

FEMALE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN D.H. LAWRENCE'S *SONS AND LOVERS* AND DORIS LESSING'S *THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK*

Ghazal Al-Sakkaf
Karabük University

Abstract

The female quest for self-identity has become one of the most important topics that attract the attention of many literary writers after the development of the Feminist Movement. Women strongly fight to become an integral part of society with separate self-identity. This battle, however, is full of obstacles and sacrifices. So, this article is an attempt to highlight some of those obstacles and the role of women in overcoming them to reach their wholeness and identity in modern English fiction. To accomplish this attempt, two female characters from two different novels are selected as a sample. They are Mrs. Morel, the protagonist of *Sons and Lovers* (1913) by D.H. Lawrence, and Anna Wulf, the protagonist of *The Golden Notebook* (1962) by Doris Lessing. A close reading of some actions by the female characters is conducted to analyze their behavior from a feminist perspective. At the end of the analysis, it is shown that both female characters show a good example of strong women who could utilize their disappointments and change them as a means to success. Mrs. Morel proves her strength in taking her husband's place at home when she notices his failure as a father to embrace her children and plan their future and Anna Wulf proves her strength in changing her five failed love relationships into a motive for living a better life in ways she feels them proper not which men or society dictate.

Keywords: Feminism, feminist literary criticism, female self- identity, Mrs. Morel, Anna Wulf

Introduction

The portrayal of the female quest for identity in literature has occupied a wide space of discussion in many academic conferences, published articles, and social and educational research, particularly after the recognition of women's rights in the late 1960s onwards. Many modern literary works, mainly novels, have focused on women's determination to become an integral part of society despite the social and cultural obstacles that surround them. Nevertheless, the literary scene still needs more studies that highlight the difficulties which women face in their battle for self-defining. So, this study is an attempt to explore some examples of such difficulties and the role of women in overcoming them to finally fulfill their aims. To accomplish this attempt, two female characters from two modern English novels are selected as a sample. They are Mrs. Morel, the heroine of *Sons and Lovers* (1913), and Anna Wulf, the heroine of *The Golden Notebook* (1962). The analysis is conducted from two different angles; the male angle as represented by D.H. Lawrence and the female angle as represented by Doris Lessing. To reach a logical result that matches the aim of the work, the behavior of the two female characters is tackled from a feminist point of view because "feminist theory offers a perspective for understanding human behavior in the social environment by centering women and issues that women face in contemporary society" (Lay & Daley, 2017, p. 50). Therefore, the study is qualitative as it depends on a close reading of some situations performed by the heroines in the novels. It begins with a brief theoretical background on Feminism, Feminist Literary Criticism, authors, and their opinion on females' status at their age. Then, it moves to the analysis of some actions that suggest the capability of women in changing bad circumstances into chances to help them in constructing their strong identities. Finally, the study ends with a conclusion that summarizes women's attempts to triumph over male and social hegemony.

Feminism and feminist literary criticism

For centuries, woman has remained hostage to the idea that she is inferior and man is superior. In other words, she is an “other” and man is a “default”. Thus, humanity is male, and man defines woman not herself, but as relative to him (Beauvoir, 2009, p. 11). Unfortunately, this idea has transferred from one generation into another to become a part of the culture of many societies and social expectations have grown out of these expectations. The woman is expected to be an angel of the house and she has to take care of her husband and children and the man is expected to work outside and earn money. Dealing with the man as a source for woman’s living requirements increases male hegemony and results in creating a purely patriarchal society. Therefore, the woman is obliged to accept all kinds of oppression and keep silent for a long period just to live peacefully. However, the situation has not satisfied a wide category of literary writers, males, and females. When they got the chance, they heavily objected to the idea and delivered strong speeches in that regard. One of them is Virginia Woolf, the famous English female novelist.

