The Theme of Fragmentation in the Golden Book by Dorris Lessing

Dr. Kaushal Kishore Sharma

Abstract—Amongst many of the themes, including colonialism, communism, feminism, apartheid, sexuality and others, that are found in the fiction of Nobel laureate Dorris May Lessing the theme of fragmentation has remained the forte and favorite of the author who possess a natural vividness to reflect it in almost all of her works. The present paper is a humble attempt to explore fragmentation in the novel The Golden Book hailed as the “inner space fiction of Lessing by Margaret Drabble in The Oxford companion to English Literature. The mental and societal breakdown that forms the core of the novel will be discussed at length in the paper.

Index Terms—Fragmentation, Dorris Lessing, The Golden Book, Literature.

I. INTRODUCTION

Narrated in a unique non-linear fashion with many different sections intersecting with each other The Golden Notebook is about Anna Wulf’s life which she herself feels and writes in four separate, fragmented stories of her life recorded in four separate notebooks, trying to bind them together into one golden notebook. The book explores the nostalgic apprehensions and the inner workings of the mind, how lives are created, and how mental, familial, and societal breakdown are intertwined within the psyche. Lessing’s deliberate and intended focus is to analyze the theme of fragmentation in the novel. The character of Anna suffers a mental breakdown, echoing the confusion and required techniques of the notebook narrative. Anna must resolve herself and experiences out into different written works, and when trying to bring them together, she finds herself losing her mind. This is a direct illustration of what Lessing saw the role of women becoming as women found themselves trying to navigate life experience, politics, family, and personal feelings in Lessing’s own words:

“This novel, then, is an attempt to break a form; to break certain forms of consciousness and go beyond them. While writing it, I found I did not believe some of the things I thought I believed: or rather, that I hold in my mind at the same time beliefs and ideas that are apparently contradictory. Why not? We are, after all, living in the middle of a whirlwind. (Preface, The Golden Notebook)

The novel is absorbed in the hue of the fragmentation theme from the very start of The Golden Notebook, and this becomes evident when Anna Wulf, the protagonist tells her closest friend and confidant Molly Jacobs that “everything’s cracking up,” in her own words, “the point is, that as far as I can see, everything’s cracking up. “The fragmentation of world and mind are surfaced as driving forces in the novel. Its plot revolves around Anna’s own gradual mental breakdown, or “crack up.” Throughout the novel, she writes endlessly about her deep fear of insanity in four different notebooks in different colors that cover four different aspects of her life—her past (black), her politics (red), her fiction (yellow), and her present (blue)—but realizes that none of them captures the real “truth” of her identity and experience. When she gives up the four books and begins writing everything in the single, titular golden notebook, Anna descends into madness, but she emerges whole, healthy, and able to write. Instead of blocking out parts of her identity to find a single, consistent truth, Anna only achieves a sense of unity and purpose by confronting the chaos within herself and refusing to partition her mind into different books. The concept of identity in the oeuvre of Dorris Lessing is never lucid or coherent, but rather a consequence of the experiences earned from the hybrid, differences, heterogeneous, often contradictory experiences and attitudes that make up any life; anyone who tries to define themselves by one thing (like one’s vocation, spouse, children, society and religion) is very much chaotic and perplexed than someone like Anna, who finally refuses to bracket herself and finds sanity by embracing, not rejecting, the segregations in her identity.

As the novel opens the reader finds that the identity of Anna is fragmented, mosaic, obscure and muddled. She cannot integrate her four separate notebooks into a single story (the novel she wishes to write), and she feels that society has split up into many sects, categories and divisions that no longer understand one another and have resorted to a “blind grasping out for their own wholeness.” Just like Anna’s mind, the novel itself is fragmented, as the reader must constantly switch between Anna’s four notebooks and disjointed thoughts within each of them. She feels that she has become multiple people and, at times, struggles to remain herself, like when she repeats, “Anna, Anna, I am Anna” on the train ride home, after noticing the palpable misery and detachment of the commuters that surround her. This also indicates the dark side of capitalism where an individual worker is nothing but a single function and role. Meanwhile, other characters in the novel are “multiplied”: in different notebooks, many characters have two different names, and many of the same names refer to different characters—the idea is that nobody can ever be a single thing. Similarly, during her disturbed relationship with the exiled American screenwriter Saul Green, Anna finds herself unable to predict which version of herself or Saul will show up in any given situation or

