أعمال دوريس ليسينغ الأدبية على أنها مساحة فنية للتكوين الاجتماعي والمساوي الشخصية، ومسعى تنافسي لإزالة الغموض عن الصراعات النفسية والثقافية المتعلقة بالأنوثة. وتروي رواية ليسينغ المثيرة للتفكير، "المفكرة الذهبية" (1962)، وجهة نظرها حول الأنوثة، والجنس، ومكانة المرأة. انطلاقاً من النظريات ما بعد البنوية، ولا سيما نظريات بتلر وفوكو وديريدا، تهدف هذه المقالة إلى دراسة مفهوم فاعلية المرأة وموقعها من خلال التأكيد على سيولة وتعدد هوية المرأة كقوة فاعلة خطابية. إن التعبير المتعدد الأصوات عن الأنوثة في الرواية، ونسيج التمثيل السردي الشامل، والبنية السردية، تزعم المفاهيم التقليدية للذاتية النسوية المستقلة، وتسلب الضوء على فاعلية أداء خطابية بدلاً من فاعلية معيارية للشخصيات النسائية. يعكس تشتت شخصية البطلة بيئة اجتماعية سياسية فاعلة تُشكّل إحساسها بالقدرة على الفعل، ويكشف أن القدرة النسوية في الرواية تتحقق من خلال سلسلة مُصطنعة من المقاومات والمواجهات الخطابية، بدلاً من كيان نسوي موحد أو مُنمّط. يرمز هيكل الرواية السردية المكون من خمسة دقاتر إلى القدرة الأنثوية متعددة الأصوات. وتُعدّ استراتيجية عنوان "المرأة الحرة" استعارة مهمة لإعادة تعريف المرأة بوعي من خلال الفعل الجماعي، ودافعاً سردياً لذاتيتها المُفككة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : دور المرأة، ما بعد البنوية، دوريس ليسينغ، المفكرة الذهبية

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## Feminist Agency in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*: A Poststructuralist Approach

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### Abstract

Doris Lessing's literary gamut is seen as an arty site of social making and personal undertaking, a contesting endeavor to demystify the psychocultural contestations of the feminine and feminity. Lessing's thought-provoking novel, *The Golden Notebook* (1962), narrates her view of womanhood, gender, and female positionality. Building upon poststructuralist theories, particularly those of Butler, Foucault and Derrida, this article aims to investigate the concept of female agency and positionality through emphasizing the fluidity and multiplicity of female identity as a discursively agential power. The novel's polyphonic articulation of womanhood, metanarrative texture of representation and narratological structure, destabilize traditional notions of autonomous feminist subjectivity and highlight a discursively performative rather than normative agency of the female characters. The protagonist's fragmented self reflects an operational socio-political milieu that shapes her sense of agency, and reveals that feminist agency in the novel is realized through a constructed series of discursive resistances and encounters, rather than through a unified or normalized feminist self-entity. The five-notebooks narrative structure of the novel symbolically corresponds to the polyphonic female agency. The "Free Woman" captioning strategy serves as a significant trope of the conscious re-gendering of women collective act, and a narrativized motif of their deconstructed subjectivity

**Keywords:** Feminism, Female Agency, Poststructuralism, Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*.

## Introduction

Experiencing a sense of multiple belonging of identity formation, Doris Lessing's fictional world unfold a literature of unique narrative structure and thematic texture. Born as Doris May Taylor in Khermanshah, in what is now Iran, on October 22, 1919, Lessing moved to London, and eventually spent her formative years on a farm in Sothern Rhodesia, what is now Zimbabwe, where her British parents moved in 1925. After experiencing two unsuccessful marriages, Lessing moved to London, where her art was influenced by other types of oppression. The major unifying theme of her work is the need for individuals to confront their most fundamental assumptions about life as way of avoiding preconceived belief system and achieving psychic and emotional wholeness.

Throughout her fictional oeuvre, Lessing engages with feminism-related concepts that identify her theory of middle-way feminism, such as female agency, performative sexuality and gender role. Her third-way approach to feminism is characterized by a pluralistic reconciliatory view. She believes that male/female, man/woman binaries are a social construct that must be levelled by critical scurrility. The present article sheds light on Lessing's representation of feminist agency in her novel, *The Golden Notebook* (1962), as a representative of her fictional works, taking a poststructuralist terrain in the analysis of the narrative.

