

# Woman's Question in Contemporary British and American Female Literature as Represented by Doris Lessing's "The Golden Notebook" and Alice Walker's "The Color Purple"

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## Summary

The aim of this paper is to present the female literary tradition and the circumstances of its development. The first part of the paper is concerned with the historical background of the female literary tradition, as well as with representations of women in literature. Each chapter elaborates on a certain historical period, naming in this way the most important features of each literary period.

The second part of the paper is concerned with the analysis of two literary works written by influential female contemporary writers. These two authors are Doris Lessing and Alice Walker. Both are still quite active in their literary careers, and their novels *The Golden Notebook* and *The Color Purple* show the greatness of their literary talent, as will be presented by the detailed analysis of each work. Both novels depict the present social situation, focusing particularly on the female subculture.

Doris Lessing is a British and Alice Walker an African American author. Choice of two contemporary female authors of different ethnic background was made on purpose. The aim was to demonstrate different historical and cultural positions of the two female subcultures and to raise general awareness about the complexity of the position African American women were, i.e. some still are, in.

**Keywords:** female subculture, the Suffragist Movement, female literary tradition, African American women, Alice Walker, Doris Lessing

## 1. Introduction

Western civilization started to develop in the ancient Greek and Roman times. For centuries afterwards patriarchy established by these two cultures remained the dominant ideology. Anglo-Saxons, who were responsible for creating the very root of the British literature, and consequently of the American literature as well, followed the same ideology. Women had always been the oppressed gender and the struggle for equality between genders was a long-lasting and a complex battle. The most difficult step in solving the so-called Woman's Question was to awaken female awareness about the very existence of that question. Living under certain dogmas for too long makes one believe that there is no other way but the one prescribed by the ruling class. Since intellectuals are interested in social conditions that surround them, and they are usually the ones who create literature, literature can frequently be taken as a historical record, a chronicle of the social atmosphere during a certain age. Reading literary works we can find out a lot about women's lives throughout the history. Representations of women in literary works vary from one to the other literary period, its variation most commonly being parallel to the changes in the prevailing social ideology.

Women occupied a low position in the social, legal and economic hierarchy. Not until the nineteenth century did some more serious changes in the female position begin to take place. Starting with the Middle Ages and lasting until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women writers were practically non-existent. British and especially American literature mainly contained religious, pastoral, political or romantic writings. Women writers were either nuns or they belonged to the higher, aristocratic social ranks. The nineteenth century, i.e. the Victorian period, saw the first signs of female critical thought. Two main female occupations were a schoolteacher or a governess. Number of educated women was constantly increasing, which also influenced the development of female literary tradition. Literary forms, topics that women writers elaborated on and language that they used was still largely limited compared to those in literary works of their male contemporaries. Women frequently had moral dilemmas about publishing their work. Writing was considered to be a male creative gift. Women writers were seen as incredibly unfeminine. Many women restrained from publishing their work, but some, more courageous ones, published under male pseudonyms. However, these ladies often complained about the lack of education influencing the quality of their work. Namely, women were not admitted to male colleges for a long time. After decades of complaining and criticizing, female colleges began to emerge throughout Europe and America.

Similarly, women were not allowed to own property or file for a divorce. Wife-beating was women's everyday life. The situation seemed desperate, or at least it does from the contemporary women's perspective. Women's legal status was popularly called *femme covert*, i.e. a covered woman, since women were defined as 'Mrs. John Smith'. All her earnings belonged to her husband. However, as the impact of industrialization, urbanization and scientific advancement stirred the whole society up, women's self-awareness finally began to wake up. New working places emerged and many women began to earn their own wages. They slowly began demanding their ownership rights. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they were openly criticising the male subculture. Numerous women were active as professional writers. At the turn of the century they also engaged in writing new literary genres. Novel was the dominant female literary genre in the Victorian age, but as the century progressed, women widened their interests and began writing plays, detective fiction, short stories etc. They took up journalism and literary criticism, which resulted in new literary theories. The Victorian female ideal called 'The Angel of the House' turned into a *femme fatale* in the turn-of-the-century literature, and transformed again into a so-called 'flapper' in the modern literature. Most contemporary female authors are not as eager to confront the male authority, since the social circumstances changed and the status of women finally reached the position it deserves in the social hierarchy. Contemporary female authors are therefore concerned with society and with the personal, intimate world of one's own.

