

The Construction of Female Identity and Existential Struggle in “The Golden Notebook”

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Abstract: “The Golden Notebook” is a renowned British novel that intricately depicts a woman’s journey of personal growth and internal conflicts. Sartre’s existentialist theory, which underscores the impact of freedom, responsibility, and choice on individual existence, offers a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of female identity construction. Based on Sartre’s existentialist theory, this thesis analyzes the identity construction process and methods of the protagonist Anna in “The Golden Notebook”, presenting how she finds a balance between freedom and responsibility, the individual and society, tradition and modernity, and revealing the deep feelings and existential struggle. Anna often faces identity confusion due to internal multiple identities and external “the other”, endures great pressure in identity construction, and ultimately achieves dialectical identity reconstruction by breaking gender boundaries, taking responsibility and highlighting female value to promote individual and social co-development. This thesis explores female identity construction in “The Golden Notebook” and provides important inspirations for modern women to take responsibility and cope with existential struggles.

Keywords: Doris Lessing; “The Golden Notebook”; construction of the female identity; existential struggle

1. Introduction

Doris Lessing is a celebrated British novelist, widely acclaimed for her insights into social, political and gender issues. Lessing’s creative career began in the early 20th century, and she gained international attention in the 1950s, culminating in her winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007 as a prominent representative of the field.

“The Golden Notebook” is widely considered to be her most iconic work. It was published in 1962, and explores female identity and the complex role of novels in modern society. The novel shows the heroine Anna’s struggles on personal, political and social levels. These struggles are shown through Anna’s life experiences. Anna is a writer. She records her life, emotions and thoughts in notebooks of different colors. This shows her constant exploration for self-identity. The novel is important because it deals with the profound problem of female identity. It covers the difficulties women face in family, career and emotional life. It also covers women’s pursuit of self-value and personal freedom. Lessing not only reveals society’s oppression and expectations of women, but also explores the dynamics of women’s relationships with men. Through Anna’s struggle, Lessing shows the inner conflict and identity crisis that women endure in multiple roles, and emphasizes how women struggle to find and reconstruct themselves in the face of social restrictions.

In the past decades, domestic and foreign studies have analyzed the survival anxiety of female characters in Lessing’s works from a wide perspective, as well as the social stereotypes and restrictions on women behind these anxieties. In 2022, Zhixin Feng published “Interpretation of Postmodern Narrative in Doris Lessing’s Golden Notebook”^[1] in *Frontiers in Educational Research* interprets Anna’s pursuit of freedom from a feminist perspective, and explores how women strive for self-worth and subjectivity in a male-dominated society. In 2023, Danqi Li’s research focused on the marginalization of women, especially through the analysis of the heroine Anna in the novel, revealing the marginal position of women in the patriarchal society.^[2] Laura Ritland’s research explores the practice of feminist criticism from a methodological perspective, challenging traditional objectivist criticism through the use of collage as a critical strategy and innovating upon Virginia Woolf’s writing techniques.^[3] In 2024, Chowdhury Adiba Zahin expanded the discourse on female identity with their publication, “Female Identity and Gender Dynamics in Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook: An Analysis of the Female Characters.”^[4] Zahin’s work examines the formation of female identity through a sociological lens, emphasizing how

social expectations, gender norms, and internal conflicts shape women's experiences, particularly in areas such as the female subjectivity, motherhood, and sexual freedom.

These studies all show the many-sided nature of how female identity is built. But they usually don't look into the philosophical parts of this process. This lack in the research makes it necessary to look at "The Golden Notebook" more deeply using an existentialist view. Past research has paid attention to sociological and feminist views. This thesis connects feminist criticism and existentialist ideas. It gives a new way to understand Anna Wulf's problems and successes. By doing this, it makes the existing studies on Lessing's work better. It also shows that existentialist ideas are still important in today's talks about identity and freedom.

The main body of the thesis has three parts. The first part points out the many dilemmas. For example, choosing between marriage and freedom, balancing political or professional ideals with reality, and making emotional needs match personal independence. These choices often cause constant confusion. The confusion comes from trying to define oneself among many identities and external judgments ("the other"). The second part focuses on the pursuit of authenticity. This involves the tension of combining identity, the pressure of making decisions, and the courage to think about oneself. The third part stresses the responsibility to rebuild identity. These three parts together show how to deal with, combine, and redefine identity when facing societal expectations and personal hopes.

