

Original Paper

The Divided Self and Fragmented Narrative: The Dilemma of the “Free Woman” in Anna of “The Golden Notebook” from the Perspective of Trauma Theory

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Abstract

Doris Lessing is a literary giant in the UK, and her “The Golden Notebook” is a milestone in feminist literature. This paper, from the perspective of trauma theory, analyzes the political belief collapse, gender predicament and emotional trauma that the protagonist Anna Wulf encounters in her pursuit of the identity of a “free woman” in the novel. Anna, from classifying various notebooks to integrating them into the golden notebook, confronts fragments, accepts contradictions, and reconstructs a complex and true self in the narrative. Thus, “The Golden Notebook” becomes a witness and medium of healing for trauma, revealing the paradox of the “free woman” ideal in a specific historical and structural context, and pointing out a possible path for post-war intellectual women to traverse trauma and reshape themselves.

Keywords

The Golden Notebook, trauma theory, free woman, Doris Lessing

1. Introduction

“The Golden Notebook” (1962) written by Doris Lessing, is generally regarded as a modern classic of female literature and even world literature, which offers a profound exploration of the individual psyche under the pressures of a turbulent post-war world. It dissects the struggles of protagonist Anna Wulf in post-WWII Britain—grappling with relationships, political disillusionment, and patriarchy. Lessing’s radical formal innovation structures the narrative through Anna’s fragmented black, red, yellow, blue, and golden notebooks.

The concept of trauma originated from the Greek word “τραύμα”, which first appears in the New Testament in the story of the Good Samaritan. Scott Floyd (2008) defines trauma as “an event outside of what is normally expected in the life of an individual, and that breaks past normal coping and defense mechanisms, causing strong emotional pain”. With the integration of disciplines and the deepening of humans’ mental world, the concept of trauma has gradually expanded from the physical level to the psychological level. In the field of psychology, trauma is defined as the intense and persistent psychological reaction produced by an individual after experiencing or witnessing an event that seriously threatens life or psychological security. These events include war, natural disasters, violent crimes, sexual assault, and the death of a loved one. Judith Herman (1992) pointed out in her book “Trauma and Recovery” that “traumatic events are extraordinary events, not because they are rare, but because they disrupt the ordinary person’s adaptation to life”. This disruption is not only manifested at the moment of the event but also in the long-term and profound impact on the individual’s psychology. From the perspective of the formation mechanism of psychological trauma, it often involves multiple aspects of the individual, such as cognition, emotion, and behavior. When an individual encounters a traumatic event, their original cognitive framework is impacted, and their assumptions about the safety of the world, self-perception, and patterns of interpersonal relationships all change.

The two World Wars and the Vietnam War caused large-scale psychological problems and social protest movements, which prompted the academic community to re-examine trauma responses. The research subjects were not only men who went to war but also women in their daily lives. “The true face of women’s lives was hidden in the personal and private spheres of life”, and discussing sexual or family experiences would invite others’ humiliation, ridicule and distrust (Judith Herman, 2015). Li Jinrong (2024) started from Alison Jaggar’s theory of female alienation to illustrate the situation faced by American women after World War II, where they were isolated as individuals and their selves were erased by patriarchy. Due to the limitations of social status and gender roles, women often become high-risk groups in trauma events (Zeng Tiantian, 2025). Studying female trauma narratives can not only reveal the unique causes of trauma but also explore how women confront trauma, express it, and achieve healing and resistance in their narratives. Therefore, this thesis will adopt trauma theory to analyze and demonstrate the inner division, identity crisis, mental trauma, and the longing for and failure to achieve an integrated “complete self” during Anna’s pursuit of becoming a “free woman” in the five stages.

2. Traumatic Fracture: The Collapse of Political Beliefs and Gender Consciousness

In Doris Lessing’s “The Golden Notebook”, through the dual collapse of the protagonist Anna Wulf’s political beliefs and gender consciousness, the self-dissociation caused by traumatic fracture is profoundly presented. This section, in combination with the core concepts of trauma theory, analyzes

how the interweaving of political and gender trauma in the text leads to Anna's dissociation and splitting of the self.

