
Female Bonding and Identity of Motherhood in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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Abstract: Motherhood is a phenomenon that concerns women as mothers across the world. The state of motherhood is often glorified and celebrated in all cultures but it is overloaded with the weight of the stereotypes of the patriarchal societies. The ambiguity in motherhood arises from the very fact that mothers connect themselves with the child and also, both child and mother feel repulsion with the act of nurturing by mothers. This ironical nature of motherhood is the result of culturally prescribed standards of mothering when women encounter stringent societal expectations of being a mother. Women as mothers resist adhering to the tiresome standards of social and cultural norms and also suffer the bond and ties with their child and hence, they suffer emotional trauma. The novel *The Golden Notebook* is about the lives of two women Anna Wulf and Molly Jacobs who undergo the experiences of motherhood and deeply share female bonding with each other. The conflicts of love and hate relationships and maternal ambivalence that both the mothers go through and in the course form female bonding with each other have been analysed in this article through the reading of the novel *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing.

Keywords: Motherhood, female bonding, nurturing, societal norms, patriarchy.

Introduction:

Addressing the struggles of 'free' and single mothers amid the patriarchal barriers in *The Golden Notebook*: The novel *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing divulges the grappling of two divorced and single mothers, namely Anna Wulf and Molly Jacobs in the patriarchal society. They have one child each whom they nurture and want the best life for them. They work hard and struggle to support their children, and give them a standard and comfortable life, and a safe home to reside in. Since they both are divorced, they are solely responsible to raise their children without any support from their respective husbands. Richard, who is the father of Molly's child Tommy, appears a few times in the novel, and nowhere, does he take up the responsibility of Tommy as a father. He mostly talks about his

professional work, and how his son can inherit his company and be successful like him. Richard spends most of his free time playing golf and tennis with his business companions, and he rarely has time for his child and his new family. Though both Anna and Molly work for their livelihoods, Anna is employed as a writer and Molly is an actress, they still find plenty of time to spend with their family while contrastingly, men in the novel are not interested in domestic matters and the upbringing of their children. Their aim in life is to marry beautiful women and beget children, who can inherit their companies and other business holdings.

Richard arrives at Molly's apartment as he is worried about how his son can inherit his company. His son, Tommy remains depressed and melancholic and spends excessive time thinking, and does not want to join the company of his father. The attitude with which he denies his father's wish to inherit his company infuriates Richard. His parents argue over this, and so the argument turns into a verbal conflict between them. Consequently, Richard snubs Molly for raising their son Tommy in such an undisciplined way that he is on the verge of rejecting his father's recommendations.

Tommy arrives and overhears the conversation of his mother and father and their opposite views on his career pursuits. At this moment, he tries to explain his unwillingness to commit to any particular path, while his father tries to explain the need to make a living. Tommy is reluctant to join his father's company and makes it clear, by saying, "I know what I don't want, but not what I do want" (53). He is trying to determine who he is when he mentions that he might be fascinated by pursuing teaching, or writing while referring to a series of conversations he had with Anna about writing. After hearing this, Richard leaves angrily, and then, Tommy also leaves the room in utter confusion, without any resolution. Here, it can be noted that Richard is associated with the world of finance and business, and Molly with creative pursuits. As a young man, with parents who hold different ideologies, Tommy is caught between the two different and departed ways of ideological thinking. He does not fully identify himself with either of them. His father's connections can give him easy access to a life of wealth and privilege, but Tommy sees the fault in this type of life, as this way of living fails to align with his values. Tommy seems to focus on art and honesty, especially to achieve social justice and political change, like his mother Molly and her mother's friend Anna. The problem with Tommy is much like that of Anna and Molly. He seems to struggle to know how exactly he can execute his instinctive pursuits. The stress of how to live an honest and authentic life in a world that doesn't seem to tolerate honest self-expression disturbs Tommy completely. He has already discarded the kind of life his father led because he knew it would force him to pretend and value things, he doesn't believe in. He believes that by living as an artist, he can achieve honesty and self-realization, but he becomes frustrated when he realizes that Anna is also lying to herself by keeping four different notebooks to compartmentalize her life and her experiences. As a result, when he is unable to solve this dilemma, he struggles with his thoughts, and ultimately, he attempts suicide. He tries to commit suicide after he realizes that there is not any way for him through which he can be his actual self, and live by his own rules. Tommy ends up surviving his

