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## AN ECOFEMINIST APPROACH TO DORIS LESSING'S *THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK*

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### Abstract

*The Golden Notebook* is a novel written by a British-Zimbabwean novelist Doris Lessing and published in 1962. The paper attempts to study the features of ecofeminism in *The Golden Notebook*. Fragmentation and postmodern concerns of the female protagonist have been considered as the major themes of the novel by many scholars so far. The protagonist who is already labelled and recognized as "Free Woman" is a humanitarian who suffers from a writer's block and is constantly in search of an authentic selfhood. Throughout the book which is written by Anna (protagonist) herself we come to know about her everyday experiences that belong to her past and present life. The paper attempts to study *The Golden Notebook* from the perspectives of Ecofeminism and examines the connection found between women and Nature. It explores how women intuitively connect with nature which remains a prominent factor in the formation of their identity. Ecofeminism studies how patriarchal society dominates and alienates both women and nature as "Others". There are many instances in the novel where the connection between women and nature could easily be established while the destructions of wild life and colonisation add to the themes of ecocriticism even further. The aim of the paper is to highlight those elements in the novel that contribute to the analysis of ecofeminism in the novel. The paper explores how women identify and associate themselves more with the sanctity and degradation of nature than men. It further highlights how the "free woman" of the novel finds these identifications to be inevitable in her search for an authentic self.

**Keywords:** Doris Lessing, Ecofeminism, Subjectivity, Identity, Eco-criticism, The Golden Notebook

Lessing as a humanitarian has always brought the issues associated with Natural environment and women in her novels. Her award-winning novel *The Golden Notebook* has already been read in connection with its concern for post war reality, fragmented society, and female identity. The novel deals with postmodern concerns and

quite evidently show the questions associated with the female self but the role played by Anna's synchronisation with Natural environment as valuable contribution to the ecocritical study cannot be denied. The attempt of the current paper is to highlight the protagonist's search for an authentic female identity which gradually reaches its

culmination when she accepts Nature as an inseparable part of her existence. Literature does have a very significant role to play when it comes to foregrounding the unjust treatment toward both nature and women. A literary work engaged in such a task often includes several major concepts like colonialism, motherhood, female identity and deals with issues like deforestation, animal slaughter and subjugation. The paper attempts to make a study of *The Golden Notebook* in association with some concerns of Ecofeminism and thus highlights the elements in the book that co-ordinate with its theory. The focus will be to show how the protagonist explores her inner self and truly achieves liberation by taking a transcendental stance where she becomes a part of Nature and loses her misplaced notions of having a fixed individual self.

The term Eco feminism was first coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la mort*. Eco feminism is a branch of philosophy that combines the concepts of Feminism and Eco-criticism to analyse the relationship between human beings and their environment. According to Merchant, "Ecofeminist theory asserts a feminist perspective of Green politics that calls for an egalitarian, collaborative society in which there is no one dominant group...there are several branches of ecofeminism with varying approaches and analyses, including liberal ecofeminsim, spiritual/cultural ecofeminism, and social/socialist ecofeminism (or materialist ecofeminism)" (193-221). Eco feminism studies how patriarchy has assigned the dominant roles to men by defining them as "rational, strong, protective, and decisive; [while] they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive" (Lois Tyson 85). In *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift*, Tandon defines Eco feminism as "a theory that rests on the basic principle "that patriarchal ways are harmful to women, children and other living things." Often drawn between society's treatment of the environment, or resources and its treatment of women, in resisting culture, eco-feminists believe they are also resisting, plundering, destroying the earth. Ecofeminism states that patriarchal society is relatively new, something developed over the last 2000 years or so

and that the matriarchal society was the first society". (56) Furthermore, "Christian society is fed upon the teachings of the Bible, where God grants absolute power to man, His son, to do anything with his surroundings including the natural world. He is told that nature exists only to cater to his needs. This decree of God has been taken very seriously by the European colonisers."(Kochar 3) Following this doctrine and the tradition of patriarchy, both women and Nature have been viewed as those existent "Others" who remain to be subjugated by men and the culture which is created by men. Eco feminism takes a separate feminist stance that analyses the connection between women and Nature while it propagates the view that "the ideology which authorizes oppressions, such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities, is the time ideology that sanctions the oppressions of nature" (Gaard 20). Ecofeminism combines the concerns of both eco criticism and feminism. It basically foregrounds the unconditional connection established between human beings and nature along with the identification of the idea that both women and nature are viewed as Others in a patriarchal society. Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism which studies the attitudes of patriarchal society towards both women and nature while drawing the connection found in both women and nature as existences. It challenges the basic patriarchal ideologies where women and Nature are described as submissive, passive and inferior to men and culture respectively. Ecofeminism highlights the parallel between men's dominance over both women and nature. According to Huey-li,

