Self as Narrative in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explore the self as narrative in Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook in order to understand how narrative accommodates the concept of self. I will follow the three dimensions of the self - the temporal, the moral and the social as suggested by Anthony Kerby, Charles Taylor and Anthony Giddens. Based on their arguments, I construct the three dimensions of the self to facilitate the exploration of the main character's identity crisis and to demonstrate the importance of narrative as an expressive embodiment of our experience, as a mode of communication, and as a form of understanding the world and ultimately our self.
Key words: self narrative, identity crisis, self-identity.

Across the multifarious writings in Doris Lessing's career, the concern with the individual's quest for self-identity is familiar, a consistent feature of her works, if not even one of her leitmotifs. Thus, it does not seem surprising that *The Golden Notebook*, where identity crisis is the driving force, has become a leitmotif among critics and readers engaged in dealing with the writer's work. This much-discussed novel raises more questions in several different fields – artistic form, politics, feminism, psychoanalysis – than it answers, and, clearly there are many different ways of coming at the subject of Lessing's writing. Therefore, my paper is a mere attempt to approach Anna's predicament in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* from the angle of identity crisis. The main point is that the self is produced in the narrative, and in daily routines the textual identity is confirmed and reinforced.

In *Sources of the* Self, Charles Taylor maintains that in configuring the picture of self-identity, we actually answer the questions of existence. Identity crisis thus expresses the feeling of disorientation and uncertainty about the meaning of life.

In *The Golden Notebook*, Anna is strained under her identity crisis which culminates in the mental collapse and in order the recover from the breakdown, Anna must re-answer the questions of her existence.

To understand how narrative accommodates the concept of self and how self-narrative is maintained in life necessitates a survey of the three dimensions of the self – the temporal, the moral and the social as suggested by Anthony Kerby, Charles Taylor and Anthony Giddens.

The explication of the disturbance of the three dimensions in Anna's identity crisis relies on the approach of psychoanalysis and sociology. In *Narrative and the Self*, Kerby touches upon these three dimensions but focuses only on the facet of temporality. I thus draw on Taylor's arguments which dwell on the moral dimension of the self and Anthony Giddens's theory in *Modernity and Self-Identity* to examine the social aspect and the maintainance of self-identity. Despite of the difference of their perspectives and focuses, all the three critics endorse the concept of self as narrative and at a closer look, their points frequently echo each other's. Based on their arguments, I construct the three dimensions of the self to facilitate the exploration of Anna's identity crisis.

In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor singles out the intensification of the internalization as one of the fronts out of which modernity emerges. People were more inclined to search within themselves than to look up to the omniscient God for the moral source of their existence. With the ascendancy of postmodernism, which in Jean-Francois Lyotard's definition is characterized by the 'incredulity toward metanarratives', the nostalgic mood, articulated in the expressions of Romanticism, is dismissed (xxiv). Lyotard asserts that metanarrative, the claim to truth smothers difference, opposition, and plurality in the name of unity and wholeness. Similarly, Jacques Derrida's discourse on *difference* points out the falsity of logocentrism, the desire for the presence of truth, and asserts, 'in the absence of a center of origin, everything became discourse' (110). The dismantlement of 'the center' would entail the swelling of the heterogeneous voices and the free

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play of values and meanings. All the truths are but a form of interpretation from a specific angle, and Truth the absolute remains inaccessible.

For the postmodernists, the true self is an illusion. Magali Cornier Michel states that

> Postmodernism posits a centerless, dispersed subject who is literally a composite of various socially and culturally constructed roles or positions – not perspectives – that cannot be reconciled. (Cornier 40)

Under the postmodern condition, the subject exists in a continuous construction and reconstruction. To strike a balance that embrace neither the romantic nostalgia for wholeness nor the postmodernist playfulness becomes an issue that has to be dealt with.