Virginia Woolf, whose works lightened the English sky in the 1920s, is considered the first woman who burned the first spark of the feminist revolution which later on takes the name of the Feminist Movement. In her, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) she condemns the oppressed status of women in general and female writers in particular. She argues that a woman’s freedom starts with releasing her financially from a man and that is by ensuring her a monthly amount of money. This means that woman has also right to work and gain money, the matter is not confined to the man only. Though Feminism flourished in the mid of the 20th century with the publication of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Suaidi and Rusfandi (2016) argue that the beginning of the 18th century is a starting point in the history of feminism (p.88). Females, at that time, did not only

show their dissatisfaction with man’s subjugation but also with the whole society that deprived them of simple rights like education which is regarded as the basis of women’s liberation. Mary Wollstonecraft, in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), insists that women ought to have equal education suits with their position in society because she believes that women are essential to the nation if they are educated they would educate its children. Thus, women could be «companions» to their husbands rather than mere wives (as cited in Craciun, 2013).

It seems that the emergence of Wollstonecraft’s and later on Woolf’s works plus their thoughts that stand on the side of women found an echo in the whole of England and America. Feminism has met global recognition either from men or from society. They confess that there is no fairness between the sexes. Then, Feminism is defined as the recognition of an imbalance of power between the sexes, with a woman in a subordinate role to men, a belief that a woman’s condition is socially constructed and therefore can be changed, and an emphasis on female autonomy” (Hannam, 2007, p. 2). Women’s fight continues today. The voice gets higher and higher. Instead of one call for equality, the feminist movement is divided into three sub-movements or waves, each one dealt with a specific female demand. This divergence in calls leads critics to add a new approach in literary criticism to study only female issues they call it feminist literary criticism. Thus, Guo (2019) concludes that “feminism is the source of feminist literary criticism” (p. 453). This new approach deals with women’s sense of belonging to society as a whole identity. Erickson (1968), in this sense, defines identity as “a person’s sense of belonging to a group if (it) influences his political (and cultural) behavior” (p.57). Modern novelists encouraged this direction of consciousness and used their skill of writing fiction to express their point of view in this regard. Through their novels and heroines, they play a vital role in guiding a woman to the way of achieving her identity. Female self-defining becomes one of the most common themes of modern works. A

significant number of novels are written to represent females' journey of search for identity and freedom from social constraints and limitations that tie them. Among these novelists are D.H. Lawrence and Doris Lessing.

D.H Lawrence and Mrs. Morel

D.H. Lawrence, in full David Herbert Lawrence, was born in 1885 in England and died in 1930 in France. He is one of the most famous English novelists of the 20th century. He gained his reputation from his outstanding novels, short stories, poems, plays, essays, travel books, paintings, translations, literary criticism, and personal letters. Among his important novels are *The White Peacock* (1911), *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Rainbow* (1915), *Women in Love* (1920), *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), and others. Lawrence used most of his novels as a medium to express his opinions on the changes that occurred at his age, the Victorian age. It was a time of a lot of rapid changes in economic, social, industrial, political, literary, scientific, religious, and technological (Chandravadiya, 2013). Those changes did not only affect the external aspects of life but they also touched the human from the inside as he had transferred from a simple person used to living the simple villages into a complicated person used to live the cities. Lawrence, however, could not swallow those changes and their consequences which were manifested in self-fragmentation, alienation, and human deterioration. He has criticized the dehumanization of modernity with all its aspects, particularly woman's deterioration. Though England in the late 1800s reached the highest level of advancement, the status of women noticeably deteriorated. Women were raped for their basic rights and they were denigrated in a society where "wives became property to their husbands, giving them rights to what their bodies produced: children, sex, and domestic labor" (Buckner & Francis, 2005, p. 137). Men had higher pay, whereas women were encouraged only to stay at home and remain housewives. So, Lawrence includes female issues in his works so that he is criticized as a feminist novelist.

