

Analysis of the “Free Woman” – Anna’s Image in The Golden Notebook from the Perspective of Feminism

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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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1. Introduction

1.1. Background Information

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.

1.2. Literature review

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, 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.

1.3. Theoretical framework

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" 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

deconstructionism, post-structuralism, Marxism, and feminism, mainly in her book “The Other World” (1987) and “Post-Colonial Critics” (1990) ^[6,7]. Spivak is good at using feminist theory to analyze the situation of power discourse divestiture suffered by women, using deconstructionist power discourse theory to analyze the Oriental position in the post-colonial context, and use the five theories of Western Marxism to form the authority of colonialism, to composition of re-interpretation, to analyze the power of authority, and to restore the truth of history ^[8]. The most prominent feature of Spivak’s post-colonial theory is the feminist perspective chosen in the theory and method. Post-colonial critics and feminist critics have found that there are certain similarities between women and colonial or semi-colonial peoples in the Third World. Compared with the dominant position of white men, they are marginalized subordinate status, and is often regarded as “The Other” of dissidence. Based on this, the two sides have found the joint point of dialogue and alliance, and jointly challenge the western mainstream society. In this way, the two theories have had frequent dialogues and exchanges, forming a theoretical model and textual interpretation strategy commonly known as “Post-Colonial Feminism” in academic circles. The significance of this theoretical model is that it triggers the rediscovery and recognition of the third world women by critics.

1.4. Purpose and significance of the study

The presentation and analysis of the images of different women’s life experience and their inner world described by Lessing in *The Golden Notebook*, deeply exposes the typical characteristics of women’s different identities as a man’s wife, a mother, and a lover. Therefore, this study explored the causes for women’s “Otherness” status in society by combining with the modern feminist theory of “Otherness” and the “Subjectivity” and revealed the true survival state of self-division resulting from confusion, certainty, 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.

2. Analysis of the “Free Woman” – Anna’s image in *The Golden Notebook* from the perspective of the feminism

The study is based on the original work and documents, combined with the predecessor’s research.

2.1. The modern women’s confusion

2.1.1. Modern female’s confusion from the different social roles

The social roles means 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 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

various roles and entrust their emotions and feelings to the male character which entrapped them at home. For many years, women live in the shadows cast by men, who negate the “subjectivity” of women. In addition, traditional women make themselves as “The Other” or “Objectivity” in their life who obey the man and have no eager for freedom or to live an independent life no matter emotionally or economically. The heroine of *The Golden Notebook*, Anna has a strong woman’s consciousness and expects freedom and independence in a man-dominated society, even she has faced problems and confusions. At the initial part of this novel, it has stated that Anna and Molly, two women were alone in a London flat, and their friends saw them as a woman who positively disdained the ordinary morality. However, these are the new-century woman who stands for an advanced western feminist, who has trouble with the roles as a wife and a mother. Anna got married because she wanted to give a social identity to her child Janet, and she divorced George because he wanted someone obedient. One kind of the role’s the realization connotes the other one’s failure, because taking care of roles at the same time seemed conflicting. For example, if Anna wants to be an independent woman, at that situation she cannot be a good wife. In addition, Anna was a feminist pioneer in the society, meaning that she has more roles to play. Failing to be a good wife, is a painful journey for her to realize as a writer, a communist, a mother and an independent woman. “But the moment the baby was born, the silly empty marriage seems to be canceled out. I remember thinking, when I first saw Janet: Well, what does it matter, love, marriage, happiness, etc. ^[10]” is what has shown as the inner thought of a woman at the first time when be a mother. Anna raised her daughter alone, and being a mother who protects Janet from all evils of the sophisticated world compelled her to be strong and not to be cracked down. Further, she was also a marvelous communist who contributed to the Independence of Africa. However, gradually, the party has changed its original object, when the inner organization has collapsed and replaced 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.

2.1.2. Modern female’s confusion from the sexual relationship

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

consciousness of pursuing personal dignity. The female characters in the book remove the chains of marriage, but they still cannot live with total freedom, due to their need of men. In the yellow notebook, when Paul left Ella pushed herself into the cliff of her mind and body. She dreamed she was waving to herself, noticing the attachment between her and Paul. She used to be emotionally independent, but with the appearance of Paul, Ella had missed herself and abandon her principles. She, who used to be free in sexual life, was willing to be attached to Paul and became “The Other,” losing subjectivity. Ella’s also demonstrated that women have emotional dependence on men, which impeded the growth of Ella to be a free woman and an independent female, and her choice of being “The Other” status and giving up the self-value or self-identity in a sexual relationship reflects on the nature of women to be dependent on men.