Dissociation is a psychological process in which an individual becomes disconnected from their thoughts, feelings, memories or sense of identity. Dissociative avoidance is a coping mechanism where an individual disconnects from their thoughts, feelings or the surrounding environment, often as a response to trauma. In such cases, dissociation acts like a psychological defense mechanism, temporarily numbing or distancing the individual from painful experiences. Pierre Janet described dissociative defense: "They embody painful experiences, but because they are separated from the mainstream consciousness, they have to operate independently... They no longer belong to the realm of personal consciousness because they are unrelated to personal perception and lack a sense of selfhood of the personality" (Janet, 1907).

The systematic persecution of political dissidents in the Soviet Union during Stalin's era triggered a profound cognitive crisis within the Western left-wing camp. When rumors of mass executions and exiles reached Britain, Anna adopted a dissociative avoidance strategy: she denied the possibility of these reports, depicting the Soviet Union as an ideal country that could not commit such crimes. This denial was not merely deception but more like a psychological defense mechanism against the trauma and stress of an ideal possibly shattering. However, the public confirmation of the truth after Stalin's death shattered this defense. The disintegration of Western communist parties symbolized the collapse of revolutionary ideals in the face of reality, leaving Anna and Molly in a state of contradiction: on one hand, they should be relieved that the Stalin era had ended and the course might change; on the other hand, they painfully realized that his death also marked the end of their lifelong political ideals. This contradiction was more profoundly reflected in Anna's illogical reaction: she was outraged by the execution of the Rosenbergs but indifferent to the execution of dissidents by communist parties in Eastern Europe. This is precisely the trace of residual dissociative defense—she could not integrate the atrocities within the "socialist camp" into her moral framework, as if this part of cognition and emotion was still isolated from "personal perception" (Janet, 1907). Although the previous collective denial had been broken, the dissociative barrier within the individual's heart had not completely melted away, highlighting the complex and fragmented psychological trauma left after the shattering of ideals.

In addition, the identity of "free woman" that Anna claims is actually a huge irony. Behind it lies the gender-based traumatization defined by Laura S. Brown (1991)—chronic psychological trauma caused by systematic gender oppression, which continuously erodes her self-identity. In the novel, this trauma is typically manifested in the irreconcilable conflict between her professional identity and her role as a mother. She attempts to pursue economic and spiritual independence through her career as a writer, resisting the role of a full-time housewife dependent on her husband. However, this resistance ultimately proves futile: even with a nanny, the illness and education of her daughter Janet disrupt her writing process. Anna is forced to struggle painfully between the identities of "writer" and "mother",

most vividly reflected in the blankness of the “Golden Notebook” that symbolizes her writing. This predicament is further aggravated by the dual devaluation of the “mother-creator” by society: her ex-husband Richard dismisses her novels as “trivialities written by a woman”. Meanwhile, her pursuit of economic independence is also extremely fragile. As she is only recognized for works that conform to gender stereotypes in a patriarchal market, unstable royalty income forces her to accept writing that goes against her artistic pursuits—children’s content.

Therefore, Anna’s political ideals and gender identity suffered a double disillusionment, causing a profound traumatic fracture. The exposure of the truth of Stalinism destroyed the political beliefs on which she relied for survival, forcing her to adopt dissociative defense to cope with cognitive dissonance; meanwhile, the systematic oppression and devaluation of the “mother-creator” by society continuously eroded her self-identity as a “free woman”. The interweaving of these two traumas ultimately led to the splitting and alienation of Anna’s self, with the core symptom being the blockage of her writing.

3. Invasive Repeat: The Dilemma in Emotional Trauma and Note Fragmentation

Emotional trauma is the core predicament that Anna faces in “The Golden Notebook”, profoundly revealing the fatal interweaving of repetition compulsion and relational trauma. Among these closely related concepts, relational trauma refers to the lasting negative impact of early harmful interpersonal relationships on an individual’s emotional and psychological development; while repetition compulsion describes the unconscious tendency to repeat traumatic relationship patterns—individuals attempt to control or resolve the initial trauma by reenacting it, but often end up trapped in a deeper cycle of suffering. This precisely aligns with Judith Herman’s (1997) definition of “trauma reenactment”: long-term trauma survivors tend to reproduce trauma-related experiences or situations through various means (such as behaviors, relationship choices, emotional states), increasing the risk of being victimized again.