2. Make Choices to Navigate Identity

This chapter centers around the state that women are caught in the identity dilemma because they face various choices and the balance of multiple roles in the society. Under the confusion of multiple roles, women are defined as "the other" by society.

2.1 Multiple Choices of Female Identity

2.1.1 Marriage or Freedom

The novel focuses on "free women", but no matter in or out of marriage, women can not achieve freedom. Marion admires Molly and Anna and called them "free women", but in the views of the two, the fact is far from it, and the so-called single state is just a hidden prison. Men in novels are often emotionally cold. They substitute sex for love and are uncomfortable with equal relationships with women. Men repeatedly tell Anna and Ella (the female character in Anna's *The Shadow of the Third*) that she's lucky to be single, which means they're lucky to be able to have sex with her comfortably without having to love her or commit to her. These men only value single women if they can claim to be "conquerors". They want to own them, not treat them as equals, and certainly don't open up to them emotionally.

In fact, women in marriage lose their husbands' romantic interest even if they do what society demands of them. Marion's relationship with Richard illustrates this point. Marion is seen by her husband, Richard, as a housewife who simply takes care of their children, and he completely ignores her for years, blaming her for her alcoholism, which leaves her in a state of losing her voice for much of the first half of the book. However, when she finally becomes close to Tommy, the first person ever to give her serious attention and affection, she stops drinking, discovers a passion for politics, and declares herself free, much to Richard's chagrin. Being rejected by her husband in the early stage, and even being abandoned by her gradually; Later, after Marion awakens consciousness, she wants to enter politics like Tommy, but is once again despised and misunderstood.

It is not difficult to find that Marion is also affected by male power and looks at single women from the perspective of a man with real power. She instinctively believes that being free from the constraints of marriage is the ideal state of independence for a person. But this also falls into the trap. The society can determine the formation of individual character and even the direction of fate. This means that a person's environment and the class attributes of their family will have a huge impact on them.

2.1.2 Political, Professional Ideal or Reality

Anna's relationships in the 1940s with German exiles Willi Rodde, a young British pilot Paul Blackenhurst and others were filled with a sense of social and geographical fear and displacement as they were not only forced to fight in World War II, and they were also forced to confront the parallels between their country's treatment of colonial peoples and the Nazi campaign of genocide and territorial expansion. The growing African movement for independence from European colonial powers also appeared in the

background of the novel. Anna both supported these movements and benefits from colonial racism, which caused her to feel a deep sense of powerlessness in the face of the British occupation of Central African society.

The history of the Soviet Union is also crucial in “The Golden Notebook”, as Anna spends a large portion of the book grappling with her conflicting feelings about left-wing ideals versus practical reality. In the context of the time, although Anna still held left-wing beliefs, she only engaged in meaningless work within some peripheral organizations, feeling deeply empty spiritually. Especially after the 20th Congress of the Soviet Union, the relevant political organizations in Britain began to split and disintegrate, and Anna fell into utter despair over everything she had once believed in, powerless to do anything more.

2.2 Persistent Confusion of Female Identity

2.2.1 Confusion of Multiple Identities

The confusion that Anna found herself in was also a microcosm of society at the time. Anna plays multiple roles as a writer, political activist, lover and mother, and there is great tension between these roles. This coexistence of multiple identities leads to the deep identity crisis.

Anna was constantly struggling between her ideals and her personal life. She couldn't write, love, or commit to politics, even if she knew what she wanted and what she had to do to achieve it. As a writer, her thought and action weren't just disjointed, they were actually opposite: the more Anna reflected, the more she felt unable to act. As a mother and lover, Anna had no enough time to look after her daughter, and had no effective way to gain Michael's true love. She feared that when she truly assembled into an integrated body, she would not have the courage to implement it. She repeatedly talked about lacking of moral energy and often felt that her mind was so developed that no action can live up to her political, romantic, or moral vision of the world.

