

**The Element of Life and Creation as it lurks in Doris Lessing's  
*The Golden Notebook***

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**Abstract**

Doris Lessing; the Nobel Laureate of literature 2007, is one of those most powerful and significant novelists of the twentieth and twenty first century who dominated the post-war English and has written on various themes like feminism, the battle of the sexes, individuals in search of wholeness, cultural clashes, racial discrimination and the dangers of science and technology. Apart from contributing to the contemporary themes, she has also placed herself successfully to be a power bearer of life and creation as an author. It is an author who gives life and sense to his or her characters literally and while doing so transfers some events, experiences and characteristics of his or her own self to characters, which exists in the work either in lurking or exposed form and *The Golden Notebook* is one of the masterpieces of Lessing in which such element of life and creation lurks till unveiled and this paper is an attempt for the same.

**Keywords: Author, character, life and creation, lurking.**

A writer's works have a deep impact of his/her personal experiences. In his/her work, a writer can present the situations or characters which s/he faced or met. The impact of their life can be seen on their works as Lessing writes, "First novels are usually autobiographical" (WS 14). But it is the artistic quality of the writer that how s/he mingles the facts with the fiction. Lessing further writes, "First novels, particularly by women are often attempts at self-definition, whatever their literary merits" (14). In her works, the elements of her personal life can be seen with the appropriate use of fiction, as is written in *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, "Lessing's fiction closely parallels her own life" (355).

Doris Lessing wrote two volumes of her autobiography which were published under the titles *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade* in 1994 and 1997 respectively. The first volume recounts the first thirty years of her life, from her birth in Persia in 1919, through her childhood and young adulthood in Southern Rhodesia to her departure for London in 1949 with the typescript of her first novel *The Grass is Singing*. It describes Lessing as a child, the growth of her consciousness, her sexuality and her political beliefs as a young woman. According to Martha Duffy, "*Under My Skin*...is not so much a recollection of her early life in Southern Rhodesia as a dissection of it" (Wilson 1717). For this work, she got James Tait Black Memorial Prize and Los Angeles Times Book Prize in 1995 for the best biography. *Walking in the Shade*, her second volume of autobiography, came in 1997 which covers the period of her arrival in London in 1949 to the publication of her renowned work *The Golden Notebook* in 1962. It was nominated for the 1997 National Book Critics Circle Award in the biography/autobiography category.

Lessing's most popular novel *The Golden Notebook*, is her real breakthrough, because of which she is considered as "one of the most wide-ranging and challenging explorers of the contemporary world" (Maslen 3). Even the burgeoning feminist movement sees it as the key text or manifesto of feminism. Though the work has a layer of feminist philosophy, "but at its core *The Golden Notebook* has more to do with the rights of the individual in a society than with the role of women" (Louis 356). The novel was translated into eighteen languages and still remains "her most successful and most technically sophisticated achievement so far" (Vinson 380). It drew the attention of her readers towards the issues of feminism, freedom, bondage and questioning of realism. For this work, she received the Prix Medicis Award in 1976.

*The Golden Notebook* was regarded by the critics as the most important single novel written by a British author since the Second World War. It marked the beginning of the

Feminist movement and inspired a sexual revolution. As part of the wider shift in popular culture and public morality, the decade witnessed “a post Freudian openness about sexual relationships...and a post Lawrentian attempt to sanctify sexuality” (Sanders 611).

Anna Wulf, the narrator- protagonist of the novel keeps four notebooks as a means of separating and analyzing different aspects of her life. She is a divorced woman and has a young daughter, Janet, with whom she lives in a London flat. She is the author of a successful first novel entitled *Frontiers of War* which gives her a measure of financial independence. Her relationships with men and disenchantment with communism gives her a feeling that her life is ‘cracking up’. She is suffering from a writer’s block. The only writing she is able to do between her first novel and her ‘breakdown’ is the notebooks which comprise the major part of her narrative. Out of her fear of madness, she records her experiences into four different notebooks. The notebooks are of different colors, “as if Anna had, almost automatically, divided herself into four, and then from the nature of what she had written, named these divisions” (Lessing, GN 71).

Anna Wulf, an ex-communist and an author of a popular first novel, lives in post-war London with her small daughter, Janet. Janet is the child of Max Wulf with whom Anna had a brief involvement while she was staying in Africa. She married Max, whom she could never love and they were divorced after the child was born. She came to London with the child and the manuscript of her first novel, *Frontiers of War*, which became a celebrity after its publication. The royalty she receives from the book gives her a measure of financial independence.