The paper approaches the question of feminist agency in the work of Lessing through a broad poststructuralist psychoanalytic framework of her dialectical positioning of the female subjectivity as an active agential source within power constellation. In fact, Lessing's third-way feminism develops from her concept of intersubjectivity as an interaction between the self and outer world experiences. The feminist agency takes a variety of parametric paradigms afforded by the ambivalent possibilities of female voicing, producing a mosaic feminist agential self.

## The Concept of Agency

The concept of agency is central to women studies and feminist discourse. Recent studies on the gender and related concepts have given significant focus to the concept of agency as a determining factor on the emancipatory articulation of the female voice and its representational presence. Moreover, the postcolonial treatment of the concept has encapsulated ideological and political drives underlying its subject formation. The break with the colonial past and the resurgent realities of the present have imposed new entailments on the submerged practices of women and other marginal groups.

In addition to the patriarchal/matriarchy dichotomy, the concept of agency has acquired extra signification related to the subalternity, as indorsed by the politico-cultural discourse of postcoloniality and women marginality, wherein the female subjectivity undergoes a metastatic transformation of the female articulation and spatial positioning within the postcolonial society. As argued by Foucault (1988, p.50), "the subjects are always subjected, they are the point of application of normative techniques and disciplines...constituted through practices of subjection". The radical feminist strand of subversion becomes as invalid and intangible as complete submission to patriarchy.

Agency is contained and maintained in the individual's ability to act and behave the way he wills and have his own choice. In this case, it is synonymous with being, that is, to act is to be. The concept of agency is sometimes termed interchangeably with freedom, autonomy, and moral

authority. It is a qualitative term that defies singular identifiable definition, usually overlapped due to the interdisciplinary componential nature.

Agency is defined by Klugman et al (2014) as the capacity to make decisions about one's own life and act on them to achieve a desired outcome free of violence, retribution, or fear. Kabeer (1999, p. 438) defines the concept as "ability to define one's goals and act on them". The choice as the key element the concept, is viewed by Kabeer in terms of three interrelated aspectual features: resources—the normative conventional social contexts, process—the operationalized power/the values of "being and doing" or the desired functionalities, and the outcomes/empowerment—the achievements or agential power resulting from the interconnected elements, and determining the boundary of the allocated choices and constraints within the general fabric of social and politico- cultural set up. Sen (1985, p.203-204) describes the term as "the freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent, decides he or she should achieve". Bidell & Fischer (1994) and Brandstädter (1998) argue that agency is a self-organizing system of the individual's activities and behaviours. Sokol et al., (2015, p.523) define agency in terms of reflexivity, meaning-making, and control as human agents that embedded in the structures, networks, constraints, extensions and expressions of agency. The agency is defined as the ability to have your thoughts and behaviors. Agency in this respect includes the notion of autonomy, the freedom from and freedom to, that is, an internal free intentional ability to choose, and an externally free from any imposed forces or relations that affect your determinacy to relate or act.

McNay (2013) contends that agency encompasses both resisting and reinterpreting oppressive frameworks, rather than merely exercising individual autonomy. hooks (1989) emphasizes that voice serves as a space of resistance, where the act of speaking truth can challenge and destabilize systems of domination. Butler (1997) considers voice as an agent of performativity, pinpointing that identity is constituted and constructed in the way we articulate our selves. Ecklein (2019) stresses that self-expression and vocality is an indicator of agential power, and that women's agency is connected with their articulatory engagement as active interlocutors. White and Epston (1990) emphasize that individuals regain agency by reconstructing the narratives that shape their identities. They claim that voice serves as a means of reconstructing identity. Writing therefore serves as an empowering tool for women to reframe and re-author their lives, transforming narratives of marginalization into narratives of resilience. Lessing uses storytelling as a tool for re-defining female identity and agency. By deploying a metanarrative technique within a narrative framing structure, she destabilizes the concept of female agency a receptive agent, and repositions its subjectivity, and redefines into a performative role. According to White and Epston (1990), individuals regain agency by reconstructing the narratives that shape their sense of self.

### **Agency in Feminist Poststructuralist Thought**

The deconstructionist approach destabilizes the normative humanist definition of agency as an individualistic feature of a mature, rational human being which, by definition, excludes the other social groups such as women, the insane and children. In this case, moral rightness is assigned by those in power and individuals are demarcated thereupon in terms of having/lacking agentic authority and power. Frye (1990, p.134) argues, "One's rightness is not really one's own, in this case, but it is one's sponsor's rightness". According to the poststructuralists, the normative human definition ignores the discursal socio-cultural and political context as a domain of

intersectional agentic power of the human act. Human experience is negotiational and operational, whether transformative or non-transformative, a positional space for subjectification.