After years of obsessively reading newspapers, Anna told her psychoanalyst, Mrs. Marks, that “nothing I could write about seemed to make any sense”^[5], compared to the terrible events taking place in the world. She felt that art had lost its meaning, just like her life, and that action was the only thing that could heal the world. As existentialism emphasizes the meaninglessness of life, meaninglessness always emerges within and without us, that is, nothingness entangles existence.^[6] Every living confusion that actually happens in life and the identity that Anna assume already exists, which means that meaninglessness comes into being naturally. Too many identity roles will make women's spiritual world confused. Anna's moral vision of an idealistic society was so far removed from the reality she saw that she had to give up.

2.2.2 Confusion of “The Other”

Women see themselves as a lover/wife and mother, identities that are fully presupposed by social norms and are fully valued by the gaze of others. Anna realizes that she, too, is only a defined being, and that her worth depends entirely on her level of obedience to men. As a single mother, taking care of her daughter, Anna not only supports the men she dates materially, cooking and cleaning for them, but also, emotionally, protects their egos.

In that time, the patriarchy constructed a power system that comprehensively suppressed women. Society saw women as attachments. It took away their independence and status as individuals. Society used different obvious and hidden ways to control behavior. These things made women accept the unfair power system. At this time, women have to accept this outside power system. They have to hold back their real wants. Sartre found that the “original crisis” of existence is caused by “the other”, and under the covet of “the others”, man's own existence is in crisis deeply.^[7] Women face a serious identity crisis in power confrontation.

However, compared with most women of her time, Anna undoubtedly has a sense of resistance, and she seeks her controllable identity from the gap of “the other”, just as Sartre perfected the concept of “the others” with dialectics from both theoretical and practical aspects in the later period, and further proved that the subject's planning is the product of the comprehensive influence of the individual and the group. This means that “the other” and “self” are not diametrically opposed dualists. When Sartre discusses the relationship between individuals and others in being and nothingness, he clearly points out that the function of others is a mirror. He believes that the subject's knowledge of himself is partly realized through others, which is just like looking in the mirror is the direct way for people to understand their own looks. While fulfilling her multiple social roles in the power structure, Anna recorded her split personality consciousness and analyzed all aspects of society through her unique female perspective.^[7]

3. Pursue Authenticity to Integrate Identity

In the process of pursuing her true self and integrating her identity, Anna is under enormous pressure, not only from society's expectations of multiple roles, but also from her own struggles.

3.1 Tension of Identity Integration

3.1.1 Great Pressure brought by Choice

After her lover Michael left, Anna often fell into hallucinations and nightmares. As a result, she kept a diary, turned to a psychologist, and began to deeply introspection herself. It seemed that she had to accept the old distance known to the world. She began to yield to social reality, but struggled in the ideal and reality. With men, she had to face the reality, or simply find a mediocre and agreeable man, but she would not do that. A fresh life is always full of contradictory things, Anna's painful self-examination, her own madness is actually in order to get rid of the past mental fantasy, so as to complete the personality of the only way, she is eager to return to the normal life track, she has a lot of reasons to live.

In the process of self-consciousness awakening, a man need to experience self-denial and break through the original identity boundaries. Anna experienced a marriage failure, career transition, political ambitions and other desires for marriage and independence at the same time.

Additionally, embracing conflict and refusing to run away should be learned. She kept conflicting ideas separate at first to avoid reading them in the same place. However, when the notebooks begin to seep into each other (such as when Anna realizes that her reflection in the yellow notebook should actually belong to the blue notebook), she understands that she must follow the advice Tommy gives her, must stop dividing her mess, and write all her thoughts together to confront it, in one place, and show it to the world.

3.1.2 Brave Determination Struggling for Self-reflection

Anna comes to realize that freedom is not a state of being given, but one that is earned through continuous choice and action. The real freedom is to separate the individual from the social experience, to find their own unique position in the grand, to escape from the pain. This view directly echoes Sartre's existential thought that "Man is condemned to be free"^[8].