In the twentieth century the relationship between men and women became a partnership, which is also proven by the variety of literary genres and themes represented equally in both male and female literature. Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* is an interesting example of the British contemporary female literature, whereas Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* emphasizes the specificity of African American contemporary female literature. An in-depth analysis of these two literary works follows in the further chapters.

## 2. Historical Development of British and American Female Literature

### 2.1. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance

British literary anthologies usually begin with the literary period of Old English, referring to the great Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* as the first British literary work. The epic was presumably written in the eighth century, a period when educated people were either priests or aristocrats. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* provides names of five extraordinary women who succeeded in having their names written down in historical records. “Atypical in both education and intellectual authority” (Gilbert and Gubar 2), Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, queen Elizabeth I, Mary Sidney Herbert and Amelia Lanier were pioneers of the female literary tradition. Margery wrote individualistic preachings, whereas Julian, a solitary visionary, recorded her mystical revelations. Both used the linguistic version of Middle English. Later on, Elizabeth I, a powerful and educated English queen, Mary Sidney Herbert, a wealthy and learned patroness of Elizabethan intellectuals, and Amelia Lanier, presumably the “Dark Lady” of Shakespeare’s sonnets, took part in crucial political, social and cultural events of the time. Their works were written in a language version much closer to Modern English. Due to Elizabeth’s royal influence, this version began its transformation into a single national language.

Literary forms that were predetermined for women were various spiritual meditations and preachings, that e.g. Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich produced. An alternative to these was poetry. Herbert and Lanier, both members of courtly circles, chose to write poems. Herbert dedicated her poems to Queen Elizabeth, whereas Lanier wrote hers for Mary Sidney Herbert. Elizabeth Tudor was “proficient in Greek and Latin as well as French, Italian, Spanish, and German. Her translations, speeches, and poems illustrate her political genius and her rhetorical ingenuity” (Gilbert and Gubar 28). These were the ladies of rare luck to possess such a high social status, to be educated and to get the opportunity to express their creative talent, even though it was seriously constrained by social conventions.

Speaking of social conventions, obedience and servitude towards their fathers and later on their husbands were expected from women. Their fathers decided who they would marry. Their husbands were allowed to beat them without any justification for their action. Divorce, female ownership of property, education or career building were unobtainable to women back then. Fifteenth century wives concerned themselves with the legal, educational and moral welfare of their husbands and brothers. Wives of middle-class farmers were obliged to help out in the field,

produce cloth for their family, take care of all the domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, etc. Women often worked in home industries like textile and food production, they sold goods like leather, wool or groceries, they made shoes and candles, bound books. However, according to the law, unless they were widows, the money that they earned was not their own, but their husbands'. Some women, who decided to take the easy way out, engaged in the enterprise of matrimony. Educated women in the Middle Ages were either nuns or they belonged to higher social ranks. Aristocratic widows were in a relatively good position back then. They "could manage their own property, choose second, third or fourth husbands, and handle marriage settlements for themselves. Middle-class widows could establish businesses, join guilds, enter into foreign trade, and even, in some cases, sue or be sued" (Gilbert and Gubar 12). Young, unmarried women, on the other hand, were in the most unenviable position. Without any legal, economic or social power, they did not differ much from the exchange goods in trade businesses. The exception was that they were traded in businesses of marriage settlements arranged by their fathers and their future husbands.

Conventions of the patriarchal society were rather oppressive towards women. However, some of the stronger and more persistent women managed to bend the social rules and conventions. Christine de Pisan is among the earliest feminist writers. She lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and like many other women of her time, she yearned for a female community whose members had male privileges. Her *La Cité des Dames (The City of Ladies)* is "a dream-vision of a female utopia" (Gilbert and Gubar 13). This was a subject that interested many other literary women of that age, e.g. Elizabeth Cary, Viscountess Falkland, Lucy Harrington Russell and Lady Mary Wroth. Even though these women were quite often literary patronesses, they were also "almost always economically dependent on church or state" (Gilbert and Gubar 14).

## 2.2. The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century

The seventeenth century is of major importance in female literary tradition, since it marks "the entrance of women into the literary marketplace" (Gilbert and Gubar 39). After the printing machine was invented, the production of literature became more commercialized, so even ordinary, middle-class women were compelled to start writing in order to earn some money. From this point onwards female writers seized to be exclusively of aristocratic rank or religious calling.



