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Research Article



Exploring the Traces of Humanism: An Investigation into Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

Dr. Ratnesh Baranwal

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
K.N.I.P.S.S. Sultanpur (U.P.)
Affiliated to Dr. R.M.L. Awadh University,
Ayodhya, U.P. India

Email: ratnesh25373@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4453-8908>

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Abstract

This research article dwells upon the exploration of the various colours of humanism as reflected most impressively in Doris Lessing's most famous novel, *The Golden Notebook*. During her long-spanning literary career, she did receive a very deep impression and motivation from her contemporary female-writers such as Mary Wollstone Craft, Kate Millet, Elain Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf and some others. Like all these feminist-writers, she too was very deeply concerned with the mental harassment, rape-violence and the sexual exploitation of the females in the existing phallogocentric society. She too accelerated the movement of feminism even in the contemporary period. Being a woman, she could understand much better the issues and the problems of the females. Thus, through her novels, she has very strongly advocated for the

equality, liberty and fraternity to the females without any kind of gender-discrimination. She is not an object of sexual gratification, confined to the domestic activities, but rather she has her own self-esteem, love and honour. She cannot lose her self-esteem at any cost. By dint of her novels, she very strongly raised her voices against gender-discrimination, social injustice, sexual exploitation, mental torture and misconduct being committed to the females. In her most famous novel, *The Golden Notebook*, she happens to introduce the two lady characters— Anna and Molly, living together in a London flat in 1957 in their free and independent life-style. These intermittent narrative frames four huge sections dedicated to Anna's notebooks of the 1950's, a black notebook dealing with the African experience, out of which, she has written her only novel; the red for politics – the decline and fall of the communist myth; blue a record of free relations with men, and of rosy dreams and sessions with her analyst; yellow in which she takes up stories; mostly drafts of a novel in which 'Ella' re-enacts a large part of Anna's experience. In all this, what it means to be '*free women*' is very thoroughly articulated and worked out. The question of living "lives like men" poses an illusion within the narrative. Despite Anna's engagement in a sexual relationship with the same liberty as a man, it inevitably culminates in an undesirable dependency. This aspect alongside the overwhelming freedom of choice that stifles her literary endeavors, the unchecked freedom permitted by the world's irresponsible state, and the paradoxical liberty of a woman obsessed with the notion of integrity, who is fatefully bound to navigate randomly to discern the significance of her actions, collectively construct the novel's intricate framework. Despite the evident complexity, the novel's most remarkable attribute does not lie in its profound or original difficulty. Contrarily, it resonates a compelling conviction of closely mirroring actual experiences. Within this realistic depiction, the anticipated concerns of a mid-twentieth-century writer organically find their respective positions, enhancing the authenticity and relatability of the narrative. It is simply an exceptional documentation of the experience of female autonomy and responsibility in connection to men and other women. It illustrates the endeavor to achieve self-reconciliation regarding these relationships, as well as issues of writing and politics. The document's distinctiveness is highlighted by its unwavering honesty and extensive scope, providing a unique exploration of these multifaceted dimensions. It has got a very wide range of interest among the readers. Thus, it remains as a sort of the book that determines the way people think about themselves.

Keywords: Existentialism, Neo-Humanism, Transcendental deity, The Broken Fragments, Debris, Scars, Disillusionment, Psychotic, Mutual Malice, Splitting, Splintering, Jungian Psychoanalyst, Ambivalence

This research article intends to bring about the exploration of the different shades of humanism as beautifully pictured in the different colours in Doris Lessing's most influential novel, *The Golden Notebook*. Doris Lessing happened to be born on 22nd October, 1919 in Iran and left for Heavenly abode on 17th November, 2013, in London (U.K.). She remained as a British– Zimbabwean novelist, because of being born and brought up to the British parents in Iran, where she kept living by 1925. Later on, her family migrated to Zimbabwe and she accompanied with them over there by 1949. Co-incidentally, she shifted away to London in 1949 and where she got into her literary

career. She was very deeply influenced by Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Jean Paul Sartre etc. before entering upon her literary career. Her famous literary creations comprise— *The Golden Notebook* (1962), *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), *The Fifth Child* (1988), *Through the Tunnel* (1955), *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), *Martha Quest* (1952) and *The Grand Mothers* (2003). She did receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007 at the age of 87 for her significant and wonderful contribution to the evolution of 20th C. English literary fiction. Her fictions have been translated into the various languages and have gained global popularity and applause across the world. Her novels beautifully reflect her multi-dimensional aspects and the encyclopaedic range of knowledge having the sharp impact of Marxism, global politics, feminism, communism, racism and the mystical and metaphysical teachings of Sufism upon her.

