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My Mother is the Other in Me: Reading Mother-Daughter Relationships in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

Since founded by Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis has been studying human psychological structures and behaviors; however, it has also been an analysis where mainly the male psyche is concerned and the female structures are often excluded, marginalized, or put into the category as the *Other*. Many theories developed in the field of psychoanalysis so far pertain to male concerns, a fact that has aroused attention and discussion from female scholars/feminists. While they partly agreed with the major psychoanalytic analyses on human psyche, feminists who are interested in psychoanalysis criticize that females are being devaluated in the study.

The fact that women are put into the position of the Other may be a result of the phallogocentric development of culture and society; however, it is not only men who regards women as the Other, women also perceives themselves as the Other. The otherness of women is deeply rooted in the society in which women are often situated in the subordinate position to men. One example where women are perceived as the Other by the same sex is the complex relationship between mothers and daughters. The nature of the bond between mothers and daughters are enigmatic because love and hatred usually coexist in the relationship. In Doris Lessing's most acknowledged novel, *The Golden Notebook*, the complex nature of mother-daughter relationship is portrayed in detail. The love-hate relationship is pervasive between mothers and daughters throughout the story, and it is not hard to recognize that mothers always occupy the role of the Other for their daughters, a

situation which corresponds to the major theories developed in psychoanalysis.

It is obvious to see that Lessing is troubled by the role of the mother, which is especially represented through her depiction of the mother-daughter (child) relationships in the novel. The major female characters in the novel are all single mothers who takes care of their children without much of paternal interruption, that is, the fathers of the children rarely appear. In the case where the mother is the primary (and probably the only one) caretaker of her children, what the reader would imagined is a close bonding between the mother and the child, with the mother being tireless in caring and giving love. But Lessing seems to have a different attitude toward mother-daughter relationships for the mothers in the novel almost always inhabit a negative position. Mothers' relationships with their daughters in the novel are often terrible, to the extent that their children want to escape and turn away from the mothers.

The conflict between mothers and daughters first appears in the novel when the protagonist, Anna, resists her best friend Molly's dominance over her. Since the start of their friendship Molly, who is older and physically bigger than Anna, "had frankly domineered Anna." Only with the help of a Jungian psychoanalyst Mother Sugar has Anna "learned to stand up for herself" (Lessing 9-10). In fact, Molly acts as a surrogate mother for Anna when she incessantly blames Anna for the slackness in her writing career, just like a mother who nags at her children for not doing well at school. Because Molly is older and bigger, she feels an obligation to take care of Anna, who is shy and unassertive. Anna feels like a daughter of the overpowered Molly, and she resists this stand-in mother's domination over her even though Molly may be well-intentioned in her care for Anna. When Molly, "determinedly muffling the tears" (Lessing 40), says that Anna should continue writing because she has only one talent when Molly herself has so many talents that she cannot concentrate on one, Anna tries to talk back but she could not. The first thought that comes in Anna's mind is that "I am not an extension of you" (Lessing 40), of which she quickly realizes that it was something

she would say to her mother if she was there. Being a daughter of an overpowering mother, Anna has to fight back this strong motherly figure if she does not want to lose her self-image or to become an extension of her mother.

The crisis of identity between mothers and children has been discussed in psychoanalysis, and many theories concerning the matter are developed. For instance, the problem of identity is discussed in Jacques Lacan's theory of Mirror Stage in 1936. The mirror stage describes an essential process in the development of human subjectivity. The infant (whether male or female) at first senses that he/she is an extension of the mother's body (a feeling possibly derived from the fact that the baby is constantly being held in arms by the mother). When seeing its reflection in a mirror, the child realizes that the single body appeared on the mirror is whole by itself, thus the baby experiences the splitting from the mother, coming to an understanding that the mother is a separate being. This stage is vital for the child's own formation of subjectivity, otherwise the child will become psychotic. The mother, from this moment on, is seen as the *big Other (mOther)*. In this well-accepted perspective on subjectivity formation in children, the mother occupies a role of the other from whom the child must separate and remain distant for their own good. In other words, when the child recognizes the mother's otherness, he must instantly reject this otherness by rejecting his mother. Hence, we may tentatively conclude that the mother is positioned as an other/obstacle for the child's formation of self identity and subjectivity and on his/her way into the symbolic realm.