It is often said that these two centuries were an age of change for England. They included “two revolutions within fifty years, two kings deposed and one killed, and an Anglican church which was consolidated, overthrown, and rebuilt” (Gilbert and Gubar 40). Radical believers, later on called Puritans, believed that the church had to ‘purify’ itself further of Catholic religious tradition. They also fought the Royalists, which resulted in an armed rebellion and afterwards in the English Civil War, that ended with Oliver Cromwell’s ascend upon the throne as Lord Protector. Political upheavals had a liberating effect on women. Political circumstances were shifting quickly, so many women had to financially help their families survive. This by no means meant taking part in political activities. Women were still largely confined to the domestic sphere, but the range of occupations available to them had definitely widened.

American female literature boomed in the period from 1630 to 1640, as numerous Puritans left England to found their own, ‘purified’ colony on the other coast of the Atlantic Ocean. “Colonists saw the New World as an inspiring, if sometimes bewildering, opportunity for development” (Gilbert and Gubar 42). However, this was also the age during which numerous jailors, convicts and African slaves landed the coasts of New England. English Parliament pressured the colonists with their policy of taxation which eventually led to the American Independence War in 1776. Puritan ideology played a great role in shaping the American identity. They believed in the individual effort and responsibility.

Early English and colonial Puritans believed that, after Adam’s fall, God had offered a Covenant of Grace through Christ to certain elect souls. Because God was thought to visit his grace directly on each of these individuals, the Puritans minimized the rule of church ritual and liturgy, and instead emphasized each individual’s need to study the self, the world, and the Bible. (Gilbert and Gubar 43)

Puritans were often considered to be self-absorbed religious fanatics, opposed to the frivolity and idolatry of the arts. They distrusted imagination. Their writings were mostly moral preachings about the mission of the New World and about the God’s covenant with man. John Winthrop and Cotton Mather were among the leading American authors and preachers.

Mary Rowlandson was one of the rare women who managed to attract a wider attention of the reading audience with her Indian captivity narrative. Puritanism as an ideology had a positive side-effect for women because it supported self-improvement. It also allowed women to explore and articulate their spiritual experiences. On the other hand, it also supported the patriarchal

ideology, according to which father functioned as the head of a family. Nonetheless, it at least defined a wife as “her husband’s partner: her soul was equal to his in the sight of God” (Gilbert and Gubar 44). Many women took up the practice of preaching, although in many cases, if they acquired too wide an audience, they ended up excommunicated. Numerous women decided to write poetry, among them was also an American poet Anne Bradstreet who was well known for her meditative poetry.

Another important effect on women’s position was created by the development of science. “The tolerant pluralism that characterized eighteenth-century intellectual history was in part the result of direct challenges to traditional religion, challenges associated with the rise of mathematics, physics and anatomy” (Gilbert and Gubar 45). Many writers decided to write satires, ridiculing the age descending into commercialism and individualism. Numerous poets on the other hand followed the example of Greek and Roman classics, trying to explore the true nature of man. By the middle of the eighteenth century the ideology of empiricism grew stronger, which resulted in the decline of traditional religion. However, both America and England lived through religious revivals during the 1740s. Due to new scientific advances, earth was no longer envisioned as a nurturing mother, which did not work in favour of the social position of women. On the other hand, materialistic ideology that emerged with scientific revolution called into question the divine right of patriarchal authority.

Locke’s psychological model of the mind as *tabula rasa* implied that all knowledge is the result of sensuous experience. (...) Locke paved a way to the realism that would allow many eighteenth-century women to record in letters and journals the private experiences that shaped their development. (Gilbert and Gubar 48)

At this point in history, the way was also being paved for the coming of the novel as a new literary genre, which women in particular would find eligible. Heroines started to emerge in the fiction of authors like Samuel Richardson whose *Pamela* and *Clarissa* were read by a wide audience. Opening of new theatre groups was also notable for the process of literature commercialization, because women writers were allowed to take part in it. Women began producing their own plays. Aphra Behn’s novel *Oroonoko*, “sometimes considered the first English novel, marks the beginning of the prose fiction produced by popular women writers such as Mary Manley or Eliza Haywood” (Gilbert and Gubar 49).

Prevailing images of women in literature still remained of misogynist nature, blaming women for unnatural eroticism. As the century progressed, thinkers increasingly advised women to hold on to the domestic values and to fulfil their proper duties as wives or daughters. A middle-class cult of weeping and delicacy was formed for women. This influenced the development of the later Victorian cult of femininity and the creation of the ideal called 'The Angel of the House'. Due to such ideological shifting, sentimentalist fiction began its development. Such prevailing ideological view of women was also mirrored in their legal status, which was popularly called *femme covert* or 'covered' woman. "The woman's legal existence was suspended by marriage: she was theoretically incorporated into the person of her husband" (Gilbert and Gubar 53). In America the attitude toward women's obtaining divorce was slightly more tolerant, however legal conditions did not differ greatly. Process of urbanization and industrialization also worked against women in one of its aspects. Namely, women often worked in smaller home industries, all of which have slowly vanished with the oncoming of the industrial age.