Within this constellated space of power relation individual's agency is determined and subject is defined. Therefore, the marginality/centrality and negative/positive relationships are created due to the conflated space of power dynamics, and how imitative, responsive and subversive individuals' action, as agentic choices, are to these classifications.

The basic tenet of the poststructuralist philosophy is the rejection of a given defining "essence" or "identity". This principle is based on the heterogenous and decentering tactic of the central foundational subject as a regenerated founded subject, a determined effect, rather than a merely conditioned product of the structures and processes that construct it. To undertake a poststructuralist endeavor is embark on a challenging task. This is because poststructuralism "contests many of the foundational assumptions upon which much mainstream Western (political) philosophical thought is and has been based" (Rae, 2020, p.1). Therefore, agency is conceived to be "a mode of subjectivity wherein the subject is capable of intentionally effecting its own movements and thoughts" (Rae, 2020, p.15).

Poststructuralist thinking rejects the normative structuralist approach to subject as an ontological product existing outside the socio-historical and politico-cultural context. Female agency is the expression of women's collective voice and action; it is an act of being in action, that is, a woman's ability to claim her voice, presence, and self within a constituted, *not constituting*, identarian space.

Agency, then, is essentially an imagined space, as subjectivity is a negotiated position, whereby individual subjects move between these constructed positionings. Agency is a social/cultural construct, subjectivized by the very reality it creates and the power dynamics that define its validity and meanings. According to Balibar (2003, p.3), the subject, is fashioned by a "simultaneous operation of deconstruction and reconstruction of the subject, or deconstruction of the subject as arche (cause, principle, origin) and reconstruction of subjectivity as an effect, or in yet another formulation, a passage from constitutive to constituted subjectivity". Deleuze (1968, p. xv) thinks of identity as "a difference-in-itself". Derrida (1982, p.3) holds this further to describe it in terms of "différance" a constellated space between difference and identity.

Poststructuralists believe that subjectivation is important, and the focus is always on the subject and her positions within the general discourse. Agency for them is "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p.112) in which subjectivity is seen as "a dialectic of freedom and constraint" (McNay, 2000, p.2). As a result, our world is seen as a symbolic creation; a representation of our being wherein our words inexorably serve as the essential material through which each individual constructs their identity as a member of various communities, each in their own unique manner (Bakhtin, 1981, p.342). In this domain, language is a determining field for exercising agency as a representational discourse: "agency is imagined as the human capacity without which ethical life, understood as the capacity to do this or to do that, would be impossible" (Mazzarella, 2021, p.7). Thus, subjects are made subjects in the symbolic world of created reality in relation to the positional discourse that shape and is shaped by them. According to Ricoeur (1979, p. 98), "The text speaks of a possible world and of a possible way of orienting within it. The dimensions of this world are properly opened up by, disclosed by, the text. ... that which we

appropriate, is not a foreign experience, but the power of disclosing a world which constitutes the reference of the text.

Agency in poststructuralist thought involves three aspectual definitions or strands: 1) the discursive formation of an individual as present and able to speak; 2) their capacity to author their own meanings and desires, shaped by their adoption of collective discursive practices; and 3) a sense of self as capable of exceeding existing meanings by blending discourses, creating new words and concepts, or envisioning possibilities beyond the current reality (Davies, 2000, p.67).

The concept of feminist agency is equated with "choice feminism", a term coined by Hirshman (2006). According to Van Eerdewijk et al., female agency refers to "women and girls gaining solidarity and taking action collectively on their interests, to enhance their position and expand the realm of what is possible" (2017, p.25). Meyers (1989) maintains that female agency is realized through two aspectual dimensions, self-definition, which refers to the individual's conception of his goals, personality attributes and values, and self-direction whereby these goals, attitudes and values are identified in daily performances.

Building upon Foucault's theory of power dynamics, Butler (1990, 2010) introduced a refined theory of women's agency, arguing that individuals are inherently represented, and their bodies are continuously sexed, gendered, or racialized to fit socially and culturally the subject positions. Furthermore, the emergence of postcolonial feminism opens new vista of rethinking the concept of feminist agency. According to Abu-Lughod (1990), within the "romance of resistance", women are tended to depicted as active agents of power dynamics, rather than just victims of this power.

