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NARRATIVE OF SELF: A CRITICAL READING OF DORIS LESSING'S NOVEL
THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK

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ABSTRACT

The Paper, describes that how the inadequacy of language can function as a translucent medium to register the discursive self narration and render true self knowledge, the enigma concerning writing the self continues. In this paper I study the famous character in Doris Lessing's Anna Wulf who attempts to make sense of the world through the process of permutation and combination of words: "Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want" (1962:549). The conflicting nature of language and power whether in limiting or expanding self representation cannot be avoided Hence it is the linguistic struggle that underwrites the representation of the narrative self.

The paper also tells us that the complicity of power in writing is evident from the fact that writing and power always work conjointly despite their complex laws and system Hence, writing the self endows the subject with power through which it can attain the mastery of its own. In addition, writing the self has a teleological purpose in that it serves the self through writing In other words, it is the care of the self that propels one to inscribe the self in writing Such a practice is discerned in The Golden Notebook.

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INTRODUCTION TO LESSING

The Nobel laureate Doris Lessing, an African-British writer of the post-war generation, engages in the discourse of the self in her writing and its ontological possibilities. Her concerns with authorship and authority become crucial as she has to negotiate with her diverse cultural experiences. Born in Persia (Iran) on October 22, 1919 to Captain Alfred Tayler and Emily Maude Tayler, Lessing spent her early years in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where she was involved in the Communist party and black politics. Her association with Southern Rhodesia and London is characterized by ambivalence. Lessing's oeuvre incorporates such diverse genres as novels, short stories, poetry, drama, autobiography and other non-fictional writings. In her fictional works, Lessing has worked on diverse themes and employed a wide array of narrative techniques and styles ranging from realism of her early works to the surrealism of some of her works dealing with madness to the speculative science fiction of her late literary career. She focuses on a vast range of 20th century issues and concerns, from colonialism and politics of race that she explicates in her early works set in Africa to the politics

of gender to the role of individual and society explored in her science fiction. Influenced by the ideas of Carl Jung, Idries Shah, R D Laing and Karl Marx, Lessing synthesizes their diverse ideas into a cohesive vision.

She incorporates in her works Marxist ideology that envisions a just society, the Jungian process of individuation that liberates the self from the social encumbrances bringing it into contact with the collective unconscious and Sufism that unites the being with the Supreme soul. She is equally critical of patriarchy as well as feminism. These diverse themes come together in her writing with the stated objective of seeking the writing self's liberation.

The Golden Notebook is the longest and the most ambitious work Doris Lessing has ever attempted to write. It is a masterpiece in portraiture of the manners, aspirations, anxieties and the particular problems of the times in which we live. Mrs. Lessing says: 'About five years ago I found myself thinking about that novel which most writers now are tempted to write at some time or another - about the problems of a writer, about the artistic sensibility. I saw no point in writing this again: it has been done too often; it has been one of the major themes of the novel in our time. Yet, having decided not to write it, I continued to think about it, and about the reasons why artists now have to combat various kinds of narcissism. I found that, if it were to be written at all, the subject should be, not a practicing artist, but an artist with some kind of a block which prevented him or her from creating. In describing the reasons for the block, I would also be making the criticisms I wanted to make about our society. I would be describing a disgust and self-division which afflicts people now, and not only artists.

'Simultaneously I was working out another book, a book of literary criticism, which I would write not as critic, but as practicing writer, using various literary styles in such a way that the shape of the book and the juxtaposition of the styles would provide the criticism. Since I hold that criticism of literature is a criticism and judgment of life, this book would say what I wanted of life; it would make implicitly, a statement about what Marxists call alienation.

'Thinking about these two books I understood suddenly they were not two books but one; they were fusing together in my mind. I understood that the shape of this book should be enclosed and claustrophobic - so narcissistic that the subject matter must break through the form.

'This novel, then, is an attempt to break a form; to break certain forms of consciousness and go beyond them. While writing it, I found I did not believe some of the things I thought I believed: or rather, that I hold in my mind at the same time beliefs and ideas that are apparently contradictory. Why not? We are, after all, living in the middle of a whirlwind.'