As mentioned above, England's first professional writer was Aphra Behn (1640-1689). She was a spy, a poet and a playwright, a middle-class widow writing for money and public acclaim. Writing for money was an unprecedented step in the seventeenth century. Some of her plays include *The Rover*, *Sir Patient Fancy*, *The Roundheads*, *The City Heiress* etc. Towards the end of her career she also took up writing prose fiction, which influenced the development of the new form – the novel, "in which, as some critics have suggested, women of letters were at last to find a genre of their own" (Gilbert and Gubar 88). Her prose works are *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, *The Fair Jilt*, *Agnes de Castro* and *Oroonoko*.

A century later, Mary Wollstonecraft enriches the English literature with some more radical writings.

Her most famous book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), is a justification of women's rights and an attack against the wrongs inflicted on women. (...) [This book presents] the first fully elaborated feminist criticism of misogynist images of women in literature, as well as the first sustained argument for female political, economic and legal equality. (Gilbert and Gubar 135)

Wollstonecraft's childhood is probably the most important impetus for her later literary career. Even though she had the misfortune to suffer under the brutality of her father and submissiveness of her mother, such relationship developed her deep resentment toward existing social

conventions and gave her strength to try and provoke a social change through her writing. She was an educated lady, who enjoyed the companionship of contemporary British male intellectuals. Some of her essayist and polemical works are *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, *Analytic Review*, *A Historical and Moral View of the Origins and Progress of the French Revolution*, etc. She also wrote novels and a children's book *Original Stories*. Compared to earlier women's writings that were mainly pastoral and romantic in their character, Wollstonecraft's ideological and philosophical writings are a significant step forward in the development of not only female literature, but of female culture in general. "Wollstonecraft became a fore-mother (...) for literary women from Margaret Fuller and Florence Nightingale to (...) Virginia Woolf, and Adrienne Rich, all of whom have extended the tradition of feminist polemic she established" (Gilbert and Gubar 138). Among eighteenth century authors there are also some more neutral ones like Anne Finch, who wrote poetry, fable, satires and plays, or the American poet Anne Bradstreet.

Women continued entering new professions, such as writing literary works. They often published under male pseudonyms, but as the century progressed, the feminist idea was slowly maturing in their minds. One more significant novelty was that according to their male contemporaries like Richardson, women began to produce their own heroines in novels of manners and in Gothic romances.

### 2.3. The Nineteenth Century – Victorian Period

With the arrival of the nineteenth century a truly powerful female literary tradition began its development. The role of women began to change significantly and claims for female liberation grew as the century progressed. Such changes were the effect of certain economic changes, imperialist expansion, political reforms, the arrival of the industrial revolution and the so-called death of God.

The striking metamorphoses of both England and America (but, again, especially England) from essentially agrarian nations to modern states commanding all the resources of power looms, printing presses, railroads, steamships, and telegraphs fostered a virtual religion of progress which was exhilarating to many, not least to a number of writers. (Gilbert and Gubar 163)

Radical religious, political and scientific changes also influenced the development of the female subculture. With the industrial advancement, people slowly stopped believing naively in the divine God's laws, and the influence of the Church deteriorated. Progress that was made in the scientific sphere, especially occurrence of the Darwin's theory of evolution shattered the former religious doctrine and people began to question not only the religious power of the Church, but also the secular power of the aristocracy. This was definitely an era of liberation, so it is no wonder that female subculture also started blooming. New working places opened for the male as well as the female population, and women began earning their own money. Even though married women still had no legal rights of ownership, and were still largely confined to the 'private' sphere, their self-consciousness slowly began to awaken and they decided it was time they finally began taking matters into their own hands. They decided to fight for their legal and economic rights, and for the general improvement of their lives. Working-class women often joined political protests, whereas aristocratic ladies wrote political pamphlets, held protest speeches, joined marches and demonstrations. In America women joined the anti-slavery movement, an action which inaugurated the feminist movement as well. Still, it was not before the end of World War I that women finally got the right to vote. Nonetheless, their progress could not be denied. New female colleges and various female institutions were founded as a result of such ideological changes.