The present paper follows a poststructuralist feminist approach that looks to woman's agency as a theme and instrument in Lessing's selected fiction so as to redefine, restructure and articulate women's subjectivity within the subjectivized human space. This is consistent with Waugh's (1984, p.131) argument that "in order to function effectively, as 'selves', we need to discover our histories ... a sense of agency ... and to be able to reflect self-consciously upon what we take ourselves to be."

### **Female Agency in *The Golden Notebook***

Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* is an exploration of feminist agency and how women assert their independence, challenge societal constraints, and seek authentic self-expression. The female voice is heard in various forms and actions. Femininity is tested, negotiated, transformed and declared through a series of fragmented narratives and experiences. Lessing follows a clinical examination of female subjectivity and self-making and choice by testing women's actions and behaviors against several socio-cultural, psychological agential events. She examines her as a girl, a wife, a divorced woman as well as a friend and a partner. Also, women's agency is also explored in different settings, contexts and relationships—business, house, work, alone, with a partner, in poor and rich situations, in politics and creativity, under oppression and in authority. All of these instances and representational experiences underscores Lessing's third-way feminist approach that contrapuntally conciliates and consolidates her view of womanhood, sexuality and feminism as an agential intersection of biological, social, cultural, political, and psychological determinants. Like Butler (1990; 193), Lessing portrays femininity as a performative act and a site where women can actively exercise power and subvert rigid social expectations. What we have in Lessing's fiction is

a "different women's voice" of "cooperativeness, nurturance, an awareness of self-in-relationship" as a socio-cultural norm (Waugh, 1984, p.13).

Lessing's metafictional experiment with different forms in the novel corresponds to the ambivalent representation of the falling apart of the traditional conceptualization of gender and genre, wherein the subject is no longer an isolated entity of essentialist demarcation, but an interplay between the real and the ideal, the subjective and the objective, the individual and the collective, and the private and the public. As argued by Brecht (1977, p.82), "Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change". The shift in time—past-present-past, in narratological mode introspectively and retrospectively, and in narrative technique from linear to cyclical, and linear again, correspond to a decentralized narrative of human world shaped by and is shaping human interaction, continuous transformation, and an indeterminate interpersonal subject positionality.

*The Golden Notebook* is Lessing's response to radical feminist theory and patriarchal taxonomy of social order. The deconstructionist texture of the narrative rethinks the normative definition of women's agency as a given norm identified by the man/woman, central/marginal, colonized/colonial, and powerful/powerless binary divisions. Anna's quest for a free woman is experienced through her negotiated subjectification that showcases a flux continuum of identarian performance.

From a poststructuralist perspective, feminist agency in the novel is recognized symbolically and structurally. The agential power is created through the interplay between the aesthetic form of the narrative and the subjectivity of its creator, Anna Wulf. This synthesis construction of the interaction between genre and gender fuses the boundaries between factual truth and the fictional symbols, restructuring the concept of gender role, and repositions the self within a new constructed frame of reality. The multifaceted and fragmented stories serve as a trope for the glided self and floated subjectivity, destabilizing the conventionally essentialist narrative fossilization of the self and identity.

In this novel, Lessing interweaves her theory of womanhood, feminism and feminine. Her protagonist, the authorial voice, is searching for a unified woman identity for her "divided" self (p.47) through consolidating the various fragments shattered in her notebooks. The "Free women" caption retrospectively encapsulates this quest. Different colors represent different experiences and perspectives in the author's life.

The narrative structure is highly significant in establishing the modality of the narrative which is organized into five color-coded notebooks (Yellow, Blue, Red, Black, and the final Golden Notebook). They symbolically reflect different forms of female agency—resisting, subverting, conciliating, participating, and mosaic. Each notebook corresponds to a distinct voice or approach that women take in asserting their identities and navigating societal constraints. The four colors and four notebooks have four phenomenological corresponding seasons, while the five "Free women" sections carry trope of the five continents, encompassing the whole universe and humanity. The fifth notebook is a constructively consolidated season of a free woman whose life is neither traditional nor radical, but a positional position resulted from the negotiated self-efficacy with the world around her. The "Free Women" becomes the leading motif that carry out the referential paradigm of the narrative. Women should be free is what Lessing want to endorse in her novel. Women's agency runs through the lines of the narrative as amalgamated assembled self;

a constructed voice within a redrawn world subjectivity where "everything's cracking up" (p.4). This repositioning of the women as free reflects Lessing's theory of post-war, postcolonial female agency drawn from her experience as a political activist, feminist communist, and dedicated novelist. She stresses that morality is never relative, and identity is cultural construct rather than a normative value, already assigned and defined by the society.