Regardless of their different theoretical positions, ecofeminists appear to agree that there are important conceptual connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. They believe that the traditional sex/gender system has had a significant impact on today's environmental problems. Moreover, many ecofeminists in English-speaking countries accept the age-old perception of an affinity between women and nature as a self-evident explanation for the connections between these two forms

of oppression. On the one hand, ecofeminists believe that there are perceived similarities between woman and nature- such as passivity and life-giving nurturing qualities- that make them equally vulnerable” (Li 276)

In their endeavours to end the subjugation, Feminists have taken the female identification with nature in diverse ways. Some feminists just throw away the above mentioned analogy as one of the ways in which patriarchy subjugates women and refrain from further analysis of woman’s identification with nature. An intriguing proposition comes from Vandana Shiva who perceives the female struggle in association with her identification as a nature-creature in the following words:

“The women and environment issue can be approached either from these categories of challenge that have been thrown up by women in the struggle for life, or it can be approached through an extension of conventional categories of patriarchy and reductionism. In the perspective of women engaged in survival struggles which are, simultaneously, struggles for the protection of nature, women and nature are intimately related, and their domination and liberation similarly linked. The women’s and ecology movements are therefore one, and are primarily counter-trends to a patriarchal maldevelopment”. (Shiva Women in Nature 47)

So, Eco-feminists believe that “an end to the oppression of women is bound up with ecological values, and that women should be centrally concerned with ending the exploitation of the eco-system” (Tandon paradigm shift 56- 57). Miles even proposes that “while the patriarchal paradigm has made man-the-hunter as exemplar of human productivity , he is ‘basically a parasite- not a producer’ .With the reversal of categories, made possible by focusing on the production of life, the masculinisation of the feminine is no longer a viable option for liberation”. (Shiva Women in Nature 51). Therefore, the protagonist of *The Golden Notebook* is portrayed by Lessing in the model of a woman who

cannot be liberated by such “masculinisation”. She lives an independent life which is not very different from any capable man but Anna still feels the void of not having an authentic selfhood as an individual. She can only hope to achieve liberation by exploring her femininity without ignoring the role that her environment plays in constructing her identity as a woman. And, for this reason we find enough instances in the novel where Anna analyses her “self” in relation to nature and its subjugation. Throughout the novel Anna shows her disappointment with the fact that her independency fails to bring her any substantial satisfaction.

Anna is a middle class woman who raises her daughter as a single mother. As an accomplished writer she has gained enough fame and financial strength to not be concerned about earning for livelihood. She devotes her time to provide services as a humanitarian. She has a lover and a friend who share and empathise with her causes. She is often addressed in the novel as “free woman” (33). But the novel begins with Anna’s growing concerns with her inability to adjust and dissatisfaction with the kind of life and the world she lives in. She suffers from a writer’s block which is closely related to her worries that are associated with her identity as a woman. Throughout the novel Anna takes multiple approaches to overcome her difficulty in visualising an authentic and fixed identity for herself. Her approaches include her nonstop scribbling in four different notebooks. She divides her role as a woman into separate groups and records her experiences into different notebooks which together constitute the whole account of Lessing’s novel *The Golden Notebook*. She also writes a novella which she inculcates in the bulky Golden notebook. Her records inform us of Anna’s visits to her psychiatrist, her hypothetical self-actualisation through the game of vision played in her imagination that brings her closer to Nature and environment. All of her experiences are recorded in her notebooks. Anna’s growing confrontation with her divided self, her concern with Natural dilapidation and industrial developments together broaden her search. Soon her self-actualisation becomes closely connected with her empathy with Nature. Reading the novel from ecofeminist perspective leads to many

constructive instances where the identity of the “free woman” is almost identical to a kind of nature-creature. Anna eventually loses her individual self in Nature and learns the undeniable rule of interdependency from Nature before she reaches the liberated and performative female self.