Narrative of Self

The narrative self in its creative journey is altered by the contradictory pulls of life. In his work *women and Narrative* (1998), James Olney observes that in contrast to the sixteenth century when the focus was on 'bios' or the course of life time, in the present era the importance is on 'autos', i.e. the self in writing and the self being written. Among the autobiographical genres like confession, memoir, diary and others, Olney prefers the term 'periautobiography' - a term used by Count Gian Artico di Porcia that suggests writing about or around the self. In his seminal work *Metaphors of the Self* (1972), Olney examines this intriguing subject and rejects the concept of a unique self in writing. He emphasizes "the isolated uniqueness that nearly everyone agrees to be the primary quality and condition of the individual and his experience" (1972:20"21). What Olney hints at the pluralistic dimension of the self and the segmented nature of reality incorporated into it. The modernist engagement with a moment of heightened consciousness, a perception of reality which Woolf called a moment of being' is interrogated in the postmodern rendition of reality as constructed in nature. In "A Sketch of the Past", Woolf captures the moments of being' when one is conscious of reality along with an attempt to incorporate the moments of non-being' in which the soon forgotten mundane every day events surface in mind. Hence writing the self involves both these moments when the self gets fragmented, cracks appear and unconscious memory floods in. As Virginia Woolf comments in *Moments of Being* (1978): "We are sealed vessels afloat on what it is convenient to call reality; and at some moments, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality" (1978:142). Woolf's statement invariably points to the theme of rootedness in reality but it nevertheless goes beyond to structure the different shades of reality. The self, for Woolf, can be better known

through its fragmentation rather than its unity, has resonances in Lessing's experimentation with the self even though the latter eschews conventional realism in her narrative.

The discussion on the self and the question of narrative authority become crucial in a problematic cultural zone that has withstood the variegated socio-political upheavals like settler colonialism, racism, gender crisis and other forces operative in Southern Africa. The authorial self gives a vantage point to examine how identity as well as agency is constructed in European and Euro-African texts written by white African woman writers. Included in *The Essential Gesture* (1989), Nadine Gordimer's well-known essay raises the question "Where Do Whites Fit In?" (1959) and her question is directed towards the Euro-African authors who support or subvert the imperial claim to the continent or manifest an uneasy ambivalence complicit in the project of colonialism. Lessing articulates the difficulties of writing as a white person belonging to Africa. Claiming an African identity, Lessing, even though her experiences are personal, underlines the conflicting nature of articulating a story.

The Construction of A Narrative Identity In A Postcolonial Set Up

To Lessing, in a specific Rhodesian setting, narratives get continuously disrupted by a wide range of historical and political factors that engulf the land. Like Gordimer, who has experienced the apartheid; Lessing too, is a witness to the political turmoil of segregated Rhodesia. The picture of Africa that emerges in the writings of both Gordimer and Lessing is a corrective to the earlier texts that celebrated the 'exotic' landscape of the continent but grossly demeaned the people of the land. The construction of a narrative identity in a postcolonial set up is challenged and challenges plural antecedents and practices of race related mythologies in that questions such as who speaks for whom become problematic. The white African writers always carry the burden of what J.M. Coetzee calls complicit colonialism. Their voices of representation are always held suspect not only on the count of race even on nationalism. The writer is always on the horns of dilemma regarding his/her writing position hence attempts to establish the individual narrative self which is not constrained by the collective. In her writing, Lessing endeavors to establish an independent speaking /writing self that is not subject to the mandates of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. In *Going Home* (1957), Lessing voices the difficulties of writing about Africa:

I have notebooks full of stories, plots, anecdotes which at one time or another I was impelled to write. But the impulse dies with a yawn. Even I wrote them well... what then? It is always the colour bar, one cannot write truthfully about Africa without describing it... (1957:25)

Writing about or around the self is a complex issue that Lessing currently engages with in her fictional and non-fictional works. It veers around her early fictional works like *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), the novel sequence in *Children of Violence* (1952-69), *The Golden Notebook* (1962), and late works like *Canopus in Argos' Archives* series (1983-90), *Love, Again* (1996), and other non-fictional works including her autobiography.