Voice, understood both literally and metaphorically, functions as a locus of agency: to speak, write, and create is to reclaim authorship over one's narrative. This paper attempts to redefine the female agency, to examine performative ramification of embodied, relational, and positional subjectivity. The female agency is articulated in the novel through five positional voices or subjectivities: resisting voice, subverting voice, conciliating voice, participating voice, and mosaic voice.

### **Resisting Voice**

By resisting voice agency, we refer to the aspect involving active opposition to dominant norms or oppressive situations. It includes acts such as reclaiming a positional presence, voice articulation against silence, redrawing setting boundaries, and engaging in self-redefinition in defiance of societal expectations or control. It is a direct challenge to external attempts to silence or define a woman's identity.

The narratological structure of the novel functions as a thematic trope of agential female power dynamics. The Yellow Notebook features the character of Anna Wulf's early attempts to resist traditional female roles and societal expectations. The novel begins by narrating women's subjectivity as an independent agent, Anna and Molly are sitting alone. Normative women role is no longer accepted and "everything's cracking up." (p.4). This statement tells us of the decentering social code and power. Nothing is fixed and nothing is stable. Anna's behavior symbolically assures self-affirmation, freedom and resilience. Moreover, male characters appear secondary to plot construction which marginalizes their role as a leading patriarchal power. This reversible role adheres to the main argument of this paper that Lessing tries to redefine gender role and agency as a performative agent rather than a normative perspective.

What we have in this novel is a type of a narrativized self, a deconstructionist technique used by Lessing to reconstruct the idea of sexuality, womanhood and femininity. Anna narrates to us his multiple pieces of the self, a polyphonic identity that, through fragmentation and "crackings", she emerges as a unified whole after self-discovery. Anna's self symbolizes resistance through fragmentation. Her self is seen as an "oasis" and a "battleground" of conflicting voices (p. 417) and a form of liberation, which rejects conformity with the homogenized or oppressive self. Her writing itself becomes an act of resistance against the societal expectations that seek to silence individual subjectivity. Objecting that "The stories written for women's magazines are always psychologically correct," Ella proclaimed "But the point is, on what level are they correct?" insisting that "we should have to re-write it with no convents, no nuns, no religion" (p.227). Her insistence on not to be "a good girl" but "a real woman" (p.152), highlights a non-conformist female self-embodied agency that resists singularity.

By turning to writing, Anna symbolically wants to affirm her power and presence as a free self-sufficient and self-dependent agent. Writing acts as a form of resistance as well as an open space outside the monolithic sociocultural imposition. It becomes a deconstructive tool against the

essentialist ontological unitary identity of women as silent and marginalized. The women in the novel attempt to reconstruct their roles and subjectivity through questioning the existing views and relations, and articulate themselves and identity with breakthrough through breakdown. Hence, Anna's critical attitude of marriage and societal norms exemplifies a resistance voice and rejection of the imposed gendering roles.

Moreover, Molly and Anna are presented as unconventional women, who don't conform to the given social code. Their talking about domestic life as guardians of home and free actants with social responsibility. Anna finds herself in the position of dealing with reality as a breadwinner. She undertakes the role of the guardian of her society who has to secure provisions and wellbeing. She decries the life "contained by a man" (p.333) that controls her desire. Also, the notion of divorce emphasizes the idea of independence, singularity and manly aspects. Furthermore, the "extraordinary tumult of sensations" (p.193) in the second "Free Women" section, indicates a disruptive women's voice. Characters like Molly and Pearl challenge the socially prescribed role, seeking fulfillment outside traditional confines. Molly's activism and independence, for instance, represent a rejection of passive femininity, embodying a form of female agency rooted in social engagement and self-determination.