“Eco-feminism suggests that an end to the oppression of women is bound up with ecological values and those women should be centrally concerned with ending the exploitation of the ecosystem”. (Collard as qtd. in Tandon) The novel holds such elements when we find the protagonist (Anna Wulf) in grief over the loss of England’s Flora and Fauna. Both Anna and Molly show hatred toward the rapid urbanisation of England while the men in the novel like Michael, Dr. West and Richard admire these changes as promising for a better future and easy life-style. They even remark on it as a sign of improvement. Ynestra King says, “Ecofeminism is potentially a global movement that is founded on common interests yet celebrates diversity and opposes all forms of domination and violence...” (Lahar 1). Ecofeminism concerns itself with the ecological crisis like problems associated with irresponsible scientific experiments, environmental dilapidation, harms done against wildlife as well as women due to the cultural domination of Patriarchy. Natural predation develops into hunting when Paul and the group kill more birds than they required for food. Paul continues to shoot the birds in excitement for mere self-indulgence. He is assisted by the other men in the group while Anna and Maryrose feel repulsion. Anna recollects the meaningless killing of doves and the way she felt disgust toward the harms done to these defenceless creatures. What is considered as the typical responses of the men and women is portrayed in the hunting ground of the group in the following extract:

“No don’t, said Maryrose... But it was too late. Paul had shot, the bird fell. Before it had even hit the ground another bird had touched down, swinging tightly on a twig at the very end of a branch. Paul shot, the bird fell; this time with a cry and a fluttering of helpless wings. Paul got up, raced across the grass, picked up the dead bird and the

wounded one. We saw him give the wounded bird a quick determined tight-mouthed look, and wring its neck” (TGN 318).

In the novel, the detachment of the men from the Natural world reminds us of the comments made by Vandana Shiva who points out that “it is not hunting which leads to a violent relationship with nature : - it is the elevation of hunting to the level of ideology which does so” (Staying Alive 50). In the novel, men are portrayed to show cultural domination while women exhibit natural submission. The patriarchal theory is further noted in Paul’s interpretations of women’s responses as hypocritical when he says: “Women are tender, said Paul. ‘They will watch us eat...making delicate little mouths of distaste, loving us all the more for our brutality.’” (TGN 315)

According to Tandon,

“One of the main theoretical projects of eco-feminism is to construct new ways of thinking about the relationship between human and nature, including animals, replacing the dualistic, objectifying mode, characteristic of western science... But the most serious critique has been framed by animal rights feminists, who part company with deep ecologists on their willingness to subsume the individual in the whole” (paradigm shift 57)

Tandon’s words not only elaborate the role and concerns of ecofeminists but also assist complementarily to comprehend Anna’s identity as a woman. Anna forms a bridge between herself and the Natural environment surrounding her. The bridge helps her to explore the fragmentation of her inner self. It furthermore enables her to break away from the fixed and essential notions associated with female identity. During her long drives with her lover Michael, she notices the increasing numbers of houses that represent the modern civilised society. Here Anna comments on the fact how the Natural wilderness of England was sacrificed for the sake of culturally developed society that they live in. She is repulsed by the ever growing numbers of buildings and the sophisticated urban civilisation that surrounds her. In her search for an authentic “self”,

Anna gradually distances herself from an extremely individualistic and fixed self and advances toward the complex reality of human existence where the constant blur between herself and the Natural environment becomes a fact. She becomes a part of Nature when she realises that she can no longer differentiate between her own existing self and the Nature surrounding her. Nature in the broadest sense could be considered the entire physical world or the universe. Anna blurs her own individuality in the face of this entire universe when she gives herself a shapeless identity in the lap of Nature and in a transcendental state says,

“I moved out into space, and watched the world, a sunlit ball in the sky, turning and rolling beneath me. Then having reached that point, with the stars around me, and the little earth turning underneath me, I’d try to imagine at the same time, a drop of water, swarming with life, or a green leaf. Sometimes I could reach what I wanted, a simultaneous knowledge of vastness and of smallness. Or I would concentrate on a single creature, a small coloured fish in a pool, or a single flower, or a moth, and try to create, to ‘name’ the being of the flower, the moth, the fish, slowly creating around it the forest, or the sea pool, or the space of blowing night air that tilted my wings. And then, out suddenly, from the smallness into space... in a state of exhilaration” (TGN 397-98)