In *The Golden Notebook*, Doris Lessing traversed the nostalgia for wholeness and anarchic playfulness through Anna Wulf's identity crisis. The characters, the heroine encounters more or less suffer from the feeling of being fragmentary, they share the attitude to split themselves up: 'one personality for the committee room; another for the café afterwards'.(Lessing 88) When the propensity for masquerading is carried to the extreme, they even develop a chameleonic personality, shifting the role-identities they can adopt without reflexive consciousness. The pictures of the split individual collected in this novel offer a panorama of the discontinuous and constructed self associated with the postmodern subject.

Anna's faith in humanistic notion of wholeness and unity intensifies her conflicts in the fragmentary society:

> But humanism stands for the whole person, the whole individual, striving to be become as conscious and responsible as possible about everything in the universe. But now you sit here, quite calmly, and as a humanist you say that due to the complexity of scientific achievement the human being must never expect to be whole, he must always be fragmented '. (Lessing 320)

There seems to be no feasible alternatives that can accommodate both the fragmentary world and her ideals and finds herself being pushed toward the direction of masquerading switching on and off her role identities without the slightest qualm about their incompatibility and conflicts. Anna's groping for the deliverance from the hazards of the fragmentary subjectivity represents Lessing's attempt to hint at the new way of looking at life for the individual in the chaotic world. Anna's search for the true self, the presence of which presumably can solve her identity problem, takes the route of her sessions with the therapist Mrs. Marks and keeping four separate notebooks meant to record various aspects of her life. Both attempts can be seen as forms of narration of one's self.

Since Lacan's theory of the subject as constructed in language, confirming the decentring of the individual consciousness so that it can no longer be seen as the origin of meaning, knowledge and action, many other modern theories have developed along his lines, so that it is now widely accepted that language actually constitutes and constrains our perception of the world, rather than passively conveying our observation.

The self, which used to be held as a given and autonomous essence within, becomes a product of language, generated in the narration of our life stories. In *Self as Narrative* Worthington quotes Emile Benveniste, saying that 'it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as subject, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality, in its reality which is that of being.' (Worthington 25)

Anthony Paul Kerby also endorses this position and claims, 'language is not simply a tool of device used by persons but is part of their very definition '. (Kerby 67)

The notion that the self is a latent but fixed entity recedes. In its place emerges the metaphor of self as a text whose content requires the selective emplotment of the myriad episodes from experience, and whose lineaments permit constant revisions.

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Acknowledging his indebtedness to Paul Ricoeur, Kerby emphasizes that narrative structures are indigeneous to human experience.

> Life is inherently of a narrative structure. To understand a life is to trace its development upon a narrative thread, a thread that unites otherwise disparate or unheeded happenings into the significance of a development, directionality, a destiny. (Kerby 40)

With Kerby, Worthington also states:

> In the process of narration, discrete moments and acts are contextualized: they are enmeshed in a history. Historical narrative contextualization is crucial to human understanding. It is because we can understand or conceptualize the connection and interrelation between remembered, experienced and anticipated actions and events, and because we can situated them in space and time, that the plethora of stimuli and experiences that constitute our world (and our selves) come to have a meaning. (Worthington 14)

If narration is one of the crucial modes of human conceptualization, as they have suggested, the conceptualization of the self still has to relay on the agency of narration. Consequently, the self usually emerges from narrative.

In *Narrative and the Self,* Kerby highlights the temporal dimension of human existence saying that from birth to death human existence is measured on the horizon of time and that the notion of the self, which is contingent on this temporal existence, should not bypass the relation of temporality in its construction. He sustains that in order to explain who I am now unavoidably involves the recollection of the past 'I '. (53) Giddens follows this line of the argument and further explains that 'a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going'. (Giddens 54)

However, Kerby emphasizes that meaning is produced only when the larger frame of reference is available, the part-whole relation palpable. A context is needed for the present action to attain its significance. Devoid of a continual and referential context, the actions would be rendered meaningless.