Femininity in the novel is contained in the plurality of voices and cyclicity of the narrative. Moving between the subject and object, Anna, Molly and Ella look for their self outside the socially framed truth. Their stories are but an echo of their repressed voice, a subconscious revolt against the constructed image of the feminine. This psychocultural dilemma is resolved through a symbolic rendering of narrative self as a multilayered metarepresentational quality. Beside disrupting the fact/fiction boundaries, the novel defies traditional setting and beginning/ending structure, signaling an all-embracing articulation of self and identarian agency.

### **Subverting Voice**

Subversion is another way of voicing self and affirming individual freedom against existing power structures. Through a successive series of writings and erasures, Anna subverts the societal expectations of the female. Nothing is final, fixed or certain. Identity is a matter of negotiation with the world and actions outside its frame. This "self" operates by questioning the underlying assumptions of power, often by working with, or re-interpreting, existing systems in a way that undermines them. Lessing plays on "the interplay between convention and subversion as the source of the novel's innovation" (Barnes, 2015, p.136).

Molly and Anna's sexual behavior is seen as a subversive sign of the patriarchal society that dictates gender roles, "try[ing] to have things both ways" and "refus[ing] to live by the book and the rule" (p.11). Their refusal of codes and order is a non-conformist voice that repositions women's agential power and decenters male's authority. Lessing's narrative strategy often involves subverting traditional notions of a coherent, unified self, and order. Through her fragmented characters, she questions the idea of a constructed, fossilized female subjectivity. Anna talks of herself not as a fixed entity, but a series of shifting fragments (p.305), highlighting her subversion of essentialist notions.

Anna's multiplicitous diaries serve as sites where the self is deconstructed and reconfigured, subverting the idea of a singular, unified identity. This aligns with poststructuralist perspectives that view identity as fluid and constructed rather than innate.

Expressing her subverting self, she declares herself as “a writer” with “no emotion” (p.249), to be “interested what I think” not as “a woman” to be looked at, admired, or appreciated. Likewise, Ella asserts her refusal to conform to passive female stereotypes, asserting her agency stressing that “we’ve chosen to be free women” (p.336)

Moreover, the sense of emotionally lesbian attachment between Molly and Anna in the novel develops a sort of subversive voice articulated as tendency for debunking heteronormative sexual standards. Also, Maryrose's assertion of autonomy is seen in her desire of sexual relation with a brother as a matter of personal choice: “I don't see the point... I don't see what was wrong with it” (p.80). Ella also “understands that this is what she would like to be herself, this imagined woman is her own shadow, everything she is not. Because by now she knows, and is frightened of, her utter dependence on Paul.” (p. 153)

### **Conciliating Voice**

This aspect of agency refers to the process of compromise, negotiation, or even apparent compliance as a survival strategy within restrictive environments. It involves identifying limitations and making choices within a constrained range. Anna's goes within a journey of self-discovery and self-making. She looks for her identity and power through the mirror of experience and self-reflection. Each experience is coalesced with a reflective image through writing as a self-reflexive shadow of the consciousness. If her experience of divorced is viewed as a refusal signal of the existing reality and the Blue Book as a symbolic image of her subversive endeavor, the Red Notebook reflects on Anna's interactional conciliatory experience with the within and without world. Her attempts at reconciliation—both emotionally and internally—reveals an acceptance voice of reality. This is reified and exemplified in her interactions with women and men. This aspect of agential power celebrates inclusion against exclusion, and seeks harmony and acceptance, rather than entirely abandoning individuality.

Anna's conciliating voice might be seen in her efforts to balance her personal desires and aspirations with her sense of responsibility to her friends and her writing. For example, her decision to maintain a relationship with Molly while also pursuing her own goals could be seen as a form of conciliating voice. Although she expresses her dissatisfaction with the social expectations of women, Anna keeps a balance relationship as a friend with Molly, as a wife with her husband, a partner with her lovers Saul Green/Michael/Tanner, and as a mother, with her daughter, Jane.

Anna comes to realize that being a divorced woman is more confining and more problematic as she feels vulnerable to emotional seclusion and sexual abuse. To solve this dilemma, she resorts to writing as a reconciliatory domain for her disruptive self. The Golden Notebook symbolizes a meeting point and a healing space that relieves her traumatic experiences, reconciling her fragmentariness, incompleteness, disinterest, self-hatred, and corporeal abjection. She eventually recognizes that “I am many selves, and I must learn to live with them” ( p. 418). This suggests a move away from fragmentation towards a more integrated, albeit complex, sense of self. Such reconciliation is crucial for personal growth and authenticity, as Lessing depicts it as a necessary step in the process of self-acceptance.