Before discussing the different colours of humanism of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, let us first come to know what humanism is and what is meant by it? This interrogation leads us to respond that this one is a philosophy which is deeply concerned with man and his happiness. This concept gained substantial prominence during the Renaissance Period, emerging as a pointed counterresponse to prevalent ascetic ideologies. It asserts the intrinsic worth and dignity of human beings, positing them as the metric for all evaluative judgments. All forms of knowledge and human institutions hold value only insofar as they augment the realization of human potential. Predominantly, both Western and Eastern philosophers concur that the paramount concern for humanity lies in its terrestrial existence rather than an unseen, ethereal realm. This perspective inherently encompasses a dismissal of the supernatural and a denial of a personal deity. Conversely, certain religious humanists ardently maintain the belief that humanity's ultimate concern should be centered upon the human being itself. The emphasis is placed upon the enhancement and realization of human capacities and potentialities within the tangible, earthly domain.

Some great humanists like Socrates, Mahatma Gandhi and Guru Dev Ravindra Nath Tagore have the same feelings and views. The quintessence of Socrates's thoughts — “Know thyself” and “Virtue is Knowledge” are very deeply— grounded in human personality as the fundamental reality, whereas all social and political institutions did remain at best aids to the human development. Even Mahatma Gandhi and Ravindra Nath Tagore has the similar views and visions. They did search out God in man and so proclaimed that the God's real worship lies essentially in the service of mankind. Serving the society and working honestly and sincerely towards his duties and responsibilities are the best worship of God. Thus humanism has come out to be an ancient traditional heritage, from the past to the present, the old to the new, tradition to experiment, moving ahead everlastingly, being an integral part of human civilization, culture and survival.

The esteemed Greek philosopher Pythagorus, from the fifth century B.C., purported to possess the “golden thigh” as portrayed in W.B. Yeats' poem — “Among the School Children,” is acknowledged as the progenitor of humanism. His renowned maxim, asserting man as the measure of all entities, is frequently hailed as epitomizing the essence of humanism. Over time, an array of doctrines elucidating the nature of man have emerged, giving rise to corresponding diversities of humanist schools. This philosophical stance is furthermore interconnected with the burgeoning intellectual awakening that unfurled across Europe during the 15th-century Renaissance. Eminent figures such as Bacon and Spenser emerge as fervent humanists of this

epoch. The era's humanistic inclination is anchored in novel inventions and discoveries, the rejuvenation of Greek erudition, and the widespread distribution of the ancient Greek authors' original manuscripts. It underscored classical writers as immediate and authentic life commentators for the inaugural time.

The 17th century's illustrious Christian humanism is notably exemplified by Erasmus. His Christological philosophy predominantly seeks a deviation from scientific scrutiny, focusing instead on the quandaries of moral existence and religious conceptualization. He steadfastly advocated for the paramount concept of 'The dignity of man' (*Humanism: An Overview*, 11) and posited humanity's significance within the framework of Christ's atonement and divine grace. Erasmus underscored the imperative of nurturing a life characterized by unyielding integrity and ardently championed the comprehension and embodiment of authentic Christianity.

Transitioning to Jean-Paul Sartre, his philosophical discourse propounds existentialism as a variant of humanism. The singular discernible humanistic element within his philosophical framework appears to predominantly entail a bold renunciation of supernatural entities.

A distinct form of humanism, denominated as Neo-Humanism, prevails. Pioneered by Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt, these individuals endeavored to supplant both the extremities of religious beliefs and the romantic perspectives of existence. Their foundational objective is to forge a synthesis of the virtuous elements inherent in ancient cultures and religions, post repudiation of belief in a transcendent deity. The bond interlinking a humanist and a novelist is identified to be intimate, signifying that their connection "is not accidental" (*Humanism in the English Novel*, 3).