Realized Notion of The Self In Writing

Claire Sprague (1990) traces Lessing's depiction of a fractured and fragmented self in *The Golden Notebook*, a layered self in *The Four Gated City*, and a less central view of the self in the *Canopus* series. In *Martha Quest* Lessing develops the notion of the dialogic self through the portrayal of Martha that is transpersonal. In all her works, her concern is to explore the possibility of revealing the fully realized notion of the self in writing. Writing that enables one to evolve into being is clearly reflected in *The Golden Notebook* - a work that examines the location of a writer in the post war situation and the crisis of writing in Britain in the 1950s and the 1960s. Located in the interstices of modernism and postmodernism the text addresses the contentious issues of author and authority and delineates the shifting conception of the author through the character of Anna Wulf. The theme of mental breakdown which Lessing claims as central to the novel is built around a series of notebooks written by Anna. Anna's notebooks are a means of writing the self attempting to overcome her self-disintegration. She keeps four coloured notebooks - black, red, yellow, and blue-simultaneously and divides herself into four parts ascribing each notebook a distinct theme. *The Golden Notebook* with its unique formal and structural complexity incorporates five sections: each section is introduced by an episode entitled "Free Women" which finally makes up the short conventional novel *Free*

Women. Each section of *Free Women* is further followed by episodes from each of four differently coloured notebooks. Finally, there is 'The Golden Notebook', a penultimate section of the whole *Go/den Notebook*. The various coloured notebooks include a diary, the partial and disrupted manuscript of a novel, a historical and 'factual' record of events related to the Communist Party in London in the 1950s and the manuscript of the biographical details of the central character Anna's life in Rhodesia. These diverse thematic of the novel further involve questions of truth, fact, point of view, realism, objectivity etc., thereby making Lessing's project as a writer problematic.

The narrative centralizes the self and ascribes it an identity that rests on narrative configuration. The narrative identity incorporates numerous changes and mutations since the narrative of the self continues to be reconfigured by all truthful or fictive stories that a subject tells about him/her self. The narrative self is multiple-authored in that it has the propensity to be shaped by others as "we are more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives" (Mac In tyro 1985:213). Hence the shadowing of one narrative identity over another or the effacement of the narrative self takes place.

The Problematic Of The Narrative Self

The problematic of the narrative self assumes significance in *The Golden Notebook*. For Anna, writing is a supplement to life as she textualizes her experiences in her notebooks, thereby blurring the boundary between fiction and life. Anna's notebooks remind us of Woolf's fictive autobiography *Orlando* (1978) where she refuses to differentiate between life and writing. As Jenny Taylor in her introduction to *Notebooks/Memoirs/Archives* (1982) observes: Anna Wulf, produces alternative selves through writing - yet finally loses individual female selfhood through the breakdown of individual subjectivity, and the acceptance of mythic archetypes. Yet Anna Wulf, the woman writer with money and a room of her own, is still subjected to her own subjectivity and to the forces of literary production - she cannot write (1982:9).

The notebooks composed by Anna Wulf make up the bulk of the text but along with the notebooks there is also an objective account of Anna's 'real' story that takes place in the 'Free Women' section. As the narrative progresses, it becomes apparent that Anna also contributes to the making of *Free Women*, which is not Anna's real story but rather a fiction, her second novel. The narrative, moving back and forth, examines how Anna operates as a 'real' writer and creates many Annas within the text. It differentiates 'real' Anna from a fictionalized character Anna. The narrative identity in the text blurs the authorial distinctions as Molly, Anna, Saul and Doris merge into each other, so that the self-other binary collapses in the fiction.