> It is this continuity of our life story that constitutes the greater part of our experienced self-identity….At the broadest and most abstract level this identity is constituted out of the part-whole relation between the 'now' and the at least implicit horizon of my life as a whole….A breakdown of this type of self-identity will occur if the part-whole relation breaks down. (Kerby 45-6)

Anna's writing plays a part in fending off existential angst. Lack of 'imaginative comprehension' is the cause to which Anna attributes her writing block. By this she means the ability to stretch beyond the limits of one's life and experience and relate oneself to the world as a whole. The assaults of fragmentation upon the mentality of the modern people are devastating. She believes that the artist should try to alleviate rather than exacerbate the pains of living in a fragmentary world. Yet, she states:

> I am incapable of writing the only kind of novel which interests me; a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life. It is because I am too diffused. I have decided never to write another novel. (Lessing 76)

The dissolution of commitments and relations threatens the maintenance of a viable self-identity and the individual's sense of self is fractured. According to Kerby, the fractured sense of

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self, the feeling of biographical discontinuity floods in such a way, that no continuous ‘narrative‘can be sustained. This feature is well grasped by Anna as she reflects over her unfinished novel “The Shadow of the Third “:

> Supposing I were to write it like this: two full days, in every detail, one at the beginning of the affair, and one towards the end? No, because I would still be instinctively isolating and emphasizing the factors that destroyed the affair. It is that which would give the thing its shape. Otherwise it would be chaos, because these two days, separated by months in time, would have no shadow over them. (Lessing 210)

Narrative not only unfolds under the guidance of a telo that entails a selective process but also imposes the causal connection between the episodes. Anna marks out this implicit structure in narrative and expresses her disconcert with the easy slide into causality to mask the contingency of life in creative writing, although she is aware that life consists of disjoint moments. She feels ‘the form ‘, the teleological orientation of the narrative, ‘is a kind of pain’. (Lessing 210). She realizes that the road to self-narration is tough going and the repudiation of the narrative structure seems to lead her further toward the breakdown.

In response to the crisis, Anna feels compelled to reinvestigate the picture of her life so as to figure out what has gone wry. The survey of her personal history produces a form of narrative from which the self emerges and against which the individual tries to make sense of the present situation. Anna’s sessions with Mrs. Marks is the more overt and obvious response to her identity crisis.

In *Modernity and Self*-Identity Giddens links the emergence of psychoanalysis with modernity saying that ‘therapy is an expert system deeply implicated in the reflexive project of the self’ (180). Stephen Frosh further explains the advantage of therapy from the angle of the self-quest. Because the self possesses an ambiguous status – it is both an object of contemplation and an experiencing subject, therapy has its credits in offering an interpretation of the self. He asserts that in the psychoanalytic dialogue the analysand can see himself ‘from the vantage point of the other’ (Frosh 2-3). The analysis offers a version of self-narrative that is perhaps more plausible because it sheds light on the previously dark territory to the mind. Yet, Frosh, in his explanation, is careful not to grant therapy the feature of objectivity albeit he admits the weakness of self-observation.

The prejudice of the psychoanalysis is not always palpable because the therapists are less inclined to impose their explanation but invites the patients’ cooperation to interpret their stories. The therapist’s insinuation usually comes across through the passive posture of listening.

Anna is not blind to the shaping forces of the therapist’s attitude and insinuation and feels the solace that Mrs. Marks can offer. With her help, Anna can ‘put the pain away where it can’t hurt’ (414). Nevertheless, consistent with the determination to spill over the frames, Anna bluntly exposes the weakness of Mrs. Marks’s instructions at last. As the series of sessions is drawing to an end, Anna protests:

> Look, if I’d said to you when I came in this afternoon; yesterday I met a man at a party and I recognized in him the wolf, or the knight, or the monk, you’d nod and you’d smile. And we’d both feel the joy of recognition. But if I’d said; Yesterday I met a man at a party and suddenly he said something – there’s a crack in that man’s personality like a gap in a dam, and through that gap the future might pour in a different shape – terrible perhaps, or marvelous, but something new – if I said that, you’d frown. (Lessing 416)