The negating power of consciousness is at work within the self. Sartre applies the idea of negating power to reflection. He shows how reflective consciousness goes against natural consciousness it focuses on. This causes the self to be unstable during reflection. The self is pulled in two directions. It is seen as one thing, but also as two things when thought about. Sartre gives this lack of self-identity a new meaning. He says it is a task. That means that the unity of the self is a task for the for itself, a task which amounts to the self's seeking to ground itself.^[6]

Through continuous self-reflection, Anna is no longer defined by simple gender, class, and political positions, but pursues a more complex and direct self-awareness. From *The Shadow of the Third* in her yellow notebook, "Then she finds herself thinking: I've got to accept the patterns of self-knowledge which mean unhappiness or at least a dryness. But I can twist it into victory", "...And out of the chaos, a new kind of strength"^[5].

Just like Ella, Anna realized that there still has a sense of self-strength for her to gather, though she need to wait for a time. She waits patiently, for the images to form, to take on life.

Anna began the process of self-redemption by writing in a journal. During a conversation with Mrs. Marks, a psychotherapist, Anna realized: "The next stage is, surely, that I leave the safety of myth and Anna Wulf walks forward alone"^[5]. This process embodies the basic idea of existentialism on self-selection and subject construction.

It cannot be denied that Anna had an extremely acute sense of awakening potential from the very beginning. Through self-reflection and critical thinking, women gradually break through the shackles of the power structure. She wrote notes separately, and as she began to record her life experiences, even though the cluttered notes themselves were the embodiment of Anna's division, she gradually realized that she was no longer a passive object but an active writing subject.

3.2 Pursuit of the Existential Authenticity

3.2.1 Embrace True Self and Freedom

It is mentioned at various points that Anna experienced deep feelings in her dreams, which became her main source of insight into fear, pain, and emotional needs. Here Anna's dreams also contain their own personal meaning:

"I felt this, like a vision, in a new kind of knowing. And I knew that the cruelty and the spite and the I, I, I, I, of Saul and of Anna were part of the logic of war; and I knew how strong these emotions were, in a way that would never leave me, would become part of how I saw the world..."^[5]

After the terrible nightmare, Anna gained a complete sense of individual peace and ease. Anna tried for the first time to think about the evil in human nature from a positive perspective, she accepted the imperfect self with the dark side, and the individual was freed from the heavy moral load. At the same time, in the process of communicating with Saul, Anna is empowered with each other, an ability to acknowledge the "feelings" that come with them, to digest, absorb, and generalize experiences.

In fact, Anna's four notebooks prior to *The Gold Notebook* were a jumble of records, and it was because she was constantly aware of her tendency to fall into the wrong (and inappropriate) type of content that she forced herself to use this method of segmentation. As she began to write in the gold notebook, Anna not only forgot the strict distinctions between the different parts of herself, which were blended into the dreams she described in the gold notebook, but also finely tuned the distinctions between herself and Saul, who seemed to invade her consciousness and her dreams.

3.2.2 Accept Contradiction and Imperfection

As mentioned above, Anna tries to liberate her nature by thinking after her dreams. Anna's most important dreams are her nightmare about "joy in spite", and those about Saul as the projectionist replaying her memories in "The Golden Notebook". Both dreams represent her struggle to overcome contradictions, not necessarily to resolve them to one side or the other, no longer to unilaterally choose happiness or resentment, but to feel herself or Saul as the true driving force of her identity (merging with it) and choosing to take both sides of the contradiction within herself. Mrs Marks teaches Anna to dream the "joy in spite" dream "positively", and to awake "filled with joy and peace". The dreams in the golden notes allowed Anna to see her diverse perspectives on life and the world, which began to merge into words on a page that represented her creativity in writing *Free Women*.

As her creativity returned, Anna gradually learned to be consistent. At first Anna saw writing as "a kind of great dream", and she constantly demanded that she pay attention to heroic figures. There is an allegory from Greek mythology in the novel. A group of people were pushing a big round rock up the hill. Just a few feet up, war broke out, and the stone rolled down, not to the end, but to rest a little higher than before. So the group pushed against the rock and started pushing up again. At the same time, some great men are standing on the top of the mountain. They looked down and nodded, the man pushing the stone was doing his best. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was sent to hell to be punished after his death for betraying Zeus. Every day he pushes a huge rock from the foot of the mountain to the top. But every time he tried to push the rock to the top of the mountain, the rock rolled down the hill. As a result Sisyphus had to push the rock from the foot of the mountain to the top again. This hard work is repeated day after day, with no hope of success, no possibility of completion. This parable rich symbolic significance. Summarizing her own experience of life, Anna finally realized that the ideal she pursued was so far out of reach.