In *Sons and Lovers* (1913), the image of a woman is depicted to contradict the miserable status that women have undergone in the Victorian age. Unexpectedly, a woman is shown with full energy to fight for her position in the family and she does not give a chance to the man to dominate or steal her presence. The woman is introduced with strength that enables her to impose her presence despite the social difficulties and life confrontations. She does not easily surrender to man's oppression and never gives his presence any attention. The woman can take her right smoothly and by force. It may come to the readers of this novel that it is mainly written to a woman as Soubi (2018) claims that "This novel is written to women, about women and for women within a male-dominated society" (p.1). It can be noticed that the creation of the three main female characters in the novel, Mrs. Morel, Mirim, and Clara form the backbone of the male characters' life. They play a vital role in changing man's state from one to another. It is somehow strange how a woman really can do that because as it is traditionally acquired a woman is expected to blindly say "yes" to everything especially if the command comes from a man, husband, or beloved. But here the matter is different with these three women. Each one has her way and policy in choosing what she wants and what she feels it is proper without taking into account whether it is accepted by man or not.

Mrs. Morel's self-confidence is presented from the beginning of the novel when she chooses her husband by herself. She feels that she admires him and decides to get marry to him despite the educational and cultural differences between them. "She watched him. He danced well as if it were natural and joyous in him to dance [...] Her father was to her the type of all men. And George Coppard, proud in his bearing [...] was very different from the miner" (Lawrence, 1979, p, 19). Regardless of whether her marriage was happy or not. Nobody knows his future and what is going to happen. At least she does what she wants. She chooses the man whom she admires

and that is all. In contrary to what was going on in her real society where a woman's family used to find a man for their daughters and marry them without even caring whether the daughter likes that man or not and whether he suits her or he is from the same level. This idea is presented differently by Mrs. Morel. By this fatal decision, she proves that a woman has the right of choosing her partner in the way she likes. Morel does not wait till her family finds a man for her. Nevertheless, Morel's brevity does not stop here. Even after marriage, she remains brave. Of course, matters do not go as she wishes with the man she loves, and her dreams of having happy married life do not come true because late she discovers that her husband tells lies about his wealth and house. He is originally not rich and he does not have even a house. The house where he lives in does not belong to him but to his mother and he has to pay her rent. Knowing these lies harms Mrs. Morel but she does not lose her strength. She wishes to get married to a rich man but she, later on, tries to manage the situation and let life go on. As a determined wife, she strongly tries to change her husband and make him a man of good manners taking care of his responsibilities and obligations as a husband but unfortunately, she failed. "She fought to make him undertake his responsibilities, to make him fulfill his obligations. But he was too different from her. His nature was purely sensuous, and she strove to make him Morel, religious. She tried to force him to face things. He could not endure it – it drove him out of his mind" (Lawrence, 1979, p.26) Mrs. Morel does not put her hand on her shakes and blames her luck of not being able to change her husband and help him to get rid the bad qualities like drinking wine and spending much time out home far from his children. She instead changes her attention to her children, William and Paul. She decides to raise them in a way she selects not her husband. Not only that, her presence at home covers her husband's existence. Her children open their eyes to find their mother who is dominant and everything is in her hand. She was all in all. With the coming of the third baby, she completely ignores her husband and his presence becomes secondary to her. "Now, with the birth of this

third baby, herself no longer set towards him, helplessly, but was like a tide Feeling him so much part of her circumstances, she did not mind so much what he did, could leave him alone (Lawrence, 1979, p. 71).

It can be said that Mrs. Morel's real identity dominates the whole scene. Even with her children, she plans their life. The strength of her identity affects all the members of the house, father and sons. The father prefers to disappear instead of comforting her wife because he knows her well. She is not an easy woman to obey or to receive orders from him. She is educated and has a ration. If she remains at home that is only because of society and its constraints otherwise she might depart the house itself. She, in a conversation with her friend, expresses this attitude. She is only putting the social limitations into consideration unless she would find another path to save herself from the sense of depression in she reaches as a result of her married life.