D.H. Lawrence, a prominent 20th-century novelist and humanist, strategically situates the novel at the epicenter of humanistic culture owing to its unparalleled proximity to human experience. Concurrently, Henry James, an eminent novelist and humanist of the modern epoch, elucidates that his "central concern is with human beings" (*Humanism in the English Novel*, 72).

In contemporary contexts, the path to amalgamating the roles of a modern novelist and a humanist is laden with formidable challenges. The turbulent alterations in class and caste constructs, the disintegration of conventional beliefs triggered by novel scientific inquiries and innovations, coupled with looming war threats, have precipitated a comprehensive renunciation of humanistic belief among numerous authors. Nevertheless, illustrious post-war novelists of the contemporary era, including John Wain, Kingsley Amis, William Golding, Virginia Woolf, and Doris Lessing, who confront the metamorphosis of the British class structure in the 20th century, along with large-scale racial discrimination and religious conversion policies, predominantly emphasize human values in their literary works. Their narratives consistently spotlight the consciousness of their characters, embroiled in the struggle for belongingness and grappling with an "Identity Crisis" amidst a harsh and antagonistic world. These characters emerge as luminaries, striving against contemporary despair and the harsh, inequitable societal systems, passionately committed to the reassembling of the shattered fragments of optimistic humanism, and intensely engrossed in the restoration and reconstruction of will. Thus, humanism perpetuates as an instrumental paradigm for envisaging an idyllic life, augmenting individual independence, affluence, commitment, and moral fortitude, and reflecting upon the ethical values and the intrinsic virtue of humanity.

Among the contemporary English novelists, Doris Lessing emerges as ardently dedicated to the reform and transformation of extant society through her creative endeavors. She articulates a “sense of duty” (*Post-War British Fiction: New Accents and Attitudes*, 64) that propels her to affiliate with various organizations. This intrinsic obligation and societal responsibility guide her exploration of ethical values and literary materials within the working classes of London. Her unwavering commitment to social responsibility and her pursuit of aiding those marginalized, tormented, and subjugated by the dominant society, profoundly influence her narratives set in colonial Africa, imbuing them with a humanistic theme. It is palpably evident that Doris Lessing stands distinguished as a bold novelist, consistently prepared with significant courage to confront and address adversity.

Moreover, she is recognized as a proficient novelist adept in depicting the quandaries faced by the female demographic. Notwithstanding, another dimension to her oeuvre surfaces, particularly evident in *The Golden Notebook*. In this illustrious creative composition, she promulgates her unique perspective on humanism. This narrative demonstrates the palpable conflict between individuals and society, which ostensibly undermines what can be classified as human values. In her initial years of novel writing, spanning from 1952 to 1969, she facilitated the publication of five novels, collectively titled *Children of Violence*. Embracing the substantial responsibilities incumbent upon a developmental novel, she aspires to dramatize— “the individual conscience in its relations with the collective” (*A Small Personal Voice: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*, 14). She has beautifully projected a tetralogy to an African problem, i.e. “the relationship of black and white” (*The Novel Now*, 99). Apart from the colour, she gets herself very deeply concerned with the rights of women in a world of men and “looks to the policies of the left-wing to bring justice to women and blacks alike” (*The Novel Now*, 99).

The international crises characterizing the second and third decades of the 20th century precipitated the disintegration of numerous traditional concepts and values, instigating tumultuous shifts even within the academic sphere of global literature. The two World Wars bequeathed the world with substantial wreckage and indelible scars. Modern scientific advancements have further exacerbated the situation. The era stands as a representation of pollution and explosion, “disillusionment and frustration,” a conglomerate of shattered images, characterized by a pervasive sense of neurosis and perversion, spiritual dislocation, and a burgeoning tide of tyranny and terrorism worldwide. Life unfurls as a mere extension of tedium and monotony.