4. Take Responsibility to Reconstruct Identity

With the gradual reconstruction of multiple identities, women still need to complete the final reconstruction. In this process, Anna regards herself as a member of the whole society, learns to respect existing things, breaks through gender limitations, and accepts all the imperfect existence and imperfect-self in the society. Finally, she found a unique and forward-looking way to reconstruct a free woman identity in the circumstances of her time.

4.1 A Dialectical Integration of Multiple Identities

4.1.1 Break Gender Boundaries

Individuals never live alone, each individual must exist in the crowd, the type of group and its internal organization will have an impact on the fate of individuals. Individual choices, whether good or bad, will have an impact on the group. If the personal choice is applicable to the whole age, then it will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the society in which it is in. In this way, the idea of being responsible to oneself as well as to all people can have positive implications for shaping the destiny of individuals and groups.

Anna finally breaks through the gender limitation and constructs a subjectivity that surpasses the traditional gender boundary. Anna and Molly both tried to rebel against society in their own way and at first they were very radical in their stance and vowed to fight against male society in order to reclaim the place of female self and refuse to be marginalized. However, they are losing ground in the face of the enormous transformation power of male society. When Anna meets Saul Green, an American writer who also suffers from writer's block, the relationship between the two allows readers to see a new relationship between men and women and feel the scene of harmony between men and women. Then Anna had a new dream:

“I slept and I dreamed the dream. This time there was no disguise anywhere. I was the malicious male-female dwarf figure, the principle of joy-in-destruction; and Saul was my counter-part, male-female, my brother and my sister, ...is concentrated into a kiss or a caress, but now it was the caress of two half-human creatures, celebrating destruction.”^[5]

There is already a clear sense here that the mutual understanding and support of Anna and Saul, men and women, is the key to solving the problems between men and women. The idea of androgyny is embodied here. The two help each other, merge with each other, and in a symbolic sense are soul mates, one representing the male component, the other representing the female component, and the two combine into a unified, active, creative whole.

The emancipation and development of women are necessary. As the main body of creative practice, women can achieve success only by combining self-struggle with social movement. But the emancipation of women does not mean the exclusion of men. While women's status continues to rise, the sexes will also touch lips and teeth. The whole nature shares the same ecosystem, and women's freedom does not come from achieving absolute physical or psychological independence, because there is inevitably a spiritual need to seek dependence and emotional comfort.

4.1.2 Combine Individual and Society's Progress

Anna was, for the most part, more liberal than her predecessors. She became a mother, a lover, a professional writer, a liberal intellectual. On the surface, Anna did gain freedom that traditional women could not enjoy. However, Anna, a “free woman”, also faces many difficulties in real life. She is locked in the room by her own freedom. From this point of view, the novel is forward-looking. Lessing no longer takes traditional women as the writing object, but turns to a free woman with a successful career. This means that women in any state can not really escape from the dilemma of social gender relations.

By the end of the novel, Anna in *Free Women* seemed to start and end in the same place --- in the apartment with Molly, gossiping about their peers, then leaving to take care of Janet. But with one key difference, she has learned to act on her own principles, by becoming a marriage counselor and teaching children. Rather than trying to define oneself by playing a given role in the political environment or trying to find their own position in a traditional society dominated by men, this process of seeking identities again is a process of female self-growth and a process in which women gradually realize their responsibility for the world around them.

Moreover, not only for the family, the liberation of the individual is closely related to the progressive unity of society. Existentialists believe that taking responsibility for existence is a kind of humanism.^[9] If society is destined to be a world of both sexes, then women should interpret the value of life with a new attitude. Traditional women often want to achieve self-fulfillment outside the family. But in fact, women should pursue the ideal new marriage and family life by not adhering to the “angel” role of a good wife and mother, but also taking responsibility for the family and society.^[10] Whether men or women, the field of vision should not only be concerned about personal gains and losses, but should look around. Individuals can throw themselves into the stream of politics, or they can shine in their own work. In Anna's case, it is clear to the reader that she is trying to empathize with every misfortune in the world. She has a deep sense of distress, which also reflects the existential sense of responsibility. The liberation

and happiness of the individual are part of the liberation and happiness of humanity as a whole.

