

**THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMININITY IN 20TH-CENTURY ENGLISH
LITERATURE: DORIS LESSING AND HER CONTEMPORARIES**

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Abstract: This paper explores how femininity was represented in 20th-century English literature through the works of Doris Lessing and her contemporaries such as Virginia Woolf and Angela Carter. It aims to trace the evolution of female identity, subjectivity, and social positioning within the shifting political and cultural contexts of modern Britain. Using feminist literary theory as a critical framework, the study analyses Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* and *The Grass Is Singing* alongside works by Woolf and Carter to illustrate how gender, class, and social expectations shaped the depiction of women. Findings show that Lessing and her peers challenged patriarchal ideologies by portraying complex, psychologically authentic women who negotiate between personal autonomy and social limitation. The study concludes that Lessing’s narratives mark a transitional stage between modernist introspection and postmodern feminist critique.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, Virginia Woolf, femininity, feminist literature, 20th century, identity, gender representation

Introduction

Background and Significance

The 20th century brought profound social, political, and intellectual transformations that reshaped the role of women in Western society. The two world wars, women’s suffrage, the decline of colonialism, and the rise of feminist movements created new spaces for female voices to emerge. Literature became a key medium through which women redefined their subjectivity and contested patriarchal values.

Within this historical frame, English women writers such as Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, and Angela Carter articulated the complexities of womanhood, social constraint, and liberation. Their works not only depicted women’s external realities but also delved into psychological and existential questions about identity and freedom.

This paper investigates how femininity was portrayed in the works of Doris Lessing—particularly *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *The Grass Is Singing* (1950)—and compares her representations with those of her contemporaries, especially Virginia Woolf and Angela Carter.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the evolution of feminine identity and subjectivity in 20th-century English literature.

2. To analyse how Doris Lessing's fiction represents women's psychological and social realities.
3. To compare Lessing's approach to femininity with that of her contemporaries.
4. To evaluate how these representations reflect or resist patriarchal ideology.

Research Questions

- How does Doris Lessing depict femininity and female subjectivity?
- In what ways do her representations differ from or resemble those of Virginia Woolf and Angela Carter?
- What social and historical factors influenced the literary portrayal of women in the 20th century?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs **qualitative literary analysis**, grounded in feminist theory and comparative textual interpretation. The method is **interpretive and analytical**, focusing on narrative structure, characterisation, symbolism, and thematic concerns related to gender.

Theoretical Framework

The research draws on **feminist literary criticism**, especially concepts from Elaine Showalter's *Gynocriticism* (1977), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). These frameworks consider gender as a socially constructed and performative category.

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Lessing's essays are used to contextualise the idea of women's creative independence.

Corpus of Texts

The primary texts examined are:

- *The Golden Notebook* (1962) by Doris Lessing
- *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) by Doris Lessing
- *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf
- *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) by Angela Carter

Data Analysis Procedure

Each text was analysed through thematic coding, focusing on:

- Female subjectivity and identity formation
- Representation of social roles (wife, mother, writer)
- Language, symbolism, and narrative perspective
- Resistance to patriarchal norms

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles and books that examine feminist interpretations of these authors.

Results

Representation of Femininity in Doris Lessing's Works

Lessing's fiction presents women as conflicted individuals negotiating between social conformity and personal authenticity. In *The Golden Notebook*, Anna Wulf's fragmented notebooks symbolise the fragmentation of the modern woman's identity. Each notebook reflects a compartmentalised role—writer, mother, lover, political activist—suggesting the impossibility of maintaining unity in a patriarchal world (Abd El Aziz, 2018).

Similarly, in *The Grass Is Singing*, Mary Turner embodies the destructive consequences of colonial and gender oppression. Her psychological breakdown represents not only personal alienation but also systemic inequality. Lessing's realism intertwines with psychoanalytic depth, portraying how social expectations distort female subjectivity (Hossain, 2018).