Although Victorian period is often called the golden age of female culture, literary women had difficulties in overcoming the influence of the male literary tradition and in creating the original and independent art. According to Elaine Showalter and many other literary theoreticians, "the nineteenth century was the Age of the Female Novelist with such stellar examples as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot" (3). Women writers continued exploring the theme of the Amazon utopia, a country entirely populated by women and isolated from the male world. Such themes developed from the earlier female literary tradition which explored the subject of pastoral sanctuaries, in which again "Eves cultivated their organic gardens, cured water pollution, and ran exemplary child care centres, but did not write books" (Showalter 5).

Female poetry was greatly influenced by the Romantics Wordsworth and Byron. Similarly to the figure of the Byronic hero, Victorian female writers created a figure of the Byronic heroine. She was "a rebellious, fierce character who rejected cultural commandments that failed to meet the needs of [her] soul" (Gilbert and Gubar 184). Elizabeth Barret Browning was an

accomplished British poet, a strong abolitionist and a devoted feminist. Her major works like *Poems* or an epic-novel *Aurora Leigh* included fierce political statements and often attacked the degrading education that Victorian women received. American poets were also quite active at the time, especially in the abolitionist causes. African-American poet with a very successful publishing career, Frances E. W. Harper wrote a volume of narrative antislavery verse called *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*. She also wrote short stories and elaborated the topic of mistreatment of black women by their white masters. A crucial model for the situation of women poets was provided by one of the greatest poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century - Emily Dickinson. She was aesthetically and intellectually committed to her art, writing extremely innovative elliptically phrased and intensely compressed poetry. Only eight poems of the extensive body of poetry that she has written were published during her lifetime. She was also an interesting figure in female literary tradition because she made a complete withdrawal from the society out of unknown reasons. She decided to live a mythical life, very much associative of the 'cage-bird' life that was prescribed for the Victorian women.

Novel was a new literary genre that proved to be a great commercial success during the Victorian period. Jane Austen, an important Victorian novelist, among other works, wrote *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. She often "criticized the over valuation of love, miseducation of women, (...) rivalry among women for male approval and the female cult of weakness and dependency" (Gilbert and Gubar 207). Austen was aware of the social circumstances of the Victorian period and in her works she also frequently implied that the female survival depends upon gaining male approval and protection. She also satirized "the bombastic self-importance of clergymen, the autocratic pride of aristocrats, the crudity of the nouveau riche and the flightiness of girls who delude themselves into thinking they are the masters of their own or anyone else's fate" (Gilbert and Gubar 208). On the other side of the Atlantic, Margaret Fuller was among the most influential female prose writers who struggled to effect a cultural transformation. She was also the first self-supporting American female journalist. In her feminist polemic *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* she claimed that "there is no wholly masculine man, and no purely feminine woman" (Gilbert and Gubar 294).

Another important obstacle in overcoming the male literary tradition was the language that female writers were allowed to use. According to the Victorian 'Angel of the House' feminine model, women were not allowed to express their self-consciousness or their sexual experience. This largely narrowed the content of their writing. "The self-centeredness implicit in the act of

writing made this career an especially threatening one, it required an engagement with feeling and a cultivation of the ego rather than its negation” (Showalter 22). However, the appearance of male pseudonyms under which many Victorian women published their work was the first sign of loss of innocence in the female subculture. Majority of women still persisted in negating their creative talents, they refused to publish their work since literary success was rather burden than pleasure for them. Showing intellectual power was considered unfeminine during the Victorian period. Additionally, one must bear in mind that the goal set for the Victorian women was the institution of matrimony. Victorian mothers were attentive to the need of raising their daughters so as to be as attractive to men as possible; otherwise young women had no future. Without legal rights of ownership and with little opportunity of getting an education and consequently a decent vocation, unmarried women were predestined to a rather miserable life. “The training of Victorian girls in repression, concealment, and self-censorship was deeply inhibiting, especially for those who wanted to write” (Showalter 25). However, certain exquisite literary women managed to suppress these restrictions and overpower the feelings of embarrassment, and consequently earned themselves praise of modern critics and a place in literary history next to their contemporary male representatives. Next to the names that were already mentioned, George Eliot and the Brontë sisters are under no conditions to be left out.

### 2.3.1. Three Phases of the Victorian Female Literary Tradition

In her analysis of female literature, Elaine Showalter draws an interesting comparison between literatures of various subcultures, such as Jewish or African-American subculture. She defines three stages in the development of their literatures taking the changes in author’s self-awareness as the main principle of division. She also applied this classification to the Victorian female literary tradition.