This background of Anna Wulf has a lot of similarity with Doris Lessing. She also moved to the post-war London in 1949 with her son Peter and the manuscript of her first novel *The Grass is Singing*. Peter was the son of Gottfried Lessing, with whom she married but never loved. In her autobiography *Walking in the Shade*, she mentioned it as a “political marriage” (38) and they got divorced in 1949. *The Grass is Singing*, like *Frontiers of War* got immediate success after its publication and established Lessing’s reputation as a writer as well as produced a good amount of money for her.

After coming in London, Lessing came into a close contact of a man whom she named Jack and began to love him deeply. When he left her, she could not forget him for years and his memory left an indelible impression in her mind and also influenced her relationships with other man. Similarly three years after Michael’s departure, Anna’s lover, she cannot forget him. With every passing day, the memory of Michael in her mind grows

deeper and influences her relationship with other men. Michael is fictionalized in the Yellow Notebook as Paul Tanner.

Like her protagonist Anna Wulf, Doris Lessing's first novel *The Grass is Singing* also discusses the problem of color-bar. The novel which typified the social relations of apartheid was described as "a serious study of a woman's moral disintegration set starkly down...a powerful and bitter work", in the *Times Literary Supplement* (225). The novel was set in Southern Rhodesia and reads as an "explicit indictment of racist colonial society" while it depicts too "a mystical and deterministic resignation in the face of the forces of savage nature" (Bertelsen 648). It tells the story of a white woman, Mary, who leaves the poor family farm on the veld to live a happy single life in the town and disastrously marries Dick Turner, a poor and stubborn farmer, and Mary's physical as well as emotional relation with her black servant, Moses. Though *Frontiers of War* presents the tragic love story of a white man and a black woman and *The Grass is Singing* presents the tragic love story of a white woman and a black man but both novels presents a tragic love-story of color-bar.

As Anna's first novel presents her deeply felt experiences of her early life in Africa, which she mentions in her Black notebook, so does the first novel of Lessing. Zambesia is the name, Lessing gives to that part of Africa where her African writing is set, describing it in the author's note to *The Four Gated City* as a "composite of various white dominated parts of Africa and...some of the characteristics of its white people are those of any ruling minority whatever their colour" (655). Scott clearly categorized Lessing as an anti-colonial and writes "When she is writing of the subject that has claimed her, that of race relations in Africa, Miss Lessing often gives the impression that she is practicing to write a masterpiece" (55). The central characters of *The Grass is Singing* are also the parts of her experience, as she writes in *Walking in the Shade*. "Dick Turner, the falling farmer, was a figure I had seen all my life.... Mary Turner I took from a woman I had known for the years, One of the sports club girls" (14).

Peter Carey, the member of RAF, with his group protest against the injustice meted out to the blacks during the week and at the weekend they go to a luxurious hotel Mashopi outside the town to enjoy wine and good food. Lessing experienced this situation when she met a group of RAF including Frank Cooper, Gottfried Lessing, Nathan Zelter, Dorothy Schwartz and Ken Graham who came in Rhodesia because of the impending war. She accepts, "The period when the Cambridge RAF were with us, a time with its own flavor and taste, went to make up the Mashopi parts of *The Golden Notebook*" (Lessing, UMS 314).

Anna had hated the place from the very beginning. She first came to Rhodesia in 1938 to marry a tobacco farmer, Steven, whom she had met in London the year before. She liked Steven very much but could not stand the solitariness of farm life and came to Salisbury to pursue a career. Lessing got married for the first time in 1939 with Frank Charles Wisdom but it was a “conventional marriage” (Lessing, WS 37) and the couple got divorced. So the first marriage of both the writers proved a failure.

In Salisbury, Anna met Wilhelm Rodde (Willi Rodde) who was a communist refugee from Germany and became involved with politics. Anna and Willi did not like or understand each other. They were also “sexually incompatible” (Lessing, GN 83) but still they began to live together. Doris Lessing met Gottfried Lessing, a German Jewish immigrant and communist intellectual with whom she got married in 1943. She was not in deep love with this man and considered this marriage a “political marriage” (Lessing, WS 38). To some extent, Willi can be said the portrait of Gottfried Lessing. Doris Lessing and Gottfried Lessing got divorced in 1949. As Willi became a powerful official in East Germany, Gottfried later became the East German ambassador to Uganda.