Mrs. Morel continues in her battle of approving her determination and her ability to save what remains for her after losing her husband. She is now planning her son's life and future, Paul's life. She decides that he will work with a manufacturing company of surgical appliances. She prepares all his documents and requirements of the application and sends them. She also goes with him for the interview. She personally talks with the manager instead of him because she is witty and knows what the market needs. Mr. Jordan admires her quick answers and the manner of managing the table of the conversation. Mrs. Jordan looked at the pale, stupid, defiant boy ... And when could he come?" he asked. "Well, said Mrs. Morel, "as soon as you wish. He has finished school now He would live in Bestwood" Yes; but he could be in –at the station at quarter to eight" (Lawrence, 1979, p. 139). Mrs. Morel's domination lasts till the end of the story. She does not stop her running after her husband and children except when she dies. Regardless of the method which she uses to grow up her children wrong or right, the

important thing is that she does not bow her neck in front of man or the social constraints. She leads the ship till the end.

Doris Lessing and Anna Wulff

Doris Lessing, in full is Doris May Lessing, original name Doris May Tayler. She was born in 1919, in Kermānshāh, Iran, and died in 2013 in London, England. She is a British writer whose novels are mainly concerned with people involved in the social and political upheavals of the 20th century. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007. Like Lawrence, Lessing appears to be interested in female, as a family member, and as a category of society. Her works are squeezed from her personal experiences. In an article entitled “Doris Lessing’s Mara and Dann” (1999), Lessing’s writings are described as a deeply autobiographical fiction that emerges from her early experiences in Africa, her years of engagement with social and political issues, her concern for Morel and psychological attitudes, and the role of women in modern society (as cited in Abd El Aziz, 2018). The story of Lessing’s mother has affected her way of depicting a woman in her novels. She puts the woman in a continuous fight to attain wholeness perhaps as her mother did when she moved to a British colony in Southern Rhodesia with her husband, as he was a captain during the First World War. She was not completely satisfied to leave her country but as a wife, she was compelled to do that. Then in the other country, she tried to adopt with the difficult life among savages and go along with the lifestyles she was offered but with no use. She went through bad conditions and faced lots of ups and downs. Finally, she decided to return to England where she also lost her efforts searching for a job. She worked as a nurse for the rest of her life. This journey of self-dependence, however, can be clearly noticed in the life of Lessing’s characters in most of her works largely in *The Golden Notebook* novel.

The Golden Notebook is Doris Lessing’s most important work. It has left its

mark on the ideas and feelings of a whole generation of women (Margaret, 1994, p.36). It is an autobiographical novel in which Lessing writes her own experiences and what she notices around her in the society and how women are treated and how they are expected to behave. She introduces the chaotic lifestyles of the women in the sixties realistically. The story of the novel mainly circles around Anna Wulf Freeman. She is a young lady who experiences love, marriage and motherhood at early age. She is a writer also. She writes four note books in which she records all her experiences in life and ends these series with a fifth note book that she calls it “Free Women”.

Like other women, Anna lives the sense of being a traditional woman who puts herself as “The Other” or “Objectivity” in her life and thinks only about how to obey the man. She also tests the unjustifiability of social roles which burden the shoulders of women more than men. Whereas men are left to seek success and money, women are left to prove their success as good wives and good mothers. The difference is that Anna makes an end to this distinction and throws the social rules behind her head. Her strong women’s consciousness and eagerness for freedom and to live an independent life are enough to make her rebel against a man-dominated society. Anna’s adventure for having a new life is not easy but she takes advantage of the changes that take place after World War II and the fall of the British Empire. One of these changes is the call for equality between men and women in many aspects of life such as education, workplace, politic, and even in divorce issues. Before this call, women had no right to separate from their husbands at any condition otherwise they would be condemned and downgraded by society because women were classified as wives or widows, with no third place for them. But later on, divorce becomes a legal right and women can ask for it without any constraints.

In fact, the equality between men and women makes a man lose his physical domination over the woman and turns it emotional. Though *The Golden*

Notebook does not show any kind of male physical oppression in its content, female characters suffer emotionally from men. The emotional oppression is represented in the characters of Anna and Molly. They try to be good beloveds and wives but without a result. Anna makes more than four love relationships and in every one of them, she suffers more. She does not find one man who is loyal to her love. Molly, on another side, her husband loves another lady and lives his life with her. Nevertheless, the failures in love and male disloyalty have not weakened the desire of having a better life empty of tension. Both ladies rethink their life and decide to leave their husbands to enjoy their life like birds.