2.2. The fight against fate, “Free Woman” – Anna’s image

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 is she belongs too, 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 aboard 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).

2.3. The way to realize freedom

2.3.1. Women’s “Other” status in society

Simone Beauvoir mentioned that “Those who want to achieve Individual liberated women often attempt to seek the meaning of survival in a limited situation, that is, to seek transcendence in the confined life, and such efforts are sometimes ridiculous and often tragic.” The book “The Second Sex” claims that “The Other” means “those alienated people who do not have or have lost self-awareness and subjective personality under the control of others or environments, completely in the “Other” status. Furthermore, without the solution of the overall social contradictions, women’s problems could not be solved. Nevertheless, as a free woman, Anna is still angry and struggling against the established social roles of men and women in gender relations, further, she is unwilling to stay on the stage of bitterness and complaint. Although the struggle ultimately

fails, it is better to exist than not to exist, and it is better to fight than not to fight, which is in fact facing reality and accepting it is a sign of maturity. Although the process is full of compromise and loss, it still has dignity and grace. Anna completed the part of “Free Women” in *The Golden Notebook*, which has a strong sense of enlightenment, where many depressed modern women find an identity, and eventually she takes the form of perception.

2.3.2. To overcome inner natures

Modern women as represented by Anna are not exactly “Free Women.” They all think that they can achieve independence and freedom by ending their loveless marriage, but in fact, they are still unable to get rid of the strong emotional needs of the opposite sex. They tried to break away from the fetters of traditional morality and concepts, and become independent and free modern women, but after a period of struggle, they still had to go into love and marriage, like Molly, and eventually married a person, while Anna also compromised to reality after experiencing the dilemma of political ideals, freedom, and identity confusion. When she rented her spare room to a university student, Ivor, who is a homosexual, he covered his friend Ronnie’s payment, included the accommodation. He lived with Ronnie in the room, but which would affect Janet adversely, because Ronnie is a bad adult model in front of Janet. Anna could not move them out directly, but after mild trial, the two boys started jesting with her, and she got appalled as she saw the obscene little play. It was women’s inner fear of the male’s antagonism. Sandburg has raised up a three principle, which refers to personalization, pervasiveness, and permanence. Personalization means the things happened to you not just because of yourself, while pervasiveness means that one disaster won’t affect every domain of your life, and permanence connotes that grief will not be everlasting. The reason why women don’t dare to get rid of the shackles, and be independent women is because that woman could not conquer their inner nature, which is fear and diffidence. Women should cultivate an ability called restore ability to let them know that no agony can bring down everything, no grief can burst everything down to the dust, and not only the male has the ability to solve problems. Females are not fragile, rather they are strong enough beyond belief. By holding a firm faith on it would encourage women to “sit at the table” to seek self-value and eventually be independent both economically and psychologically.

2.3.3. To despise the social stereotype and build harmony between sexes

In the book, as a free woman, Anna is still angry and struggling against the established social roles of men and women in gender relations, and she is unwilling to stay on the stage of bitterness and often complaint. Actually, in the era of social fission, the collapse of traditional ideas and the chaos of social structure will cause the loss of security for all people not only the women. Having experienced the chaos, confusion, and troubles brought about by the changes, both men and women have the responsibility to rebuild their homes together. Aristotle also mentioned that the two sexes are not autonomous, but interrelated, therefore the ideal of autonomy advocated by the women’s movement will not be realized but may lead to an alienation which make the independent women another image.

The alienation of social values is not gender-specific, on the one hand, women are bound to the role of “female,” while men are bound to the role of “male,” where they need to be enterprising, strive to become powerful, wealthy, and have status, which is not also a constraint on men’s nature. However, at present, if women’s liberation is to do what men can do, then is it equivalent of putting men and women in the same position? Women are rescued from one alienation and then put into another, thereby what we need to do is not to turn housewives into male mothers, but hope that this alienation can be integrated, men and women can cooperate, women could strive for greater development in the workplace, and men can make more contributions in family life, of course, not only money, specifically, could do housework, can be with the children, and more. Neither man nor woman is confined to the definition of gender, at the same time not

confined to each other. This mode of common development is the equal society, which is feminism pursues.

3. Conclusion

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.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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