The Red Notebook contains entries about Anna’s political life and deals with her experience as an intellectual member of the British Communist Party in the 1950s and her gradual disenchantment with Marxism. The Notebook captures the climate of the Cold war era and highlights the post-war disillusionment. Lessing’s autobiography, *Under My Skin*, provides a perceptive account of her intellectual engagement with communism, its enchantment and contradictions. She found a philosophy in communism which crystallized all the thoughts, beliefs and ideas she had valued from the beginning of her adult life. She writes in the autobiography, “I became a Communist because of the spirit of the times” (259).

The central theme of the novel is breakdown or fragmentation in its social and personal forms. Anna divides her experience into intelligible parts in order to avoid chaos and confusion. Her desire to embrace communism, a political doctrine, which looks at things as a whole, reflects her attempt to seek an elusive totality in her life. Explaining her decision to join the British Communist Party in the early 1950s, Anna writes in her notebook, “somewhere at the back of my mind when I joined the party was a need for wholeness, for an end to the split, divided unsatisfactory way we all live” (Lessing, GN 157). But politics, like psychoanalysis, failed to solve Anna’s problem. After joining the party, the split within her instead of being healed, only widened. Her problem was that after coming back into the Party fold, she hardly met anybody except the communists and they could not be expected to speak

frankly about politics. She felt herself isolated and it was the one major reason why she left the party.

Doris Lessing joined the Communist Party with great enthusiasm but over the years her political attitudes and beliefs changed. The great enthusiasm was replaced by a steadily growing cynicism about communism. The socialist role in Central and South Africa during the war and the horror of the communist rule in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe contributed largely to her disillusionment with communism.

The Yellow Notebook looks like the manuscript of a novel, *The Shadow of the Third*. Ella is a projection of Anna's self, her alter ego, and the relationship of Ella and Julia is an account of the relation between Anna and Molly. Ella, a divorcee, lives in Julia's house like Anna, who lives in Molly's house. So Ella can be called a projection of Lessing herself. Ella's father was an ex-military officer from India and a "silent hard-bitten" man (175). Like Ella's father, Lessing's father was also in the British army as a captain during the First World War. Lessing's father lost his one leg during the war and thus became unfit for the army. Ella's father also "got unfit for the army" (180). She clearly writes in her autobiography, "Joan was Molly, much altered, of course, and I, Ella" (Lessing, WS 306).

The Yellow Notebook is interspersed with Anna's analysis of Paul-Ella relationship and her remarks about the problems she faces as a writer, particularly the difficulty of writing explicitly about feminine sexuality. Paul Tanner can be said a character derived from Doris Lessing's real life. Like Ella, she met a man, who was a psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital, in a party. She gives him a name Jack in her autobiography, *Walking in the Shade*. Like Paul, Jack had worked as a doctor with the armies throughout the war. At their first meeting, Jack fell in love with Lessing but she did not at once fell in love with him like Ella. But she loved him because of his loving her so much. During her relation with Jack, she realized that her previous marriages were futile. She writes, "I had never been 'really' married to Frank Wisdom, but for four years we had a conventional marriage. Gottfried and I had hardly been well matched, but we had lived conventionally enough...I felt that these marriages did not count (Lessing, WS 37).

Lessing finds Jack the most suitable man for her and writes, "I was born to live companionably- and passionately- with the right man, and here he was" (38). Both of them understood each other very well. According to Lessing, they had everything in common. They suited emotionally, physically and mentally with each other. So she decides to settle her life with Jack as she writes, "I was ready to settle own forever with this man" (39). Like Paul,

Jack also comes back from the war to find his wife, whom he had married long years before and the two children whom he hardly knew. Like Paul, Jack has no intention of marrying Lessing. He says, “I am sleeping with other women, I have no intention of marrying you” (39). But he spends his night in Lessing’s place and in the morning leaves her “to pick up clean shirt from home” (94). It is the same reason for which Jack leaves Ella in the morning.

As Paul left Ella, Jack left Lessing too. He was going to abroad to some hospital. Lessing knew that he had arranged it to break with her. Both of them knew that it was the end of their relationship. Lessing was deeply shocked of his departure. She presents the farewell scene at the airport in her autobiography, “We embraced. He left. I immobilized, tears flooding” (Lessing, WS 141). She considers her affair with Jack, which had lasted four years, ‘a marriage’, “more of one than either of my two legal marriages” (141). She further writes about the seriousness of her relation with Jack and the emotional shock she received after it:

I had been uncooked, raw, not involved with more than a small part of myself. But with this man, it had been all or nothing. How absurd that was: he had never ever said he would marry me, made any promises. And yet I had been committed to him. This was the most serious love in my life....There is no one who hasn’t suffered over love at some time, and so it should be enough to say that being thrown over by this man was bad for me. It was the worst. I was unhappy for a long time...My great love, with Jack, had ended badly. (141)

After the departure of Jack, Lessing, like Ella, shifts to her own flat.