Comparison with Virginia Woolf

Woolf's characters, such as Clarissa Dalloway and Lily Briscoe, also confront patriarchal confinement but through introspective consciousness rather than external conflict. Woolf emphasises the interiority of women's experiences, arguing that artistic and intellectual freedom require economic and spatial independence—"a room of one's own" (Woolf, 1929).

While Woolf's modernist feminism focuses on individual creativity and inner life, Lessing expands the discussion to include socio-political and class dimensions. Thus, Lessing represents the **transition from modernist to post-war feminist realism**, where gender intersects with politics and history (Smadi et al., 2024).

Angela Carter and Postmodern Femininity

Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* reinterprets fairy tales from a feminist standpoint, exposing the hidden violence of patriarchal myths. Her heroines resist victimisation through sexual and narrative agency. Compared to Lessing, Carter's feminism is more symbolic and subversive; however, both writers destabilise gender stereotypes and explore the fluidity of feminine identity (LI Yan et al., 2024).

Thematic Findings

The analysis identifies several recurring patterns:

Theme	Representation	Example / Author
Fragmented Identity	Women split between roles	Anna Wulf in <i>The Golden Notebook</i>
Patriarchal Constraint	Domestic social limitations	Mary Turner in <i>The Grass Is Singing</i>
Creative Autonomy	Need for self-space freedom	Woolf's <i>A Room of One's Own</i>
Rebellion	Subversion Women reclaiming narrative power	Carter's <i>The Bloody Chamber</i>

Discussion

The Evolution of Feminine Subjectivity

Lessing's heroines reflect the historical movement from early feminist consciousness to mature psychological realism. Her narratives question whether true autonomy is possible within patriarchal and capitalist systems. Through fragmented narrative structures, Lessing symbolically represents women's struggle to reconcile inner and outer selves (Eren, 2016).

Woolf had earlier posed similar questions but in subtler, interior terms. The continuity between Woolf and Lessing suggests that 20th-century English feminism evolved from **psychological liberation to social critique**.

Intersection of Gender, Class, and Colonialism

Unlike Woolf, Lessing situates femininity within colonial and racial hierarchies. In *The Grass Is Singing*, the relationship between white women and African servants reveals how patriarchy and imperialism reinforce one another. Lessing thus anticipates post-colonial feminism, showing that gender oppression intersects with race and class (Redalyc, 2023).

Narrative Innovation and Feminist Form

Formally, both Woolf and Lessing revolutionised narrative technique. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness dismantled linear time, while Lessing's multi-voiced structure in *The Golden Notebook* breaks narrative unity. These techniques mirror women's fractured social experience and resist patriarchal storytelling conventions (Showalter, 1991).

Limitations and Critiques

Although Lessing's works are widely celebrated, critics note that some female characters remain trapped within conventional roles or display ambivalence toward feminism. As Eren (2016) observes, *The Cleft* reverses creation myths yet still employs traditional gender dichotomies. This tension highlights the complexity of representing femininity without reproducing stereotypes.

The Legacy of Lessing and Her Contemporaries

Lessing's influence extends to late 20th- and early 21st-century feminist writers, who explore hybrid identities, sexuality, and intersectionality. Authors like Jeanette Winterson and Zadie Smith continue to engage with questions first articulated by Woolf and Lessing—creative independence, the politics of representation, and the body as a site of resistance (Qayumova, 2025).

Conclusion

Doris Lessing and her contemporaries transformed the literary representation of femininity in 20th-century English literature. Through experimental narrative techniques and psychologically complex characters, they dismantled the passive stereotypes that had long dominated female depiction.

Lessing's work bridges modernist introspection and post-modern feminist realism, illustrating how women's experiences are shaped by intersecting forces of gender, class, and culture. Her contemporaries—Woolf and Carter—each contributed distinct perspectives: Woolf emphasised the interior world of women's consciousness, while Carter subverted patriarchal myths through symbolic rebellion.

Together, these writers forged a lineage of feminist thought that redefined not only women's roles in literature but also the very form of the English novel. Their legacy continues to inspire debates on identity, authorship, and equality in contemporary literary studies.

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