Anna’s relationship trauma and its recurrence are multi-dimensionally presented in the text: in intimate relationships, both Anna herself and the “Ella” she projects are trapped in unhealthy relationship patterns. Paul Tanner’s assertion that “making love doesn’t equal love” towards Ella and his belittling of her writing talent, treating his wife as a “symbol of respectability” while viewing Ella as a “sexual plaything”, exemplifies typical objectification and emotional abuse. More crucially, Anna’s relationship with Michael is a prominent instance of her compulsive repetition. Unconsciously, she replicates the pattern of exploitation: providing sex, domestic chores, emotional support, and maintaining the man’s self-esteem, only to be ignored and ultimately abandoned by Michael. This pattern reaches its peak in her subsequent relationship with Saul Green, which is more sadistic and masochistic in nature. Saul’s sensitive narcissism replicates Michael’s power structure, and their mutual accusations of each other being mentally unstable and the intense conflicts in the bedroom mark the deep trauma that Anna is

forced to relive due to her failure to separate.

Anna's emotional trauma does not only stem from specific intimate relationship partners, but is also deeply rooted in the daily practices of the patriarchal society. Such practices themselves constitute a profound source of relational trauma and continuously reinforce its repetitive compulsion pattern.

...Anna's portrait of her day begins. She wakes early...She lies down and is "careful not to" fall sleep because Janet is nearly awake... Anna is a half hour late to the Party office—even though she is unpaid...

The Golden Notebook, p316-317

The text clearly demonstrates this exploitation: Richard belittles Molly and Anna's efforts, disregards Marion's hard work in raising children, and appropriates the work of his secretary—all of which reveal the institutional devaluation and appropriation of women's labor in society. Anna herself is deeply entangled in this. Her blue notes faithfully record not just a simple to-do list, but a recurring, emotionally draining traumatic cycle: taking care of her daughter Janet, catering to Michael's needs, and doing unpaid work for parties... These daily, unseen and unacknowledged efforts are themselves a form of ongoing relational harm. They constantly reinforce her sense of "worthlessness", erode her self-boundaries, and provide a psychological foundation and practical training ground for her habitual acceptance of exploitation in intimate relationships. This daily cycle is a concrete proof of her self-fragmentation, and her time, energy, and sense of self-worth are cut and consumed in different areas. Within the framework of structural oppression, she is forced to repeatedly play the role of dedication and sacrifice, which itself is a daily rehearsal of the continuous occurrence and compulsive repetition of relational trauma.

Anna is trapped in the core predicament of emotional trauma, manifested as an inescapable compulsive repetitive pattern: in her intimate relationships with men like Michael and Saul, she unconsciously "reenacts" the early relationship trauma of being objectified, exploited and abandoned (Herman, 1997). This repetition not only stems from the harm of specific partners, but is more deeply rooted in the daily practices of the patriarchal society, constantly weakening her self-worth and providing a psychological basis for her habitual acceptance of exploitation in intimate relationships. The trivial daily life recorded in the blue notes is a concrete proof of this traumatic cycle and self-fragmentation.

4. The Paradox of Integration: Trauma Healing through the Golden Notebook

Starting from Judith Herman's trauma theory, the process by which Anna Wulf in "The Golden Notebook" moves from fragmentation to integration vividly interprets the core position of "narrative integration" in trauma healing. Initially, Anna feels that "everything is falling apart", and she uses four notebooks of different colors to separately record different aspects of her life. This is precisely the manifestation of the fragmented memory and dissociative state brought about by trauma.