The Blue Notebook depicts Anna’s mental breakdown and her efforts to come to terms with a fractured reality and a fragmented psyche. The notebook testifies to a terrifying sense of personal and professional fragmentation which torments Anna both as a woman and as a writer. Anna is an artist who suffers from a writer’s block. Due to her fear of chaos and destruction, Anna, the free woman and artist moves towards disintegration. In his review of *The Golden Notebook* in 1962, Irwing Howe remarks that Doris Lessing is “radically different from other women writers who have dealt with the problems of their sex... in that she grasps the connection between Anna’s neuroses and the disorders of the day” (17).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Doris Lessing came under the spell of psychoanalysis, and was deeply influenced by the thoughts and ideas of C. G. Jung and R. D. Laing presented in their works. *The Golden Notebook* reveals some significant preoccupations of Jung and Laing like the unconscious, the link between the individual and the collective, dreams, neurosis, split self and insanity. Lessing’s views as manifested in the novel have striking similarities

with Laing's on the split self, manifestation of insanity, dissolution of the ego and the consequent loss or breakdown of language. Laing, in *The Politics of Experience* remarks about insanity and split-self, "What we call madness or schizophrenia may actually be a healing process that destroys the limits of ego and reconnects the psyche with transcendent experience" (27). It has a resonance in Anna's experience in the blue notebook.

The first section of the Blue Notebook describes Anna's dreams and her sessions with Mrs. Marks, a Jungian psychoanalyst, who treats her for a growing weariness. Mrs. Marks sees her cure exclusively in terms of resuming her sacred vocation as an artist, of her starting to write again. The reason why Anna consults Mrs. Marks is that "she cannot deeply feel about anything. She is frozen" (Lessing, GN 215). She tells the analyst "I've had experiences that should have touched me and they haven't" (213). There is no connection between Anna's thought and feeling. Mother Sugar (Mrs. Marks) advises her to maintain a diary and keep a record of her experiences in order to unfreeze her and release her from the writer's 'block'.

The character of Mother Sugar of *The Golden Notebook* is also derived from Lessing's real life. In *Walking in the Shade* she presents the character of Mrs. Sussman, a Roman Catholic and Jungian who was specialized in unblocking the blocked artists who could not write or paint or compose. Lessing describes Mrs. Sussman as "Mother Sugar in The Golden Notebook" (WS 35). Though Lessing was not suffering from a 'block' but she needed a support in her life. At this situation, Mrs. Sussman said to her, "If you don't stand firm now, it will be the end of you and the end of Peter too" (36). Lessing goes to visit her twice or thrice a week and considers herself lucky because Mrs. Sussman was always supporting her. She was "a friend" (133) to her.

The second section of the Yellow Notebook shows Ella's emotional dependence on Paul and the devastating effect of being rejected by him and the passivity with which she accepts it. Even after more than a year Ella has not been able to overcome the mood of depression. She accepts Patricia Brent's proposal to make a trip to Paris to meet the editor of a popular French magazine for women in order to buy the rights of a story for Women at Home. Even in the hotel in Paris she is unable to sleep without thinking of Paul. Since his departure, she has not experienced, even once, vaginal orgasm. On her return flight to London, she meets an American C. Y. Maitland, a brain surgeon. Ella feels attracted to this energetic and unpretentious youth and sleeps with him. She gives him immense pleasure but cannot achieve orgasm herself and thus got "physical disappointment" (Lessing, GN 291).

She understands that she will never experience orgasm except with a man she loves. Her emotional attachment to Paul thus plays havoc with her sex-life.

Like Anna, Lessing could not forget the memories of her ‘great love’ Jack and this attachment with him also play havoc with her sex-life. After Jack’s departure, she made relations with several other men but could not get the satisfaction. She presents her “most bizarre sexual encounter” (WS 341) with Ken Tynan. Her relation with the exiled black writer and a black man from Jamaica also proved failure and she considered herself “unlucky” (344) because she could not enjoy it.

The second section of the Blue Notebook is an objective record of a day in Anna’s life. It presents Anna in her many roles – as a house wife, a mistress, a mother and a Party worker. She joined the party out of a need for wholeness, for an end to her painful self-division. But she comes to the conclusion that there is no room for contrary opinion, criticism and dissent within a Communist organization and instead of democracy there is only centralism in it. In utter disillusionment, she decides to leave the party. She writes, “Suddenly I decide I must leave the party” (GN 311). It marks the end of an important phase of her life as she writes, “I’m leaving the party. It’s a stage of my life finished. And what next? I am going out, willing it, into something new, and I’ve got to. I’m shedding a skin, or being born again” (315).