In the beginning of the novel, Anna and her Friend Molly are shown calm and happy in a hotel exchanging gossips about people on their life. They are now free without any kind of responsibilities towards their homes or husbands. They enjoy their new life as fly birds as it is suggested through Molly's words in her conversation with Anna when she says "Free. Do you know, when I was away, I was thinking about us and I have decided that we're a completely new type of woman" (Lessing, 1962, p. 5). They become new type of women now, or "Free women" as they are described in the novel. However, the novel begins from the end. It shows the triumph before the war. Anna in particular has not reached to this sense of freedom easily but she has undergone through different stages of her journey of self-identity. As a writer, she sums up them in four colored books, black, red, yellow, and blue. The black book presents her life in Central Africa before and during World war II where she notices all kinds of human aggression by the colonized against the colonizers. The red reflects her political experience as a member of the communist party. The yellow shows her the painful end of her love stories and marriages. And the blue presents her personal memories, dreams, and emotional life.

Unfortunately, in each and every phase, Anna is subjected to a new experience of fragmentation. She is about to lose the control on herself. Being a writer with sense of art puts her on a struggle from inside. She suffers from the conflict between the individual consciousness and the collective good. On other words, she swings between what she wants and what society dictates. She does not know what exactly to do, to continue in her way and fight for freedom or to find another relationship and enjoy family affairs after her five-year broken relationship. Even her joining the communist party as initial step to obtain wholeness is not an ideal solution. It increases that swing. She discovers that there is a yawning gap between the communist theories and realities and they are hypocrites, capable of doing nothing (Ugale, 2018, p. 2). They sell speech more. They are hypocrites and incapable to do anything for a woman. Instead, they place the woman as a second-class –citizen. This is reality as it is suggested in the dialogue between Anna and another character, Saul. Anna says "Saul]... I've always been a hypocrite and in fact, I enjoy being boss where women are second class citizens, I enjoy being boss and being flattered. Anna] 'Good', I said. Because in a society where not one man in ten thousand begins to understand the ways in which women are second-class citizens, we have to rely for company on the men who are at least not hypocrites (Lessing, 1962, p. 437). This fragmentation leads to another symptom that is self- split.

Throughout the novel, Anna is shown with three identities. When she is with her lover Michael, she behaves like a sexy and attractive lady. When is with her daughter Janet, she behaves like a careful mother. And when she is at work, she behaves like a strong and independent woman. This self- split confuses and almost collapses her. She knows about this split. She is satisfied that she cheats others and her beliefs. This awareness is presented in form of a dream. She, in describing of the dream, says that as she lays on the surface of the dream-water, and began very slowly to submerge, she hears a voice of unknown person tells her "Anna, you are betraying everything you believe

in; you are sunk in subjectivity, yourself, your own needs” (Lessing, 1962, p. 442). Then she tries to dive deeper but she gets afraid of the unknown old creatures under the sea but the same voice encourages her to dive deeper and nothing is to be worried of “ I heard the voice say: ‘Fight. Fight.’ I saw that the water was not deep at all, but only a thin sour layer of water at the bottom of a filthy cage” (ibid, p. 442).

Anna’s dream is purposely added by Lessing to suggest that Anna’s journey of self-identity is not impossible but it is a matter of patience. As in real life, medicine is coated with sour but its effect is good. If Anna can swallow it then she can pass over her fight. The sour layer suggests the social constraints that if a woman can resist them, then she would have her freedom. Through Anna and this dream, Lessing wants to say that success needs courage and determination and Anna throughout the novel appears courageous and determined regardless of the result. Perhaps she cannot reach her complete wholeness but she tries her best. As a post-modern lady, she resists social expectations and shows a realization of her status.