Anna accuses Mrs. Marks of fraudulence through inviting collusion from the patient to present a ‘containable’ story, the consequence of which encourages diversion from spontaneous responses. Mrs. Marks cannot defuse Anna’s identity crisis in Anna’s terms and, thus, she leaves the counseling room to work out her salvation on her own. Paul Schlueter remarks, ‘Anna, though,

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cannot receive this ordered existence vicariously from Mother Sugar; she must work it out for and by herself, and this is done, through her obsessive concern with language and with putting on paper the ordered language constituting human discourse'. (Schlueter 69)

The notebooks turn out to be Anna's self-reliant quest for true self-identity. It is felt throughout the novel that 'Anna Wulf's sense of self-identity had always been intimately related to the power of words' (Kaplan 124). Her notebooks can be regarded as a form of self-narrative; the words burst on the notebooks and take the center of Anna's search for a true self-identity.

The content of the notebooks is discursive and makes up a comparatively ordered and substantial record of her experience. In effect, the attempt to map the territory of her personal history is an instinctive reaction to the feelings of loss and disorientation. Kerby remarks:

> Actions do not occur in a void and are not meaningful in and of themselves; their meaning is dependent on the broader perspective of a framing story, as events in a history. We must ourselves know such a personal history if we are to make intelligent choices in the present. (40)

The attempt to transcribe her experience first underlies the multiplicity of roles that she adopts in life. Anna partly attributes her plight to the clashes of these role-identities and, in order to alleviate the strain of these clashes, she divides her experience into four different coloured notebooks to deal with the various aspects of her life, feeling that otherwise 'it would be such a – scramble. Such a mess' (240). The compartment of her life is inspired by her preference for order and control. Magali Cornier Michael remarks that 'Anna has convinced herself that the division of her life into four notebooks will stave off the chaos of contemporary existence and enable her to retain a concept of wholeness' (50).

If the compartmentalization of her life reveals Anna's longing for the true self to solve the incompatibility of her role-identities, the awkwardness of this division foreshadows the invalidity of such a belief and the inaccessibility of the true self. Anna elucidates the division of her notebooks. 'I keep four notebooks, a black notebook, which is to do with Anna Wulf the writer; a red notebook, concerned with politics, a yellow notebook, in which I make stories out of my experience; and a blue notebook which tries to be a diary' (418). But just as Kerby and other critics have emphasized, if the self is produced and created in writing, the acts of narration would inevitably multiply the self-narrative as well as the self. After Anna recognizes her conflicting roles and compartments them into the notebooks, she not only gives a substantial form to her disjoint selves but also is bound to come across some others in the process of writing. As Anna proliferates in the process of writing, it appears that there exists 'no essential Anna in *The Golden Notebook*; instead the novels offer many versions of Anna on several narrative levels, so that the name 'Anna' can at best refer to a composite of various roles, functions and representation' (Michael 47). If Anna has intended to bring forth the true self through the apartheid of her clashing selves in her notebooks, she now is faced with the ever growing immensity of her task, since every attempt to nail her selves down on paper brings her to some others that have so far hidden in the dark. What adds to the feeling of chaos and confusion is the futility of maintaining the boundary among the discursive selves, as the line between the notebooks is frequently transgressed. She parenthesizes the note of transgression in the yellow notebook, '(This sort of comment belongs to the blue notebook, not this one)' (471).

The struggle to contain the disparate selves within the assigned terrain is frustrated. Anna, the author of the four notebooks, fails to separate her conflicting selves properly. Consequently the true self remains absent; there is no transcendental self that can deliver her from the identity crisis.

Due to the constraints inherent in narration, the notebooks fail to bring forth the true self for her, leaving her to its elusiveness and her continual predicament. Non-fictive writing disappoints her in its deficiency to correspond to the reality. On the other hand, creative writing with its acknowledged dissociation from slavish documentation of the lived experience holds up a mirror that exposes the innate structure which narrative possesses but life lacks: fiction has a teleological

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structure that constructs and sustains the unfolding of the stories while life is not granted such a scaffold.