Through her self-discovering journey, Anna finds that neither man nor woman can exist separate from the other. To settle on this, she exerts efforts to negotiate her inner conflicts and her relationships demonstrate this. She searches for the truth outside social reality, to navigates its

centrality: "it's dishonest. We've chosen to live a certain way, knowing the penalties, or if we didn't we know now, so why whine and complain... and besides, if I'm not careful, Molly and I will descend into a kind of twin old-maidhood" (p. 41). Finally, she discovers herself transformed into another. A conciliating voice is heard saying: "My big room, like the kitchen, had become, not the comfortable shell which held me, but an insistent attack on my attention from a hundred different points, as if a hundred enemies were waiting for my attention to be deflected so that they might creep up behind me and attack me" (p.454).

### **Participating Voice**

Participating self involves engaging with existing systems and institutions to effect change from within. This entails an active, engaged stance within one's socializing process. Instead of being a passive victim of isolation, the "participating self" consciously opts for engaging in social experience as a supportive voice actively counters the segregating voices.

Throughout the novel, women try to articulate themselves in social events, conversations, work, political thinking, business making, education and writing. This highlights the agency of women's participatory presence, power, and leadership in decision-making, reframing social norms, and shaping collective action.

The Black Notebook signifies a form of agency rooted in female collective action and solidarity. It explores the characters' engagement with political activism and collective struggles, representing participation in societal change. Women characters are portrayed in the novel as active social interlocutors, but also a political and business active agents. On a personal level, "The man's desire creates a woman's desire" (p.335). Politically, Anna's involvement in political activism and her reflections on her participation in the Communist Party exemplify woman's participatory voice and self. Communist and socialist tenets represent sexless participation that contributes to the collective voice of change.

Anna's participation in the intellectual and artistic circles, signifying authorial autobiographical experiences of Lessing's in London and colonial Africa, could be seen as forms of participating voice. Anna resonates the authorial voice, working as a writer and involving in intellectual debates, emphasizing the importance of the active, participatory self-making and undertaking. Lessing's sociopolitical advocacy entails that the self is incomplete without engagement in the world (p. 273), positioning participatory action as vital for authentic selfhood.

### **Converging Voice**

"People like Anna or Molly and that lot, they're not just one thing, but several things. And you know they could change and be something different" (p.31). This statement encapsulates the poststructuralist reading of the female agency in the novel. We are not before a singular voice of a single self, but an ambivalent discursive self. The concept of the self in this context is mosaic and convergent, composed of diverse, sometimes conflicting pieces that form a complex whole because "they haven't set into a mould" (p.31). This celebratory voice absorbs a multiplicity of polyphonic self that accommodates alterity and austerity. Lessing succeeds in problematizing the female agency as a narrative self or a meta-voice that defies identification and fixed meaning, describing human identity as amalgamated being of many different "pieces" or dimensions, such as experiences, roles, and characteristics.

The idea of self is socially relational and personally embodied. Throughout the novel, Anna attempts to understand herself in relation with the world around her. Finally, she collects her fragmented parts of the self into a whole Golden Notebook as a converging voice that integrates her various experiences and identities into a cohesive narrative. Her blending of fiction and nonfiction in the black notebook could be seen as a form of combining different elements of her life together to form a new meaning of the self: expression and resistance, subversion, conciliation, participation, and convergence. She affirms this integrated voice in her statement: “humanism stands for the whole person, the whole individual, striving to become as conscious and responsible as possible about everything in the universe” (p.263).

Moreover, Anna’s golden notebook incorporates her restructured identity, and a mosaic portrait of her subjunctivized self, showcasing a poststructuralist image of multiplicity, diversity, and acceptance of contradictions inherent to human identity. Both at symbolic and identarian levels, Lessing underscores the idea of fragmentation through the protagonist's fragmented self and the fragmented structure of the novel. It is through this technique that Anna and Lessing achieve the wholeness of identity.

The novel’s protagonist, Anna Wulf, typifies the quest for female agency through her multifaceted role as a writer, mother, lover, and political participant. Her fragmented notebooks—feminist, political, artistic—reflect her attempt to work out her identity beyond traditional gender roles. Lessing illustrates Anna's effort to reclaim her voice amidst societal pressures, emphasizing her desire to forge an autonomous self. Anna’s decision to write her own story signifies her assertion of agency: "I keep trying to write the truth and realising it's not true" (p.200).