The 'Free Women' sections in the novel implicitly evoke the notion of freedom but freedom here does not lead to any kind of transcendence; rather it signifies a 'chaos or cracking up' that accompanies the breakdown of social convention and disintegration of the individual. As in the opening paragraphs of the novel Anna says to Molly, "the point is, that as far as I can see, everything is cracking up" (1962:25). Anna seems to understand her world and her experience of the world as fragmenting and fragmented, where 'unity' remains an elusive fiction. Any work of art including the novel captures the fragmentation as Anna maintains, "the novel has become a function of the fragmented society, the fragmented consciousness" (1962:75).

Anna's notion of the fragmented self confirms the post-structuralist notion of subjectivity positing "a treeless dispersed subject who is literally a composite of various socially and culturally constructed roles or positions - not perspectives - that cannot be reconciled" (Michael 1994: 40). Hence the narrative self veering around different subject positions can attain freedom without being constrained by any dominant ideology. In the preface to *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing concedes how an 'author' writing without being subjective could earn a greater sense of freedom.

In the course of the analysis of *The Golden Notebook* we will explore how freedom for the writing subject emerges through the intermittent effacement of the self. In the section I of *Free Women* the narrator reiterates the effacement of Anna both within and outside the narrative. Anna, the writer "deliberately effaced herself and played to the dramatic Molly" (1962:30), when the two would go out together. There are other occasions when Anna or her alter ego Ella is being effaced in the narrative. Throughout her notebooks and the 'Free Women' sections she appears faceless on the page. She undergoes defacement, to use de Man's term in that she obliterates her subjectivity. Roberta Rubenstein points out to the "dialectic between Anna's

projections and self-cancellations" which is formerly expressed through the self-canceling fictions that comprise the layering of the narrative" (1979:102-103).

With each notebook replacing another, the self undergoes erasure and selects an alternative. In *Double talk and Doubles Talk* in *The Golden Notebook*' (1982), Claire Sprague argues that through layers of effacement present in the text *Free Women* works as a "highly laundered version of the notebooks" (1982:182). It effaces the writer Anna and links Anna's effacement with that of Doris Lessing in the narrative. With each notebook that interconnects to and replaces another, the narrative self undergoes erasure and selects alternative representation. As Anna begins to record her literary experience in the Black Notebook, she confronts textual resistance, "I am incapable of writing the only kind of novel which interests me: a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life. It is because I am too diffused" (1962:76). Being a narrator of the Mashopi memoir (Black Notebook I) that results in *Frontiers of War*, Anna despairs not fulfilling her artistic role, for falling into the wrong tone. The tone pervades the Black Notebook and she rejects the Black Notebook on the ground that all her ideals have been distorted by wrongheaded earnestness or sterile irony. Her narrative fails to give an objective account of truth and as a result she fills the Black Notebook 4 with newspaper cuttings referring to violence and death in Africa. With the Black Notebook failing to give a coherent view of life, she chooses the Red Notebook to express her political disillusionment with the Communist party. She realizes that political jargons and pronouncements have no value, as she says: "Words lose their meaning suddenly. I find myself listening to a sentence, a phrase, a group of words, as if they are in a foreign language - the gap between what they are supposed to mean, and what in fact they say seems unbridgeable" (1962:272). The last section of the Red Notebook is devoted to a 'true' version of the story Anna had read five years earlier. The Communist faith is subverted at the end; Anna closes the notebook rather than confront the feelings of loss that engulf her. With the Black and Red Notebooks falling into disarray, Anna moves towards the Yellow Notebook devoting it to her fictional work *The Shadow of the Third*. In this notebook, Anna traces the illusion of her love through the projection of Ella, her alter ego and Paul Tanner, a fictional version of Anna's lover Michael.