Dr. Kaushal Kishore Sharma, Asst. Prof. Amity University Rajasthan.
argument. When she begins to confront her madness, she dreams about “alien personalities” “invading” her body and then entering others’ bodies herself to gain their perspective—which hints that these “invasions” might not be sinister, but rather a metaphorical solution for society’s fragmentation. Just as she tries to hold herself together here, Saul during his lengthy rants, he repeats “I, I, I, I,” as though shouting his identity aloud in order to pin it down. Nevertheless the words Anna speaks and notes repeatedly, inevitably fail to capture reality: not only do her notebooks never reach the truth of who she is or what she feels, but she realizes in agony that she is “cracking up” because words stop meaning what they are supposed to and language begins to break down.

Anna, in her genuine efforts to be a one complete individual and perfect entity desperately tries to be to be one person and tries to recognize herself in her writing and decisions, to feel consistent from regularly, to banish her contradictory beliefs and deeply fears the mental breakdown she knows is inevitable. She sees two paths from her initial fragmentation to her goal of wholeness. The first is to deny and repress her contradictions (like her simultaneous resentment toward marriage and desire to marry, her belief in communist theory and her disdain for the Communist Party, or her nostalgia for her time in Africa but disgust at the novel she wrote about it). Her second alternative is paradoxical: she can dissolve her fragments, embracing chaos, contradiction, and heterogeneity. Later in the novel, she realizes that her four notebooks have represented the first solution to fragmentation: she has kept herself apart to hold herself together, segregated her contradictory thoughts to avoid ever reading them in the same place. However, when the notebooks begin bleeding into one another (like when Anna realizes her reflections in the yellow notebook should actually belong in the blue notebook), she understands that she must heed the advice Molly’s son Tommy gives her: Anna must stop dividing up her chaos and keeping it to herself, but rather confront it head-on by writing all her thoughts together, in one place, and revealing them to the world.

The novel aptly makes clear that everyone is perplexed, camouflaged, and confused from the outset, suggesting that breakdown is not the opposite of wholeness, but rather a means to it. When Anna lets her fragments dissolve into a unified self, she finally “cracks up”—she gives up her four notebooks and writes everything in the single golden notebook, which symbolizes the unification of her identity. But the golden notebook tells a story of madness: Anna hallucinates, dreams that she and Saul have entered one another’s minds, but also finally admits that she has writer’s block and was “buttoning up” her fears and emotional pain the whole time she kept separate notebooks. It is often impossible to tell whether Anna or Saul wrote different parts of the golden notebook, and they only break apart by merging one final time, exchanging opening lines for their next novels. Saul walks away with the golden notebook, which becomes his successful novel, and Anna walks away ready to write the novel Free Women, which has been The Golden Notebook’s frame story the whole time.

Finally, Anna’s madness does not result from the multiplicity of her character—everyone is multiple and it is strange and unhealthy for anyone to let themselves be defined by a single thing. Rather, Lessing separates madness from delusion: by insisting on dividing her multiple identities into different notebooks, Anna lives in delusion, much like anyone who insists they are only one thing. Anna’s madness—her insistence on embracing contradiction and combining her fragments—is a way of healing her delusion. The chaos she finally experiences is precisely what forces her to reconcile the contradictory and seemingly separate dimensions of herself into a unified and healthy whole that is, nevertheless, not simply one thing. The very existence of Free Women, Anna’s second novel, is proof that she has healed.

Though the use of four different notebooks by the protagonist Anna is initially meant to help her keep different parts of her life separated and organized yet when her mental health declines, it becomes almost impossible for her to see herself as a complete, perfect and organized individual. As she sees tensions between her identities of mother, lover, writer, and political organizer, she begins to feel more fragmented disturbed and conflicted. Anna’s sense of personal fragmentation reflects a broader sense of global fragmentation in the Cold War era. At that time, individuals no longer felt a sense of security or stable world order, and social norms were also becoming less secure. Anna’s feelings of fragmentation threaten to drive her to the brink of madness. The Golden Notebook thus is not only an appealing tale of disturbances, fragmentation of an individual but also it represents the cosmos as a whole where all are consistently at struggle to discover the singularity of their own personality maneuvering and decoding the multiple personalities. The fragmentation as an important theme doesn’t appear in the novel merely due to an artistic effect or literary device but to express a stark reality of the society as a whole and a person as an individual in the post-world war II era.

REFERENCES