Furthermore, this mosaic voice is symbolically represented through the synthetic texture and structure of the novel. Different perspectives and settings are eventually commuted into a new, cohesive and mosaic performative view. Anna’s process of fictionalizing her experiences in her notebooks finally creates a unified narrative design and thought: "all her attention focused on selected fragments of print" (p.465). All these fragments—her life, writing, politics—must come together into one story. In poststructuralist terms, nothing is certain. She "felt a new sensation, like a hallucination, a new and hitherto not understood picture of the world." (p. 466).

The last lines of the novel constitute the poststructuralist deconstructionist view of women's agency as a synthesis of conflicting multivalent voices underlying a unified female voice: "There's nothing like knowing the exact dimensions of the bed you're going to fit yourself into" (p. 479). The novel begins with "The two women were alone in the flat" and closes with them "kissing and separated" in recognition of the "Free Women" motif that dominates the scene.

From another poststructuralist plane, the relational aspect of voicing in the novel emphasizes the importance of sharing truth within secured and supportive spaces. The women character's search for authentic articulation of their experience assert their own agency and redefine the constructed images and lines drawn by the socio-cultural order. This signifies a collective act of reclaiming which deconstructs women's marginality beyond individual exigencies (McNay, 2013). The orderless order of narratological representation epitomizes a poststructuralist play of agential power and dynamicity of identarian agency. As argued by Hite (1989, p.17), although Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* talks “about coherence”, it is realistically incoherent, thus celebrating a sort of unity through narratological disunion.

Anna search for truth outside the world of social order, in the symbolic order of meaning where "Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want" (p.455). Her struggle to claim agency is juxtaposed with societal failings that represent cultural norms inhibiting women's freedom. Throughout the novel, women attempt to voice themselves by encountering social expectations. Anna's resort to writing becomes a symbolic act of resisting, subverting as well as counter-narrating the societal fossilization of women's normative marginality. The repetitive captioning of sections and varying framing of story (yellow, blue, red, black, and golden notebooks, along with "Free Woman" sectioning) indicates the importance of writing the female voice as a link between the personal and the collective. Anna's golden notebook represents the synthetic self and voice that emerges from her correlated and negotiated relationships and experiences. It also demonstrates the play of female agency wherein signifier (Anna's experiences and relationships) signifies a perceptual truth of the signified (female agential power and presence).

### Conclusion

The study reveals that the female agency is articulated in the novel through five positional voices or subjectivities: resistance, subversion, conciliation, participation, and integration. The five notebooks mirror the evolution of female agency from resistance and subversion to participation and integration. Through self-questing and self-centering, the protagonist, Anna Wulf, rediscovers her self, and redefines the concept of female agency as a power induced from within not from without. This power is performance not provision; it lies in the woman's self-empowering, free self that is able to choose to act the role she chooses, rather than the anticipated societal role. The fragmented narratives correspond to the fragmented self of the protagonist. Torn between self-expected role and image and social imposed role and image, Anna goes into a series of manic episodes, represented in repetitive acts of abortive beginnings of writings that are eventually erased. Lessing uses uncertainty, fragmentation, and polyphony to deconstruct the dominant structural view of singularity that hegemonizes women. The novel reveals that female agency is not a unified construct, but a plethora of interactional acts and choices. Anna, the novel's protagonist, exemplifies the quest for female agency through her multifaceted role as a writer, mother, lover, and political participant. Her fragmented notebooks—feminist, political, artistic—reflect her attempt to piece together her identity beyond traditional gender roles. Anna's compartmentalized self is contrasted with the captioned stories of "Free Woman", which absolutely debunks the very truth of reality and subverts its reality as illusionary system. Furthermore, Anna's decision to write her own story signifies her assertion of agency as a multifaceted form of truth and reality. Self is a construct that changes with the context its shapes and creates. Self is also relational, created through negotiation with the world around it. Anna's relationships with men, such as her affair with Saul and her complex feelings for her lover, portray the tension between personal independence and emotional dependency. Anna's golden notebook synthesizes her self and experience into a composite whole, acting as a hybrid conclusion to Anna's fragmented identity, persona and the narrative of the story. This blurs the line between facts and fiction, creating a sense of acceptance without a defined and determined interpretation. In this novel, Lessing in fact shows us the power of words in a world of a wordless statement.

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