By employing a different narrative self (through Ella), Anna recognizes herself delusion and breaks off the narrative. She represents her romantic idealizing self through Ella and her conscious self through Paul. Through her fictional surrogate Paul Anna is able to realize the positive force of her emotion she earlier condemned. The gap between ideals and reality frustrates her and it is reflected in her Yellow Notebook - "If I've gone back to pastiche, then it's time to stop" (1962:475). She renounces fiction writing as it fails to live up to her ideal of art. In contrast, the Blue Notebook proposes to be a diary with the aim of recording every minute detail of her everyday life. She recoils from fiction making as it evades truth and organizes her notebook as a compendium of her daily events and happenings. She chooses the diary notebook to exorcise her idealizing self and resolves to "write down as truthfully as I can every stage of a day" (1962:283). She relies on reportorial accuracy rather than on her imaginative ability and in doing so she opposes her own romantic notion about art and those of her analyst Mother Sugar who advocates emotion, intuition, imagination, dreams and fiction. Anna cannot reconcile Mother Sugar's view of the true artist and a real woman with her own views on art and life. The "artist", according to Mother Sugar, "has a sacred trust" (1962:216). The Blue Notebook which she discovers worse than the other notebooks is eventually replaced by the Golden Notebook, in which she records the final breakdown of herself. Throughout the narrative, Anna is in search of a writing that can capture her own self. Each notebook eludes truth what it claims to unravel. The provisional nature of writing in the notebooks allows Anna's subjectivity to be in process', to use Julia Kristeva's term, a subject which is not fixed but constructed improvised and negotiated through reading and writing and therefore it is "constantly called into question" (1984:129). At the beginning of the Blue Notebook Anna realizes that her writing undergoes displacement, and like Derrida's scene of writing' her writing meets resistance to be transformed into signified systems.

I came upstairs from the scene between Tommy and Molly and instantly began to turn it into a story. It struck me that my doing this - turning everything into fiction- must be an evasion.. Why do I never write down, simply, what happens...? Obviously my changing everything into fiction is simply a ~means of concealing

something from ~myself (1962:325).

Thus the *transition* in the narrative whether at the thematic or structural level leads us to consider the provisionality of the narrative as well as the truths of life. It delineates how provisionality gives a false impression of life and when decoded unravels the unbearable aspects of life and at the bottom of which lies the fragmentation of the self leading to the failure of anesthetization of the narrative. The *narrative transition* in the text also indicates a closure since one notebook is exclusive of the themes explored in the other notebooks. However, one narrative closure creates another narrative opening and a new narrative identity of the self. Hence the effacement of the narrative self and closure of the narrative are closely connected

The Crises of the Narrative Self

The crises of the narrative self occur not because of the inability to narrate the story of the self but the question of self narration is also bound by certain obligation and responsibility. Paul Ricoeur (1990) adds an ethical dimension to the narrative self which persistently keeps one true to oneself. It is, as Ricoeur believes, to assume responsibility for one's past actions and for the future consequences of those actions, no matter how much the self-narrative might change. The crises of the narrative self are accompanied by the dispersion of language and fragmented narrative form. The juxtaposed sections from the notebooks interpolated with sections from *Free Women* and the multiplicity of the narrative self create a rambling narrative. Writing is conflated with Anna Wulf's existence; indeed her existence is predicated to the fact that she is writing. With words losing their meaning and the narrative getting fragmented, Anna pronounces many times in the novel that she would write no more - "I shall never write another" (1962:214) but eventually falls prey to her narrative compulsion. In this context, it is pertinent to mention Richardson's *Pamela* where Pamela, the protagonist "always scribbles" (1980:54) to tell her story and the moment she stops her writing she ceases to exist.

Literally, writing is Pamela's sole existence: there is no Pamela without her words and writing guarantees her safety. She has to keep her letters in her petticoats, away from the prying eyes of Mr. B, hence the body of the text and the body of its 'author', come closer, both literally and symbolically. Writing's connection with the body can be discerned in *The Golden Notebook* as Anna uses her notebooks to inscribe her body. The theorists of *écriture féminine* insist on the textual practice of writing the female body that subverts the coherence of language as a signifying system and assigns it with "a notion of feminine as subversion, a transgressive force linked with the realm of the mother's body that continually threatens to disrupt the single fixed meanings of an authoritative and repressive phallogocentric discourse" (Felski 1989:23). Anna does write her body in the Blue Notebook, recording her physical symptoms of illness, her experiments with sex and pleasure, and even the details of her menstruation. Such a practice may lead the feminist critics to locate her in the domain of *écriture féminine*.