The first stage is the imitation of the prevailing literary modes. Showalter calls this a Feminine stage of the women’s subculture, since literary works written in the beginning of the female literary tradition mostly follow the male literary tradition, avoiding to explore new subjects or to try out some new forms. This would be a period from the appearance of male pseudonym in the 1840s until the death of George Eliot in 1880. Literary women of that period choose to keep inside the boundaries, avoiding any conflict with the social norms that were prescribed for them. They were expected to be “contentedly submissive to men, but strong in

[their] inner purity and religiosity, queens in [their] own realm of the Home” (Showalter 14). The most consistent themes and images of their novels can be traced back into the eighteenth century; varying from “the mysterious interiors of Gothic romance to the balancing duty and self-fulfilment in domestic fiction” (Showalter 18). Not until later, during the first phase, did women writers began to specialize in novels of fashionable life, education, religion and community, all of which are a part of the so called “domestic realism” (Showalter 20). Professional activities allowed to women of that time were quite limited. Moreover, “Victorian women were not accustomed to *choosing* a vocation; womanhood was a vocation in itself” (Showalter 21). Women worked as either nurses, governesses, novelists or social reformers. One more important characteristic of this age is the appearance of increasingly stronger female bonds inside the subculture, the culmination of which we find in the following phase.

The second phase is marked by protest against existing standards and values. In relation to the female subculture, Showalter named this phase the Feminist phase. Making a step further was by no means an easy task. In many literary works from this age, a moral dilemma appears, an inner battle between obedience and resistance that each female writer was forced to lead. Nonetheless, women managed to push back the boundaries of social conventions even further.

The feminists challenged many of the restrictions on women’s self-expression, denounced the gospel of self-sacrifice, attacked patriarchal religion, and constructed a theoretical model of female oppression, (...) but their need for self-justification often led them away from realism into oversimplification, emotionalism and fantasy. (Showalter 29)

In this second phase, female bonds grew particularly strong, and feminists were often accused not only of being castrating towards men, but also of being homosexual.

An additional issue of this phase is a distinction that must be made between women’s novels and feminist novels. This is a difference which was of particular significance to Rosalind Coward, who explored it in her essay “Are Women’s Novels Feminist Novels?”. She warns against lumping all women’s novels of that age together simply on the basis of the similar content that they offer, which is the female experience. Often content of a book is not feminist at all, but critics analyse it as such because the female writer was politically active on some other occasions or because of her other writings. Coward notes that women-centred writing is not so radically different from romance fiction in general. It contains a rigid formula; “the heroine



invariably finds material success through sexual submission and marriage” (231). Such novels quite often possess a quasi-autobiographical structure, since their women writers struggle to turn their experiences into literature. In Coward’s words, these novels may also be named “confessional novels” (232), since they are preoccupied with the confession of female sexual experience. This age is characterized by one more important change in the female literature and it concerns the language of literary works. Women finally began using the language primarily reserved for men only, as well as exploring the male subjects. They were moving toward equation of the social positions of two genders. Certain publishers sighted a good opportunity to earn some money on the most recent sociological occurrences, which is why feminist novels were a commercial success for both sides – male and female. As educational opportunities for women expanded, the reading audience also widened and the number of self-conscious women was on the constant increase. However, as Rosalind Coward explains,

preoccupation with sexuality is not in and of itself progressive. Feminists have been involved for too long now in the analysis of images and ideologies to be conned into thinking that accounts of sexuality are progressive just because they take women’s sexuality as their central concern. (233)

Michel Foucault expresses similar concerns, although he confirms that sexuality is an element which in most writings reveals the true and essential nature of people. Taking such considerations into account, one still has to admit that the social change brought about by feminism is of immense importance. Women’s sexuality was from the midst of the nineteenth century onwards no longer equated with something illicit or disgusting. Moreover, in modern time it even became desirable. Possibilities of sexual enjoyment were no longer focused on motherhood, which presented a great relief to women. Naturally, all of this would not be possible without certain technological and medical advancements like the birth control pill, which enabled family planning. It also saved women of the pain that most modern women would consider unbearable - giving birth to a dozen of children, which to Victorian women was a common thing. As a conclusion to her essay, Coward argues that effective feminist writings should fulfil their political and ideological purpose. One should be able to distinguish a feminist writing from a woman-centred writing. Such demand certainly makes sense. Besides, it would be foolish to say that all women are equally radical in their thinking, or equally courageous in publishing certain controversial materials. Nothing is definite or explicit when it comes to creating the literary tradition. Even the three phases that Elaine Showalter defined intertwine

with each other and elements of one are undoubtedly to be found in the following phase. All in all, the 1860s and 1870s were marked by a radical social change in female subculture, which is also reflected in their literature. Later female writers moved on and engaged into a self-identity quest.