As a communist, Lessing was always an active party member. She was active in the antinuclear movement, a member of the first Aldermaston March organizing committee with John Berger, Wolf Mankowitz, Michael Tippett, Philip Toynbee, John Braine, George Melly, John Osborne and others, and was one of the platform speakers on the march itself. *In Walking in the Shade* she writes:

The root of communism-a love of revolution-is, I believe, masochism, pleasure in pain, satisfaction in suffering. Identification with the redeeming blood....To leave ‘the party’ was to give up the greater truth, give up being an initiative into understanding the real processes of life. (241).

Like Anna, Lessing was also disappointed by the ‘dishonesty and double-dealing characteristic of the comrades’, which resulted in her leaving the party and the end of an important phase of her life. She left the party in 1956 but remained politically active.

Anna finds her motherhood a soothing and pleasant experience. She spends a lot of time and energy for her daughter. Janet has seen the complex, disorderly world that her mother inhabits and decided that it is not for her. She wants order and stability in her life. She

has a desire to go to a 'conventional' boarding school like her friends, and not to a 'progressive' school that Anna chooses for her.

For Lessing, her son Peter's happiness was more important as she writes "I had made a life for me and for Peter. That was an achievement, and I was proud of myself. The most important part was Peter, who was enjoying this life..." (WS 31). He was also sent to a boarding school. About Peter, she writes, that Peter "had been the one constant in my life" (261).

The Red Notebook ends with a story written in Anna's own hand writing. The story, rendered in parody, describes the disillusionment of a sincere and dedicated Communist Harry Matthews, and reflects the general mood of disenchantment in Europe, in the late 1950s with the myth of Communism. It can also be said the disillusionment of Lessing herself. Though she left the party but she admitted her indebtedness to the communists in *Going Home*, "I'm grateful to the communists for what they taught me; particularly about power".

The Yellow Notebook ends with a series of sketches for short stories and outlines of plot for short novels. The plots of these stories and novels revolve round the themes of the Yellow and the Blue notebooks which are based on Ella's or Anna's own experience and observation of men who enter in, her life. As the Yellow and the Blue notebooks have a lot of similarity with Lessing's life, it can be said that they are based on Lessing's own experiences.

A wandering American writer, Saul Green, arrives to stay in Anna's flat. She was not willing to allow him to stay in her flat but does so at Molly's request. Saul Green was an American leftist with a non-conformist conscience. Like Anna, he was an idealist and wants to preserve his integrity as an artist at any cost. He was younger than Anna. He talks warmly and knowledgeably about the problems of 'free woman' who live and rear children alone. According to Anna, he is capable of "real perception about woman" (GN 485) and she begins to love him. The final section of the Blue Notebook records the vicious, self-destructive antagonism of Anna and Saul which results in a tremendous explosion of erotic energy that ultimately leads to Anna's healing. She breaks into Saul and becomes inseparable from him. It is Saul to whom she admits for the first time that she is suffering from "a writer's block" (526). She decides to pack away the four colored notebooks and put "all of [herself] in one book" (528).

Clancy Sigal, an American, entered into Lessing's life. Like Anna, earlier she was not ready to let him a room in her house, but on the request of a Comrade, she provides him a room. He was younger to her. Clancy had an intelligent understanding of women, "not as

females, but of our situation, our difficulties...Women easily responded to him. In *The Golden Notebook* I call it 'naming'. He 'named' us" (Lessing, WS 155). After the departure of her 'great love' Jack, Lessing was feeling emptiness but Clancy removed her feeling, as Saul Green brings out Anna from her block. She admits' "Both Jack and Clancy are in *The Golden Notebook*" (156). Lessing admits that Anna's alter ego, Ella's situation was like herself when she wrote this novel. She writes, "Ella's situation in *The Golden Notebook* was mine, but not her character, not really." (307). She was suffering from a 'feeling of loss' and change at the time when she wrote this novel.

Thus in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, we witness the charm of author Lessing, how she creates character like Anna and others who possess the characteristics of its creator like having the same background of post war London, common ground of success in terms of first novel's transcript, love for psychoanalysis, love of motherhood, similar ups and downs in regard to marriage and love, love for communism and Marxism and gradual disillusionment with the same, which until and unless one gets acquainted with life story of Lessing in deep, otherwise cannot figure it out. So it can be said that Doris Lessing's work *The Golden Notebook* do bear element of life and creation in lurking form.

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