The protagonist, Anna Wulf, in *The Golden Notebook* is rejected by her daughter, Janet, because Anna is accused by her daughter of "putting too much of her" into the daughter, to the extent that Janet, who is usually a quite and sweet little girl, openly confronts the mother and says that she "wants to be ordinary . . . don't want to be like you [the mother]" (Lessing 617). Is this not an example where a mother stands as the obstacle to the child's formation of self-image, where the child is criticizing her mother of devouring her with the mother's

expectations and desires? Lacan also describes on several occasions the “cannibalistic fantasies of devouring, and being devoured by, the mother” (Evans 120). This image of the mother as some kind of overpowering and devouring “crocodile” has been constant in Lacanian works: “[f]or psychoanalysis, a continued allegiance [of the child] to the mother appears as regressive and potentially lethal” (Chodorow 168). Inasmuch as the mother’s role is presented as negative and even deadly, it is a good suspicion that the child may have hidden or unconscious resentment of the mother.

The otherness in the mother is more apparent and influential to the daughters than sons, because mothers and daughters have biological alike bodies which form an even tighter bonding between the parent and the child. The daughter must try harder in confronting the otherness in the mother who is quasi-identical to herself. Furthermore, Sigmund Freud’s most well-known Oedipus complex describes that woman/mother serves as an object of desire in family relations. The male child’s desire for the mother, which aroused the father’s anger, eventually turns the boy towards his father whom he identifies as more powerful and inspires to become one like that. The girl will do something similar as to cast her love and desire on her father but blames the mother for “her perceived castration” (Stevenson). In psychoanalysis, just as Nancy Chodorow observes, that “[w]hile psychoanalytic feminism have added the female child to the male, they have not succeeded in including the perspectives of adult woman. The adult woman also is a mother, continues to exist only in relation to her child, never as a subject in her own right” (167). Thus, it seems that the special quality of the role of the mother naturally founded the notion of otherness inside the women’s bodies, and the daughters are the ones who try the hardest to conquer this otherness.

The famous psychoanalytic feminist Luce Irigaray also talks about the frightful dominance of the mothers and the stress that the mother’s overpowering “love” caused on the daughters: “but you feed me/yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me up completely with your offering. You put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate” (61). The daughter in

this case frankly states her wish not to be given too much love nor “too much of her mother” in her, pleading “I would like both of us to be present. So that the one doesn't disappear in the *other*, or the *other* in the one” (61, emphasis mine). Clearly, the over-protective or over-dominating mothers do pose a threat for their daughters. Even Irigaray herself, a feminist, sees the mother as an Other in the relationship.

The overpowering mother, represented by Anna Wulf in *The Golden Notebook*, discourages and frightens the seemingly less powerful child/daughter, Janet, and as a result prompting the child to repel from the mother and to seek alternative way (the patriarchal way) as the direct opposition of the mother's control. In the novel, the approach Janet takes to separate from her mother is to attend boarding school, which is described by Anna as an institution where little girls “. . . going fro walks in crocodiles, like soldiers, and looking like everyone else, and doing things regularly at certain times. If you're not careful you're going to come out of it like a processed pea, just like everyone else” (Lessing 617). This passage clearly shows that what Janet wanted is actually the patriarchal/socially accepted/constrained style of living, rather than being raised like Anna, a free woman who flees from social norms. In this sense, the young woman, Janet, after tasting the “free life” of her mother eventually decides to return to the father's world (although a father figure never appears in her life, but the repulsion that she feels towards her mother incites her to do the decision and thinks it is better.)

In another passage in the novel, Lessing clearly speaks through Anna that the daughter has deserted her mother for the desire of paternal (masculine) rules rather than maternal (feminine) chaos: “Janet went to school today. Uniform is optional, and she chose to wear it. Extraordinary that my child should want a uniform. I can't remember a time in my life when I wouldn't have felt uncomfortable in one. . . The uniform is ugly . . . yet she [Janet] is delighted” (Lessing 522). On knowing that the uniform is in fact designed by the head-mistress of the school whom “the woman in her died before she was twenty” (Lessing

522), Anna is reassured that by “sending Janet to her [the head-mistress], I am providing Janet with a father-figure” (Lessing 522). Anna “trusts” in Janet that she would oppose the father-like mistress in some way, but to her surprise and dismay, “Janet does not want to oppose anything” (Lessing 522); Janet gladly accepts what the “father” asks her to do. In addition, Lessing describes Janet’s attitude towards her mother’s life as “. . . the world of disorder, experiment, where people loved from day to day, like balls perpetually jiggling on the top of jets of prancing water; keeping themselves open for any new feeling or adventure, and had decided it was not for her” (Lessing 617). For the daughter her mother’s style of living is what bothers her, and she certainly does not want to be “like her mother”.