Anna’s self- confrontation and her admission of failure is a proof of her courage, when she says “Why do our lots never admit failure? Never. It might be better for us if we did” (Lessing, 1962, p. 45), Anna turns from fragmentation into integration. She wins this integration when she admits her failure in reaching her dream of being a free woman. Accepting reality is not a weakling point but it is a beginning for true life. Maybe Anna doesn’t fulfill her dream but she acquires strength by realizing the surrounded environment and knowing that fake is fake. False cannot cover the reality that woman is still underestimated by society. The only true reality is that a woman has to have faith in herself and to go alongside with what has already been founded. Through her alter ego, Ella, she claims that being a free woman is only a wish that cannot be gained but knowing this helps in obtaining wholeness. As Ella admits that “What did it mean, my saying I loved Paul-when his going has left me like a snail that has had her shell pecked off by a bird? I should have said that my being with Paul essentially

meant I remained myself, remained independent and free” (Lessing, 1962, p. 288). Moreover, Anna admits, “...and when had this new frightened vulnerable Anna been born? She knew: it was when Michael had abandoned her” (Lessing, 1962, p. 390).

Conclusion

As it has been noticed, the status of women does not remain the same. The old image of woman has changed. Modern woman becomes full of energy to fight for her wholeness and identity. Mrs. Morel and Anna Wulf are the best examples of such strong women. Regardless of time and place, both present an honorable picture of the strong woman who seeks the best for her life. They show that woman is capable of managing her life by herself with or without man’s presence. Though the end of the two character’s stories reveals that the existence of man in a woman’s life is important, it does not mean that they have to stay silent and not to interfere in the necessary situations. Perhaps Mrs. Morel loses her children at the end because of the wrong treatment that she follows with them but at least she breaks the border of fear of being a woman and she leads the ship instead of her man, her husband. The same thing is with Anna. She finally gets contented that the presence of man in a woman’s life is good but not to that extent to oppress her. She realizes that female self-identity lies in her awareness of how to be a part of society and enjoys her rights within the logical limitations. This means that woman has to be free from domination of man at the same time his wife and beloved.

References

- Abd El Aziz, H. M. (2018). Female Identity in Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 9(1), 149-159.
- Beauvoir, S. D. (2009). *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books. A Division of Random House. New York.
- Buckner, P. A., & Francis, R. D. (Eds.). (2005). *Rediscovering the British world*. University of Calgary Press.
- Chandravadiya, D. M. (2013). Influence of the industrial revolution on Victorian Age and upper Class. *International Journal of Research in all Subjects in Multi Languages*, 1(6), 1-3.
- Craciun, A. (Ed.). (2013). *Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: A Sourcebook*. Routledge.
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Youth: Identity and crisis*. New York, Ny: Ww, 10.
- Guo, R. (2018). Brief analysis of feminist literary criticism. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (ASSEHR)*, (300), 453-455.
- Hamid, H. M. (2010). Feminine domination in D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers. *Journal of Education and Science*, 17(42), 26-36.
- Hannam, J. (2007). *The Book of Feminism*. England. Pearson-Longman.
- Lay, K., & Daley, J. G. (2007). A critique of feminist theory. *Advances in social work*, 8(1), 49-61.
- Lawrence, D. H. (1976). *Sons and Lovers*. London. Heinemann Educational Books.
- Lessing, D. (1962). *The Golden Notebook*. Harper Perennial. Modern Classics. Retrieved from <https://juanpemoon.files.wordpress.com/2013/11>
- Sboui, A. (2018). Main female characters in Sons and Lovers. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 7(12), 319 – 7714.
- Suaidi, S., & Rusfandi, R. (2016). Feminism reflected In Pride And Prejudice Novel By Jane Austen 1813. *Jurnal Ilmiah Bahasa Dan Sastra*, 3(1), 85-99.
- Ugale, S., G. (2018) Identity crisis in Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook. *International Journal of Recent Scientific Research*, 9(9), 28770-28771.
- Woolf, V. (1992). *A room of one's own*. London: Penguin.