At the end of the first part of the yellow notebook, the artificiality of creative writing has been pointed out. The remark 'Literature is analysis after the event' makes it clear that fiction does not mesh with the experience of living but presents it in light of causality. (Lessing 210)

Temporal dimension assumes a very important place in the individual's picture of his self. Anna's notebooks, if approached from the light of temporality, also take on the temporal feature and develop concurrently with the progress of her search. Overall, from the light of immediacy the black and the yellow notebooks are undertaken in retrospection: the black notebook is the recount of Anna's experience in Africa, which is also the raw material of *Frontiers of War*, and the yellow notebook is the dramatic projection of her affair with Michael when their relation verges on dissolution. On the whole, these two notebooks signal Anna's instinct to take a survey over her past in order to have a better picture of her self, a reflexive reaction to the uncertainty of the meaning of her life. In contrast, the red and the blue notebooks share the feature of being dated: the former is the journal-like record of the heroine's political activity and the latter is her acknowledged diary. They concern the sporadic meditation over the immediate episodes. The inner golden notebook tracing the process of madness down to the signpost for a better tomorrow becomes the notebook for the future.

The search for a viable self-identity, just as Kerby has emphasized, inevitably involves the interplay of the past collected from the memory and the present. The picture of our personal history at best serves the basis to build on the notion of the self.

Even if both writing and psychoanalysis fail her in the configuration of the true self, for Anna to recover from her identity crisis she must not aspire at a life or a self beyond narrative.

Apart from the temporal dimension, the self also moves in a moral space. According to Taylor, in the articulation of what is moral, we announce what is of higher values.

With Tylor, Kerby states, 'our identity is tied to what is morally good. To define my self is to become conversant with the values I operate by ….' (Kerby 59). The portrait of self-identity consequently involves more than a recount of the personal acts with a clear and stable temporal relations; it would also drive one to explicate the basis upon which he/she passes evaluative judgments and makes decisions. Therefore, the quest for self identity would necessarily take the route of clarifying what is important to us and what is not.

My point here is that if clarifying might lead to a certain closure. However, in Anna's case the notion intensifies her fragmented nature, resulting in her breakdown.

According to Taylor, identity crisis is a form of uncertainty about how the individual is related to his/her moral framework. The moral framework serves as the criterion to judge the worth of life. As a result, the feeling of disorientation probably will give rise to the meaningless about one's life.

As for the social dimension they assert that the maintenance of the self-identity is concrete and tangible through the participation in the social activities, the practical intercourse and engagements in the daily flux of activity. Kerby states:

> Much of the time our identity is not a concern for us because it is unthematically supported by the regularities in our day-to-day experience: our body, work, friends, home, and general style of living. (47-8)

'Practical consciousness,' Giddens term for the intuition based on the routinely activity and interactions, lays the most solid groundwork that supports the construct of our self-identity. Most of the time, practical consciousness remains as much unconscious or non-conscious as the self-identity is unproblematic.

> For much of our lives a concern with self-identity may be marginal at best. Questions of identity and self-understanding arise primarily in crisis situations and at certain turning points in our routine behaviour. Such events often call for 'self-appraisal'. (Kerby 6-7)

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In *The Golden Notebook,* Anna's identity crisis results from her perception that her life seems to have gone wry. As a communist activist, she finds herself unable to justify the strategies of the Communist Party, and her participation in the political activities becomes a struggle against the dictation of her ideals and conscience.