But the paradox is that Anna writes her body "without a body, dumb, blind" and articulates the impossible and becomes noticeable in Anna's case is the constant installation and erasure of her self. As she mentions: "I am always having, as it were, to cancel myself out" (1962:283).

Self effacement recurs throughout *The Golden Notebook*, and it becomes apparent that the Annas of the text engage in repeated self cancellation through writing. The question remains: why does the narrative engage in repeated self cancellation when the purpose is to inscribe the self? Aporetic the proposition seems, but the contradiction resolves as we begin to consider the empowering effect of self erasure. These self cancellations within the narrative allow freedom for the writing subject. Patrocino Schweickart, the reader response critic gives less emphasis on Lessing's narratorial strategy; rather she considers her effort in *The Golden Notebook* as an intimate communion. Schweickart further notes:

Lessing pins her hope on the reader. If we consent to read as carefully as she has written, we could at least for the moment, release the literary enterprise from its bondage within language of commodity and domination and, in the space of this moment, recall what it means to talk as individual to other individuals in a small personal voice' (1985:279).

Similarly, we can say that Anna releases the author from her multivocal texts and envisions a Foucauldian approach to the writer who writes in order to have no face' Foucault continues with his admonition: " Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write" (1972:17).

Conclusion

In her fictional works, Doris Lessing explores among other issues the limits of representing the multivocal, heterogeneous narrative self questioning the authority of the author, on the one hand, and on the other, questioning the structure of fictional narrative. In both cases any measure of 'unity' or coherence is not possible except holding the fragments or diverse elements together only through the effect of signifiers (language/rhetoric). She comes closer to Salman Rushdie's understanding that there are no guards at the frontier of fiction.' In crossing all types of boundaries or frontiers fiction creates immense possibility of meaning in capturing the drama of human life.

Thus fiction's 'being' is signified in its becoming as it transgresses genres, norms and challenges the limits of language. At the centre of any narrative is language through which self actualization occurs and narrative subjectivities are constructed. Martin Heidegger claims that 'being' and the dynamics of language are entrenched as co-constituents and it is language that brings human being and the world into existence. In his essay "Language" (1950), Heidegger celebrates the view that it is " language that speaks" (2001:1123). The narrative self, as it appears in writing, always fluctuates between the narrative time and space. It is contingent, plural and centrifugal; hence language becomes an opaque medium to capture the reality. The narrative self is always in pursuit of its representation in the presence and identity of its own self. But language faces a crisis in representing the essence of the narrative self. Richard Shepherd alludes this to the crisis of language' and he contends that " the modernist crisis of language is located not in the impotence of the creative individual or a literary style within a language which is living and potential, but in the 'de-potentialisation' of an entire language as such" (1976:329). What Shepherd obliquely refers is the centrifugal tendencies in language that limit the feasibility of inscribing the protean and fluid self.

Wittgenstein invokes that the mutation of the self in language " is grammatical- it punctuates. Thus it cannot be named because every attempt to do that would presume it. It can be shown, and as art, it represents the limits of the world (culture, history) as a manifestation of it" (cited in Guercio, 1991:247). The punctuation occurs as each version of the self amends its own narrative, even subverting the prior narrative logic.

The self that writes is also a participant in the reading process. Reading the notebook entries gives Anna a sense of herself that gets dissolved into chaos. She cannot communicate even to herself as she finds truth constantly eluding her knowledge: " But now, writing it, and reading what I've written, there is nothing there, just words on the paper....I cannot read it back, the knowledge of destruction as a force...the knowledge isn't in the words I write down now" (1962:514). It is word or obliquely the language that initiates the fissure between the self and the knowledge of truth.

However, despite the inadequacy of language to function as a translucent medium to register the discursive self narration and render true self knowledge, the enigma concerning writing the self continues. Anna Wulf attempts to make sense of the world through the process of permutation and combination of words: " Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want" (1962:549). The conflicting nature of language and power whether in limiting or expanding self representation cannot be avoided. Hence it is the linguistic struggle that underwrites the representation of the narrative self. As Seyla Benhabib (1992)

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