Judith Herman's three-stage theory of trauma healing outlines the framework for recovery from trauma, emphasizing the importance of safety, processing traumatic memories, and reintegration into life (Herman, 1998). This separated writing is similar to the "isolation" defense mechanism proposed by Herman, which is her attempt to maintain order in the midst of inner chaos, but it also constitutes "secondary trauma". Forcing traumatic memories into a linear narrative not only fails to touch upon the true experience but also deepens the inner fragmentation and distortion. Anna realizes that these notebooks cannot present her true self, and language gradually loses its meaning.

When she abandoned the four-color notebooks and turned to the chaotic, time-disordered, and font-diverse golden notebook, it seemed like a mental breakdown, but in fact, it was her first step towards accepting the essence of trauma and a crucial move towards true integration. The disordered form of the golden notebook is precisely the external manifestation of the non-chronological and irrational nature of traumatic memories. It provides a safe space where suppressed sensory fragments, conflicting beliefs, and fragmented identities can coexist, collide, and surface, rather than being forcibly unified. This process of giving up "rational integration" and accepting internal contradictions is exactly the healing method emphasized by Herman (1997): true integration is not about eliminating fragments but about accommodating contradictions and understanding how trauma becomes a part of one's personal history. The most notable example is the "identity swap" writing they did in a trance-like state. But the golden notebook tells a crazy story: Anna has hallucinations and dreams that she and Saul enter each other's minds. This is the painful manifestation of internal fragments breaking through strict isolation: clear self-boundaries collapsed, and the core concept of individual identity became blurred, undoubtedly the peak of chaos and pain. This "madness" also became a desperate attempt to break absolute isolation. Lessing also expressed a similar view in her book: Anna's breakdown was not pathological but a necessary way to confront problems and a fierce process towards review and mourning, "Sometimes breaking down is a self-healing method, and this process means that the self is discarding those false oppositions and divisions" (Lessing, 1962). Eventually, through the "breakdown" space of the golden notebook, Anna integrated seemingly contradictory self-fragments into a more complex and true self-narrative, achieving a sense of unity and peace, and created the golden notebook. This marked her completion of the key steps in Herman's three-stage trauma healing process, proving that the "crazy" writing of the golden notebook was not destruction but an inevitable path to facing fragmented reality, achieving deep integration and healing.

Anna's shift from the color-coded notes to the chaotic golden ones marked a crucial turning point in her trauma healing. This seemingly disintegrating move was actually an acceptance of the irrational nature of trauma, providing a safe space for the suppressed fragments to coexist and collide (Herman, 1997). Eventually, through the "collapse" field of the golden notes, she integrated her conflicting selves into a more complex and authentic narrative, proving that this "crazy" writing was not destruction but the inevitable path to facing fragmented reality, achieving deep integration and healing (Lessing, 1962).

5. Conclusion

Doris Lessing's "The Golden Notebook" presents the survival predicament and mental landscape of individuals in the post-war era, especially the intellectual women striving to break free from the shackles, through Anna Wulf's fragmented notebooks and fragmented self. Analyzed from the perspective of trauma theory, it is clearly seen that the "free woman" identity claimed by Anna is actually trapped in an inescapable trauma paradox.

Anna's "split" reflects her core trauma state. The truth of Stalinism destroyed her original political beliefs, and the gender trauma brought by patriarchy continuously weakened her self-worth and subjectivity. To cope with these traumas, Anna ultimately re-integrated her fragmented self into a more complex and authentic whole in "The Golden Notebook", completing the creation of the novel and achieving inner unity and peace. Therefore, Anna's predicament reveals the illusory nature of the "free woman" ideal within a specific historical and traumatic structure. Her "split" is not only a manifestation of a psychological crisis but also a profound reflection of the political turmoil, gender oppression, and cultural transformation of the era on an individual's soul.

"The Golden Notebook" is not only a carrier of trauma but also a witness to healing. It shows that true integration and freedom do not lie in suppressing trauma or fabricating an ideal self, but in having the courage to delve into chaos and accept and reconstruct the fragmented past in narrative. Through Anna's experience, Lessing not only presents the weight of trauma but also, in a unique artistic form, points out a painful yet resilient path to redemption for souls seeking meaning in a fragmented reality-to rebuild a self that embraces contradictions and faces scars through honest narration in the midst of trauma.

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