suicidal attempt but his gunshot wound leaves him blind. The aftermath of his suicide attempt causes various shifts in Anna's life and her relationships with Tommy and other men in her life. Anna becomes frustrated by her inability to re-establish open communication with Tommy. Both Anna and Molly become uncomfortable around him and lose their confidence to talk to each other. Also, Anna starts feeling guilty and worries that Tommy shot himself because he read something in her notebooks.

There are many other instances of troubled relationships between parents and children in *The Golden Notebook*. One such instance is the relationship between mothers and daughters in the novel. The complex nature of the mother and daughter relationship is portrayed, where the mothers inhabit the role of the opponent against their daughters. In general, the mother is the primary caretaker of her child without any paternal interruptions, and there exists a close bond between the mother and her child, where she works tirelessly in her nurturing role. This assumption gets in conflict with Lessing's portrayal, where the narrative of different attitudes of mothers toward their children is developed. The relationship between mother and daughter in this novel almost always occupies a negative position. Here, mothers' relationships with their daughters are often terrible to the extent that their children want to escape and turn away from their mothers. The first instance of the conflict between mother and daughter first emerges in the novel, when the protagonist, Anna opposes her best friend Molly's supremacy over her. Since the onset of their friendship, Molly is taller, older, and physically bigger than Anna and she

had frankly domineered Anna. Slowly, and the offices of Mother Sugar had had a good deal to do with it, Anna learned to stand up for herself. Even now there were moments when she should challenge Molly when she did not. She admitted to herself she was a coward; she would always give in rather than have fights or scenes. A quarrel would lay Anna low for days, whereas Molly thrived on them. She would burst into exuberant tears, say unforgivable things, and have forgotten all about it half a day later. Meanwhile Anna would be limply recovering in her flat. (30)

Molly acts as a surrogate mother for Anna when she relentlessly blames Anna for her casualness in her writing career, just like a mother who nags at her children for not being well at school. Since Molly is older and bigger, she feels her responsibility to worry for Anna, whom she feels is shy and unassertive. Anna feels like a daughter of an overwhelming mother, Molly, and wants to resist this motherly domination over her even though Molly intends to care for Anna. When Molly, "determinedly muffling the tears" (57), says that Anna should carry on writing because she has only one forte when Molly herself has so many talents that she cannot focus on one, Anna tries to counter her but she is not able to do so. The first thought that comes to Anna's mind is that "I'm not an extension of you" (57), which she quickly realizes that it was something she should say to her mother if she would have been there. By becoming the daughter of dominating mother, Anna has to resist the presence of a strong maternal figure, to save her self-image and remain undefeated by this power or she could have easily become an extension of her motherly friend Molly.

Another instance of a mother and daughter terrible relationship is between Anna Wulf and her daughter Janet. Anna is rejected by her daughter Janet because Anna is accused by her daughter of dominating her. This hatred is to such an extent that Janet who is a sweet little girl, overtly defies her mother, and says that she “want[s] to be ordinary . . . don’t want to be like you” (561). It is an example, where a mother stands as an impediment in the way of a child’s creation of self-image to the extent that the child criticizes and accuses her mother of consuming and exhausting her with the expectations and desires of a mother.

The overpowering mother Anna discourages and threatens the apparently less powerful child, Janet. This invokes Janet to keep away from her mother and seek an alternative path based on patriarchal forms in direct opposition to her mother’s control. Janet decides to attend a boarding school to separate from her mother. This act is described by her mother as “going for walks in crocodiles, like soldiers, and looking like everyone else, and doing things regularly at certain times” and if Janet is “not careful [she is] . . . going to come out of it like a processed pea, just like everyone else” (561). This clearly shows that what Janet wants is the patriarchal, socially accepted, and constrained style of living rather than being raised like Anna, a free woman who flees from social norms. In this sense Janet, after acquiring the taste of the ‘free life’ of her mother eventually, decides to return to her father’s world although her father never appears in her life. But the repulsion that she feels towards her mother incites her to take this decision and she thinks it to be a better choice. In this regard, Lessing noticeably speaks through the character of Anna that the daughter has forsaken her mother for the desire of paternal or masculine dominion than maternal or feminine chaos:

Janet went to school today. Uniform is optional, and she chose to wear it. Extraordinary that my child should want a uniform. I can’t remember a time in my life when I wouldn’t have felt uncomfortable in one. . . . The uniform is ugly. . . . Yet she is delighted. (479)

On knowing that the uniform is chosen by the headmistress of the school, Anna thinks that “the woman in her died before she was twenty, she probably killed her off” (479). Anna is reassured that by sending Janet to her, “I am providing Janet with a father-figure” (479). Anna aspires that Janet will oppose her father as mistress in some way but to her surprise and dismay, “Janet doesn’t want to oppose anything” (479). Janet gladly accepts what the “father” seeks from her. Furthermore, Lessing describes Janet’s approach to her mother’s life as “the world of disorder, experiment, where people lived from day to day, like balls perpetually jiggling on the top of jets of prancing water; keeping themselves open for any new feeling or adventure, and had decided it was not for her” (561).

For Janet, her mother’s style of living is what bothers her and she certainly does not want to be like her mother. So, eventually, she leaves her mother. After Janet is gone from her house to the boarding school, Anna’s world starts to fall apart and as a mother, she ceases to exist and loses the sense of her own body. She is tormented by the guilt that she is not a good role model for her daughter and Molly’s son Tommy. She is no longer able to sustain

her rationality and gradually loses her existence. In the interim of insanity, she becomes alienated from everything around her. Janet cannot be blamed for her mother's sickness which worsens after she departs her mother's home. It is undeniable that a daughter plays an important role in the life of her mother and the daughter is necessary for the mother's well-being. The only reason which holds back Anna from lunacy is Janet and her duty and responsibility towards her daughter. Her maternal love and responsibility towards her daughter strongly break her when she is again betrayed in one more relationship. Anna has loved her child so dearly that her life practically depends on the presence or absence of her daughter. Anna cannot continue her life sanely after her daughter leaves her. It can be seen that the negative traits which Janet thinks about Anna such as her being overpowering, dominating, overwhelming, or devouring are derived from the maternal love that she holds for her child. Ultimately, her writing and her role as a mother bring her back to her sanity.

Isolated individuals in the family and the development of female bonding in *The Golden Notebook*: The novel *The Golden Notebook* describes the individual conflicts in modern society. It also pronounces the fragmented life and experience of Anna when she writes in the four different notebooks. The melange of four notebooks at the end is where Anna attempts to regroup her fragmented self to represent the creative principle. It also represents restoring the sense of senselessness and forms out of formlessness. The other instance of fragmentation and self-conflict is when Tommy remains confused as he cannot reconcile with his plural selves. Tommy's blindness is symbolic of his lack of true awareness and his inability and dilemma to come to accept the path of truth or snobbery of his parents. He is also torn between the ideologies of masculine and feminine parents holding polarised opinions. He also suffers a lot at his home and tries to commit suicide. The emotion of Tommy is not understood by the aggressive parents and he becomes a victim of tamed sentiments. The friendship with Marion and Anna cannot save him from the devastation that he was undergoing being a teenager. He also acts as a foil to Anna and becomes aware of her destitution as a writer.

The novel is often hailed as feminist text but Lessing refutes such an argument and says that the novel describes female emotions. Anna and Molly become empowered women in the narrative. They refuse to efface their individuality for the men in their lives. They are posited as 'free women'. The term 'free women' becomes a normative category in itself which is justified in the due course of the progress of the novel. The relationship and friendship that exists between Anna and Molly is completely new and a perfect example of female bonding. Anna's relationship with Molly indicates their mutual trust and concern for each other and it foregrounds the theme of sisterhood. The theme of female bonding is crucial in the narrative as it helps Anna to become a balanced individual and means to recognize her selves from all the fragments. They both are misfits and are aberrations in the patriarchal system that they will find very difficult to be accepted for what they are. Male characters like Michael and Richard symbolize the male resentment towards female bonding. They look at this bonding with antagonism and try to manipulate it so that they would be able to destroy

their friendship. Lessing says that the space created by the female is restricted to them and men cannot comprehend the space the women create.