Hence, the daughter Janet leaves her mother Anna; however, the story does not end here. So far only the daughter’s point of view on her mother is considered, and now we should see the reaction of the mother to her children’s opposition. After Janet is gone from Anna’s house to stay in boarding school, we see that Anna’s world starts to fall apart. It is until then that Anna realized that her daughter was her support, a pivot of her “normal life”, without which she can no longer sustain her rationality and stability. Anna realizes that she “had depended on the discipline which having a child had enforced on her—getting up at a certain time in the morning, going to bed soon enough. . .arranging regular meals, organizing her moods so as not to upset the child” (Lessing 618). The seemingly haggard duties of a mother in fact help to retain her normality, withholding her from abnormality or madness, for when Janet is not home, Anna can pass several days in her dim little room cutting up and patching newspapers which is definitely not a sane life-style. If it is true that the mother “continues to exist only in relation to her child” (Chodorow 167) and psychoanalysis tells us the children should leave all mothers or become psychotic, what should the mother do if her children leave her? (Father/husband is not considered in this case because he also has deserted a mother of his own.) Would mothers cease to exist? This seems as an answer given by Doris Lessing. When Janet is gone, Anna as a mother ceases to exist, to the extent that she is no

longer able to sustain her rationality and has gone into madness.

Certainly, Anna's psychological problems are not entirely caused by her relationship with her daughter, so one cannot blame the daughter for her mother's illness that worsens after her departure from home. While it may be true, it is undeniable that the daughter really plays an important role in her mother's life, and the daughter is particularly influential to the well-being of the mother's psyche, since the only cause that holds back Anna from madness is Janet, or more specifically, the mother's duty and responsibility for the daughter. For illustration, when Anna is hurt again by man, she "had been very depressed . . . had depended a great deal on that personality—Janet's mother. [She] continually ask myself—how extraordinary, that when inside I am flat, nervous, dead, that I can still, for Janet, be clam, responsible, alive?" (Lessing 475) This maternal love and responsibility is so great that Anna is able to resist her madness and retain sanity after all.

Julia Kristeva, in one of the letters she has written to Catherine Clément discussing feminine issues, speaks about maternal love:

The more I love him [her son] the less I can do anything about it, and that the more powerless I am the more attached I am to him. I gave life . . . or life passed through me, and I can't do anything about it . . . except to give of myself endlessly, for the remainder of time and in the time remaining in us, which is a great deal and, all things considered, *keeps me going*." (Clément and Kristeva 64-5, emphasis mine)

Mothers feel attached to their children and depended on their children to keep them going on through life withstanding hardships and conflicts. Anna cannot continue her life sanely after her daughter leaves her; she has loved her child so dearly that her life (or rationality) practically depends on the presence/absence of her daughter.

In short, we see that the negative traits (such as overpowering, over-dominating, or

devouring) designated to mothers in fact derive from the maternal love that she has for her children. Why is it that mothers with such wonderful maternal love and caring for her child are eventually rejected and even despised by those that she has given so much? The answer to this question probably will never be found, and certainly Lessing does not provide a solution in her novel. Nevertheless, I propose that it is the otherness in the mother that caused the children's resentment (especially from the daughter), not her maternal love. The love of mother is so great that she would give everything she has for her daughter (it is much easier for a mother to pass on her thoughts to her female child rather than male child), and it is in this excess giving that the daughter must try with all her might to re/form her identity.

Psychoanalysis tells us that in all our life, we are always confronting the gaze of the other, and it is by the presence of the other that our world is constructed. In fact, although as much as we would like to get rid of this *Other*, actually getting rid of it will do us no good. Since the world/identity is constructed around the *Big Other*, it is an essential otherness that people must face. So maybe, and just maybe, a better way to react to this *other* is to cope with it rather than repel from it. Kristeva in a speech given at France says that "What we lack is a reflection on maternal passion." And going back to Irigaray's mother who she sees as the "you [other] in me, and me in you," (63) it is clear that while the mother can be viewed as the other in the daughter, the daughter can as well be the other in the mother. What the daughter does not realize is that when she leaves her mother and goes into another house, she becomes the mother herself. The mother-daughter relation is so close a bond that the daughter is born out of the mother and the mother depends on her daughter. This relationship should be positively encouraged rather than negatively rejected. Yes, the mother is the other, but she also represents the other in the daughter (everyone experiences in themselves this *Other* whom they feel is constantly gazing on them, influencing them). When the daughter rejects her mother, it may not be the "mother" she is denying but the other she sees in her. The hitherto excluded "Other" should be bring back and make peace with. Love your mother as

she loves you.

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