4.2 A Unique Living Way of Female Responsibility

4.2.1 Unleash Unique Female Potential in Society

The bond between Anna and her best friend Molly is also based on a shared criticism of men, and their conversations revolve around men, too. When women are no longer perceived as objects for male venting and domination, their unique potential will gradually be unlocked. And when women's own potential is seriously underestimated, they will gradually lose the original power of self-perception. Anna believed that she would be unable to function normally after enduring painful love losses and writing blockages.

However, in reality, she began to observe the lives of others within her social circle with a more nuanced and inherently feminine perspective. She gradually transitioned from being a passive object of control into an active subject of experience, rectifying past deviations in social, familial, and emotional realms. She realized that women can independently and proactively assume multiple roles in society rather than being coerced into accepting predefined pressures. By the end of the novel, Anna has regained her faith, entered a new relationship, and embraced a fresh beginning.

Finally, Anna uses strategic identity integration to find space for survival and development in the gap of social system. Instead of being a complete victim, she chooses to make choices actively and seek for freedom for herself. Absolute freedom, as a form of existence of independent individuals, is intended to remind people that the subject is the real legislator, and that responsibility and freedom are one. In the situation of interacting with others, people realize that seeking transcendental goals outside the subject requires individual responsibility, so as to break the freedom caused by others to individuals.^[8]

4.2.2 Highlight Practical Female Self-value in Society

In addition, Sartre's humanism has another profound meaning, which means the action of man focusing his purpose on reality by virtue of his own supremacy. This constitutes the relationship between man's transcendence (not understood as God is transcendent, but as transcendent himself) and subjectivity (meaning that man is not closed within himself but permanently in the human universe).^[8] In the novel, Anna strives for her life in reality and accomplishes her cognitive transcendence in the end.

Anna's construction path is very characteristic and forward-looking. In the existentialist view, the horizon cannot survive independently from the limited perspective. This shows that taking the God perspective is ineffective, because the perspective itself does not exist.^[8] At any time, value is meaningful only when realized from a limited perspective. All efforts and actions made by individuals in order to realize value are ultimately aimed at pursuing their own integrity. When an individual takes self-shaping as his life goal, he actually describes and evaluates his own behavior from an external perspective. In fact, this is consistent with the moral philosophy of existentialism. Individuals show self-cultivation and virtue to others by their own actions

In addition, by reflecting on her own mental journey, Anna realized that the value of women in the society can use but not rely on outside force to reflect. From the "expansion" of the restless self to the awareness of human being as the smallest component unit of society, She transferred from the perceptual output of youth to the rational thinking of maturity.^[11] Among social collectives, both men and women, old and young, they all should work together to assume their own responsibilities, to think about social phenomena, focus on the racial aspects of globalization, report on the impressions of participating in political parties and make awareness and publicity work. This method is suitable for long-term existence state of human society.

5. Conclusion

Through Anna's growth, "The Golden Notebook" vividly interprets the core propositions of existentialism about subject selection, self-construction and meaning creation. The integration of female identity is not a direct linear process or arrival at a fixed state, but a dialectical journey full of tension, pain relief, nourishment and continuous breakthrough.

Anna's growth process embodies the fundamental insight of existentialism: individual existence precedes essence, and we constantly create ourselves through choice and action. Anna's story is not only a process of modern women's awakening and identity reconstruction, but also the embodiment of the

existential dilemma and self-redemption that individuals generally face. The freedom emphasized by existentialism is absolute, human beings exist as freedom, existence precedes essence, cannot get the essence that has been determined from nature, and a non-existent God cannot define man.

To find a balance between the role prescribed by traditional values and the pursuit of a new modern path is not only a choice of personal fate, but also a promotion of social transformation. The key is that individuals, especially women, are neither completely subservient to a given role nor blindly antagonistic. Reality should be respected, but being fully defined by reality should be avoided; ideals should be pursued, while change is promoted with a pragmatic attitude. The “uncertainties” in contemporary society, such as professional competition, technological changes, and social discipline pressures, may also trigger mental crises among women. Women are not only family members but also participants and recorders of social change.

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