Molly and Anna are close friends throughout the novel. Molly is similar to Anna in that she is a single mother who considers herself a ‘free woman’. Molly cares for Anna and believes that Anna is a true artist and chides Anna for wasting her talents. Molly is an actress but not a very flourishing or talented one. Although they share many characteristics and similarities, the two women are also quite different. Molly is described as a woman who appears masculine while Anna, on the other hand, is soft and more feminine and prides herself on always looking the same. They complement and complete each other in several terms and characteristics. They share their experiences of their affairs with men and also the problems that exist for them as mothers. They are so close to each other that they always seek advice and suggestions from each other. Molly and Anna also discuss Anna’s writer’s block. Anna has published one bestselling novel, *Frontiers of War*. After that Anna writes only in notebooks as she does not want anyone to see and she considers it personal. The fragments of notebooks certainly become manifestations of her mental conflict, distortion, and disintegration. She has become annoyed by the form of the traditional novel and desires to experiment with writing that is in some way more truthful. Anna seeks therapy sessions with Mrs. Marks so that she will be competent enough to write again. At the end of the novel, Molly announces that she is going to marry a successful businessman to which Anna shows surprise but the story ends with Molly and Anna still friends. It can be noted that male characters have multiple relations with women to which they were faithless but the relations that exist between Anna and Molly continue throughout even in the state of emotional deprivation and various ups and downs. In this context of female bonding, Adrienne Rich’s terms “lesbian existence” and “lesbian continuum” is pertinent. She asserts that it is a woman’s life and woman-identified experience, female experience, and not simply the sexual experience with another woman. Adrienne Rich is clear in her idea when she explains the meaning of the shared experiences of women:

If we expand it [lesbian continuum] to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the receiving of practical and political support; if we can also hear associations as marriage . . . we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of “lesbianism.”

Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. It has of course included role playing, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide, and intrawoman violence; we romanticize at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain, and under heavy penalties; and lesbian existence has been lived (unlike, say, Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social

underpinning. The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain. (648-49)

Remarkably, the concept of female friendship is evolving concept which Lessing perpetuates in her novel in which she explains that women don't need men always for their fulfilment. Since women share the experiences of most things including motherhood, so women can establish the best comradeship. In this regard in the novel, Marion Vlastos Libby in the article "Sex and the New Woman in *The Golden Notebook*", points out:

In some ways the mutual sympathy and support characteristic of female friendships in *The Golden Notebook* seem to belie the traditional vision of woman's nature revealed in Lessing's portrayal of sexual relations. Women in her fiction respond to each other both emotionally and intellectually - they are affectionate, though rather decorous and restrained in physical demonstrativeness, and they spend most of their time together in frank and thorough analysis of the meaning of their lives. Even if another woman poses some kind of threat to their own security, they usually feel an immediate, instinctive sympathy with her condition, are vitally incapable of the "catty" response of the defensive conventional woman.

But friendship between women in Lessing is finally defined by relations with men, in obvious contrast to the intense solidarity of feminist groups whose closeness in some cases excludes men and extends frankly to lesbianism. (112)

The novel also deals with the social pressures of conformity which is represented by orthodox male characters. On the other hand, Anna and Molly assign themselves as free women because they are not tied down by social protocols and conventions. Molly is an actress and Anna is a writer by profession and for this reason, they are always rebuked by money-minded man Richard. The need for emotional intimacy by female characters is also discussed in the novel. They live in such a modern world that they struggle with their need to be loved by men even as they continue to consider themselves free women. Anna gets physical intimacy with a man and discovers that her emotional intimacy is unfulfilled. She also finds that most men in her life leave her when she begins to depend on them for emotional needs. This explains that working women, single mothers, and sexually free women are often ostracized; they suffer emotionally and all the way around at their workplace, home, and family because they do not fit into socially accepted roles.

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