The third phase of the female literary tradition is in chronological terms the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Showalter calls it a Female literary phase, with a turn inwards, self-discovery and search for identity at its focus. Female writers who belong to this phase were true artists, since they attempted to expertise the practice of creation, experimenting and exploring various possibilities of writing. “Psychologically rather than socially focused, this literature sought refuge from the harsh realities and vicious practices of the male world” (Showalter 33). During this period, female aestheticism developed greatly.

Paradoxically, the more female this literature became in the formal and theoretical sense, the farther it moved from exploring the physical experience of women. Sexuality hovers on the fringes of aesthetics’ novels and stories, disguised, veiled and denied. (...) Again, ‘a room of one’s own’, with its insistence on artistic autonomy and its implied disengagement from social and sexual involvement, was a favourite image. (Showalter 34)

Literary creativity interested one more female literary critic. Susan Gubar uses the Pygmalion’s story metaphorically in her essay “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity”. Pygmalion has namely sculpted a beautiful ivory girl, which represented his vision of an ideal woman. As the girl came to life he was immensely happy. The moral of the story is that to men the female ideal was pliability, responsiveness, passivity and purely physical attractiveness. So strong were the myths of the former patriarchal societies that male primacy was felt in theological, artistic and scientific creativity. Gubar abhors “the idea most lucidly articulated by Gerard Manley Hopkins that ‘the male quality is the creative gift’” (293). Early Victorian women dreaded being thought of as presumptuous, castrating or monstrous because of their artistic gift. “Until very recently women have been barred from art schools as students yet have always been acceptable as models” (Gubar 293). However, many of them were simply unable to hold the flame of artistic creation within themselves, so they wrote either in secret and never published their work, or they published it under male pseudonyms, and others again engaged in self-destructive narcissism. The later cases are very well represented in George Eliot’s novels,

whose heroines possess creative talent, but they use it to reconstruct their own images<sup>1</sup>. These women of vivid imagination often pretended to play theatre roles, even though they were off stage. Susan Gubar mentions several authors who celebrate “uniquely female powers of creativity without perpetuating destructive feminine socialization” (308), and these are George Eliot, Maria Rosetti, Olive Schreiner, Edith Wharton, and Katherine Mansfield, “all of whom are involved in efforts to sanctify the female through symbols of female divinity, myths of female origin, metaphors of female creativity and rituals of female power” (308).

## 2.4. The Twentieth Century Female Literature

### 2.4.1. The Turn-of-the-Century Female Literature

With the turn of the century the whole Western culture made a transition from the old Victorian world into a new, more liberal, but rather materialistically oriented world. Certain changes received a warm welcome, however some other changes resulted in great disillusionment. In the domain of literature, the change affected the literacy rate. More educational opportunities produced more literate people and a wider reading audience. In fact, at this stage in history a mass reading audience developed, which again resulted in commercialization of literature and development of trivial literary genres, which literary critics welcomed rather coldly. However, this was not such a bad news for the newly emerged professional female writers whose goal was to become financially independent. Question of “schism between a financially successful popular culture and what was considered genuine, ‘high’ art” (Gilbert and Gubar 949) was not elaborated only in literary theories but also in works of fiction<sup>2</sup>. Certain innovative styles of writing such as elliptical prose with a purpose of ridiculing and expressing irony, use of dialects in order to capture the uniqueness of characters, and creative innovations in rhythmic methods in poetry announced even more encompassing changes in the modernist literary period. Subjects that interested writers at the beginning of the

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<sup>1</sup> In Doris Lessing’s novel, *The Golden Notebook*, a female character Molly is described as capable of changing various faces, depending on her mood. She is obviously a lady who pays more attention to her physical appearance, than to her inner state. As if her appearance, instead of a literary or any other work of art, testifies about her artistic talents.