It is not solely Doris Lessing who has navigated such an ordeal. Numerous contemporary novelists of her epoch have encountered analogous episodes of horrific, panicked, violent, destructive, disintegrating, and lethal experiences. Durrell, for instance, depicts Alexandria as a figurative inferno, further highlighting the prevailing atmospheric turmoil and despair within literary explorations of the period. Even her contemporary poets are too remaining under the clutch of the terrible experiences of life. Ted Hughes, a great contemporary poet, in his famous poem – *Cadenza: The New Poets* presents the state of mind:

“The full based throat of a woman walking water,
The loaded estuary of the dead
And I am the Cargo
Of a Coffin attended by Swallows,

Bearing the Coffin that will not be silent” (*The New Poets*, 233)

Dramatists such as Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter adeptly paint a desolate and somber tableau, yet concurrently transmit a message of hope, akin to a silver lining in a dark cloud. Their steadfast repudiation of facile solutions or inexpensive illusions of solace ultimately manifests a liberating impact. The inherent nature of humanity is constructed such that in the deliberate act of confronting the reality of their condition, human dignity is invariably augmented.

Doris Lessing, with distinguished success and brilliance, unveils the tumult, confusion, and psychological tension permeating the contemporary world, affirming her stature as a preeminent humanist and realist. Her literary execution transcends even the celebrated D.H. Lawrence in the depiction of animal instincts intertwined with unbridled sexual intensity, desire, and passion, devoid of any semblance of chastity and purity. Lessing remains an epitome of bold contemporary novelists, permitting her literary alter ego, Anna Wulf, the central figure in *The Golden Notebook*, to champion and proclaim equality with men

In this reference, Bernard Bergonzi writes, “On the face of it, Anna has achieved a degree of personal freedom that the new woman of Ibsen and Shaw could scarcely have dreamed of I she is as free as any man in all the major spheres of life, professional, intellectual and above all, sexual” (P. 237)

The Golden Notebook is probably the most significant single novel published in England since the War. It carries its theme as denoted in the first line of the first section “*Free Women*”. The two women, Anna and Molly, are alone together. The theme is developed in a number of materials. Within the “*Free Women*” section, it gets dramatized above all in the behaviour of Tommy, Molly’s son who intentionally went a psychotic.

Simultaneously in the *Black Notebook* section, the tension of mutual malice and self-contempt does occur. But she also analyses her inspiration in writing it. She says, “The novel is about a colour problem. I said nothing in it that wasn’t true. . . I have to first switch something off in me, now writing about it, I have to switch it off, or a story would begin to emerge, a novel and not the truth” (63-64). The *Red Notebook* deals with the description about the splitting and splintering of the political groups and the counterplay of truth and lie, moral enthusiasm and cynicism each polluting and corrupting the other among communists. When she rejoins the Party, she says in her first interview; “both pleased me being back in the fold so to speak already entitled to the elaborate ironies and complicities of the initiative, and made me suddenly exhausted. I had forgotten, of course having been out of the atmosphere so long, the tight, defensive, sarcastic atmosphere of the inner circles” (155). The *Yellow Notebook* reflects in fictional form – Anna’s love-affair with a man who is determined from the start not to commit himself to her and the strain this creates out of which she splits herself into psychic parts. How essential anything is in her everyday life. The *Blue Notebook* deals with Anna’s sessions with Marks, a Jungian psychoanalyst, who observes her cure exclusively in terms of her starting to rewrite-to resume her sacred vocation as artist while Anna is deeply ambivalent, deeply split about the value of art.

Doris Lessing possesses an exceptional biometric sensitivity to the societal climate, albeit her approach is more anticipatory of trends rather than summarizing them within her novels. Hence, her comprehensive exploration of intellectual and political women in *The Golden Notebook* notably predated, and in a sense, paved the path for the Women’s Liberation Movement. Despite

her protagonist Anna's assertion that she and her companion Molly epitomize entirely novel female archetypes, an unspoken continuity bridges their experiences, emotions, and values with the venerable lineage of independent artist women from history.

In summation, *The Golden Notebook* stands as a monumental accomplishment of Doris Lessing, wherein she astutely addresses the complexities faced by 20th-century women, alongside their cultural and traditional contexts. Lessing harbors a steadfast conviction regarding the imminent global catastrophe, potentially stemming from germ warfare or the disintegration of civilization. Within this looming human disaster, distinctions of sex and gender hold no relevance. In her novel, Lessing's feminine sensibility is deftly portrayed, satirically represented through a female author who underscores the paramountcy of every aspect of her quotidian existence within her journal.

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