By playing this game of vision in her mind, Anna remains in complete harmony with England’s wilderness. Gradually, she becomes air, plant, flower and various other parts of Nature. With the game, her identity is transpersonalised and she becomes a creature who is not just a woman but a being that grows out of her own limited female self to become the entire of the physical world. Anna’s experience endows her with a new found understanding of her “self” which triggers the blur between herself and the others, more and more. She views the world with an altered perspective where she tries to simulate the interconnectivity of Nature; the beings that belong to Nature as well as the people surround her who are also a part of Nature. At the beginning of

the novel, Anna suffers from a writer’s block which hinders her creative explorations. But gradually she learns from Nature, how to break the limitations that surround her due to a fixed and individualistic self. She laments the inadequacies of words for the purpose of emotional expressions: “Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want...The fact is, the real experience can’t be described. I think, bitterly...Anything at all, but not words” (TGN 455). When she accepts the fact that she is a small existence within Nature, she becomes a nature-creature who has moved beyond the limitations of verbal communications and feels exhilarated within the silent communion with nature and says: “The colours are melting and flowing into each other, indescribably beautiful so that the world becomes whole, all one beautiful glittering colour...This moment of almost unbearable happiness... I was suddenly standing in space, in silence. Beneath me was silence” (TGN 219). Anna’s return to the Natural world plays a significant role in her acceptance of the fragmented self because she identifies her own “self” with that of Nature. Like Nature she affirmatively responds to the interconnectivity and dependency between “beings” and realises that her “self” becomes a comprehensible entity only in relation to others.

Ecofeminism assists the liberation of female self and shows “the direction in which feminist theory is heading away from the traditional conceptualisations of liberal, atomistic theory toward a more comprehensive view that recognised the interrelationships among all living beings and the right of all to exist”. (Tandon 57). The novel deals with Anna’s difficulty in cooperating with the division that she feels in her identity. At the beginning of the novel she is unnerved by the contradictions and diversity that crowd her psyche. Her self-consciousness makes her suffer from even a writer’s block. But gradually, with her identification with Nature, she learns to acknowledge complex inter-relations as a universal truth that not only defines the universe but also her own individual “self”. Anna gradually acknowledges her assimilation of Natural environment which allows her to be more empathetic towards the fellow



creatures that surround her, including human beings. Her stance can be better understood from Merchant's perspectives who says,

"Constructing nature as a partner allows for the possibility of a personal or intimate relationship with nature and for feelings of compassion for nonhumans as well as for people who are sexually, racially, or culturally different. It avoids gendering nature as a nurturing mother or goddess and avoids the ecocentric dilemma that humans are only one of many equal parts of an ecological web and therefore morally equal to a bacterium or a mosquito" (8)

As a Nature-creature, Anna becomes a part of the universe and all the "beings" that reside in it. She acknowledges that her self-actualisation cannot occur unless she accepts her connections with other human beings. She eventually learns to affirmatively view the blur between herself and the others. She even decides to live her life like a "boulder-pusher" (155) in order to keep the humanitarian dream alive and endlessly work for the good of humanity for rest of her life. Instead of succumbing to pessimistic absurdity, she decides to become an entity that is not just an individual woman but a being that sees her "self" as a part of everything that surrounds her. The acceptance of the multiple personalities in her corresponds with the blur between her "self" and the "others", thereby giving her the necessary release from the uneasiness and the writer's block that she was suffering from. Looking at the Natural world where life overflows with diversity and complexity, she finally accepts her own diversity. The novel reflects the world where patriarchal ideologies still treat both Nature and women as insignificant and ignorable. The paper has attempted to make an analysis of how Anna's association with Nature helps her to identify and accept her own fragmented self and thereby release her from the writer's block. Lessing seems to be suggesting that the key is not to withdraw from the so called patriarchal categorisation of women along with Nature, but to accept the thought that every individual is inevitably an inseparable part of Nature and every intellectual individual simulates Nature in his/her journey of self- actualisation.

The focus of ecofeminism is not just on the connectivity between woman and Nature. Rather, it foregrounds the inevitable integrations of diverse race, sex, and gender within the entire natural environment. According to Charene Spretnak, ecofeminism grew out of radical or cultural feminism, which holds that identifying the dynamics behind the dominance of male over female is key to comprehending every expression of patriarchal culture with its hierarchical, militaristic, mechanistic and industrialist forms. (5) Ecofeminism calls for such recognitions which helps people to understand that there is not much difference in the oppression of women than in the oppressions of poverty-stricken people or coloured people or children or even the homosexuals. The problem lies in the perception where one group is held to be more significant and dominant than the others. The obliteration of such oppressions demands a simultaneous approach which has always been one of the most significant traits of ecofeminist theory. And, because of this reason, any kind of subjugation can be taken and viewed from ecofeminist perspective which is based on the relation of an individual with his/her environment since each oppressed individual belongs to an enclosed environment which is inevitably connected to the broad human-nature environment.

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