The Red notebook records Anna's political activities but it is not cast in a linear way from a communist member's illusion to disillusion. At the beginning, Anna relates her mentality when she decides to join the Party; she admits she is 'an old hand' and 'with a full understanding of the nature of the inner circles'. (Lessing 152)

Henceforth, episodes accumulate. But the point of culmination, which presumably is the moment when she decides to leave the party, does not appear in it. The Red notebook is terminated unexpectedly, as if extra details would not add anything meaningful to it or prevent its content from falling into patterns. The indentification of patterns and repetition in one's experience marks the time when the individual realizes that something has gone wrong but is still unable or hesitant to take the decisive step to break away. In the case of Anna, the period of hesitation is prolonged because she finds the alternative is equally repulsive – to join the club of the disillusioned who devote themselves to the accumulation of wealth and turn deaf to any appeals to squeeze out the memory of their previous naïve enthusiasm. When she decides to leave the party, she confesses to her colleague Jack that her mind has become 'a mass of totally contradictory attitudes about everything' and on the bus home she eventually 'collapse[s] into emptiness' (319-321). As Anna welds the meaning of her life with the communist utopia, to break away from the Communist Party demands her re-define the purpose of her life.

Anna's identity crisis also results from the collapse of the familiar landscape of her world. As a mother, she is no longer needed because her daughter has decided to go to the boarding school, growing independent of her mother's caring and protection. Proud of being a free woman, she used to take pride in her independence, but the breakup with her lover Michael dawns on her that the pride is misplaced and the posture of being emancipated is ironic. At this moment, the flux of her daily activities is disrupted and all the main facets of her self- identity verge on dissolution.

'On a societal level,' Dieter Hoffman-Axthelm writes, 'the establishment of personal identity is never an end in itself but a passing historical prerequisite for making forms of activity clear' (207). From this respect, identity serves as a sort of organizing point against which the individual makes sense of his activity. When the validity of this reference point is called into question, identity crisis arises.

As Anna comes through the process of breakdown and disintegration she abandons her four separate notebooks, and uses a new, golden-colored notebook to record the experience of breaking-through. The golden notebook acts as a symbol of Anna's psyching integration, just as the previous symbolized her feelings of disunity. Saul and Anna give each other sentences for a new novel, and Anna's sentence is "The two women were alone in the London flat "which is of course the first sentence of *Free Women*.

Her new psychic does not change the world, and her aspirations are shown to be low key. Paul tells Ella in the yellow notebook that they are 'boulder-pushers'. Sisyphus-like, their task is to push a great boulder (representing truth intuitively recognized) up the high mountain of human stupidity. Every so often it rolls down, almost to the bottom, and boulder-pushers begin again. This image of perpetual effort with the prospect of very little achievement replaces Anna's idealistic communist dreams. With the highlight on the moral responsibility, as well as the invocation of the boulder-pusher, she gradually emerges from her identity crisis and overcomes the feeling of meaningless. The figure of the boulder-pusher is her answer to the question of her existence. Besides, through her self-narratives, she acknowledges her moral framework. Her struggle to re-define her self, as Kerby predicts, has turned out to be a dialogue with the values she upholds. (Kerby 59)

Anna strikes a balance that would embrace neither nostalgic wholeness nor the nihilistic formlessness. As a committed and responsible agent, she is flexible just as her self-narrative – *The Golden Notebook* – remains open-ended.

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The non-closure of *The Golden Notebook* dissolves the divisions between fiction and reality into a continuum of possibilities.

If self- identity emerges from narrative, Anna's notebooks can be considered as her various versions of self-narrative and she, the postmodern subject of a postmodern writer for whom writing is both a response and a contribution to an even thoroughgoing sense that reality and truth are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions and reconstructions.

With *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing's narrative strategies change: her writing becomes a 'wordless statement' and the individual highly fragmented. The result of her exploration is an assault on the rational mode of consciousness. It seems that she has moved away from the immanent approach to the problem of alienation. In this novel man is not seen, as forward-moving, rational and realistic; in fact, rationality has come to be seen as itself an alienating factor. Yet the novel neither invites quiet resignation nor irrational surrender to the authority of some saving revelation as our response. On the contrary, we must dwell on the languaged world if we are responsible.

It is this tension and the continuing self-conscious exploration of the limits of genre and form that account for the importance of narrative as an expressive embodiment of our experience, as a mode of communication, and as a form of understanding the world and ultimately our self.

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