<sup>2</sup> Anna, the protagonist in *The Golden Notebook*, is deeply troubled by the artistic value of her first novel, which is the reason she kept rejecting offers of movie producers to make a film version of her novel.

twentieth century were interrelation of the individual and the society, time and death, flesh and spirit, social and personal transformation. “Turn-of-the-century artists charted the rapid changes in the society, (...) and regionalists attempted to capture the uniqueness of the local customs and landscapes that frame their characters’ lives” (Gilbert and Gubar 952). Concern with the individuality is a writers’ response to the establishment of mass culture and the globalization process that started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reached its peak in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Organized religion and imperialist ideology were increasingly criticized not only in the prevailing male literature, but in the female literature and the newly emerging literature of national minorities, e.g. in African-American literature as well.

The turn-of-the-century obsession with figures like the *femme fatale* and the New Woman reflected not only the importance of women’s issues in the public and private lives of Americans and Britons, but also the growth of female reading public, and the visibility and success of women writers. (Gilbert and Gubar 960)

The figures of *femme fatale* and the New Woman were rebels who defied marriage because of their emancipation, but who just as equally suffered a tragic punishment for their views, which was used by many men of letters to emphasize the self-destructiveness of feminism. Although many restrictions still remained until the midst of the twentieth century, female influence slowly extended from the private and into the public sphere. Such transformation was supported by the technological advances in food preparation and by invention of new domestic appliances which decreased the amount of housework and ensured more free time for women. The image of a woman as an angelic ministrant or a slave slowly began to fade out and the Victorian cult of feminine purity slowly lost its validity. A new ideology of separate sexual spheres emerged, granting women new freedom for self-fulfilment. With the new age, a new set of occupations became available for women. They worked as farm labourers, teachers, sales clerks, factory and textile workers, cashiers, bookkeepers, accountants, typists etc. It was a true revolution compared to the Victorian governess or a schoolteacher alternative. Although a considerable difference between male and female wages still remained, this was definitely a positive change. Women writers continued envisioning utopian female worlds, some also wrote works which focused on symbolism, regionalism, social realism and naturalism, but the female dimension was rarely omitted from their works in hope to move the social boundaries even further.

#### 2.4.2. The Modernist Female Literature

Most literary anthologies estimate the beginning of the First World War as the beginning of the modernist period, and the end of the Second World War as its end. The period that follows is usually called the post-modernist era. Modernism represents an era of exuberance for women. Their power increased, they finally got the right to vote, they entered most vocations. On the other hand, this was an age of anxiety for men, whose social position seemed to be in a constant decline. They saw themselves as increasingly marginal and powerless against the new machinery and the new public hierarchy. The new technology had far-reaching effects on travel, business and communication and it kept eroding the old ways of life. Even though the first reaction to such development was enthusiasm about new discoveries, this quickly changed into scepticism about the disembodiment of the individuals, who were turned into interchangeable parts of the society. Due to various political developments, such as two world wars, nuclear bombings, Vietnam War, Cold War, communism etc., modernist and post-modernist art were marked by periods of great anxiety and disillusionment, which influenced not only the content, but also the form of artistic works. Many writers commented not only on the fate of the working class, but also on the manipulative minds of magnates who shaped their fates. This alienated world was often criticized in poetry, e.g. in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Numerous literary works belonging to the contemporary period are dystopian in character, which is due exactly to the emergence of apocalyptic assumptions of the modernist age. Economic crisis and the Great Depression of the 1930s was also a cause for general disillusionment, which naturally reflected onto the literature of that period. The so-called 'Red Scare' was a cause for international terror of communist infiltration. In the domain of philosophy, the decisive influence came from Freud and Nietzsche. Freud's psychoanalysis caused turbulences in the literary world, since numerous authors founded considerations of their own psyche on his theory. In the following chapters, this will be proven by the analysis of D. Lessing's novel *The Golden Notebook*.

As popular culture continued to develop and spread around the globe, new popular, global or so-called mass artistic styles developed in the literary, as well as in the musical, and other forms of art. However, the 'higher' art forms were also going through certain innovations. A definite novelty was the grouping of authors who often travelled abroad to organised meetings and conferences to discuss new literary and artistic styles and values. Numerous magazines and journals were published, all of which helped in the creation of a new cosmopolitan literature.

A certain new literary direction was the so-called magical or surrealist art, based on dreams and visions, wild associations and surreal images of the world. Experimental methods were also employed in poetry. Narratives became increasingly fragmented, a new technique called stream-of-consciousness emerged in modernist fiction, which meant that a novel generally focused on the mental process, thoughts and interior emotional experiences of a single central character. Literary works which employ these techniques are Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Nadine Gordimer's *July People* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Another novelty originating in Germany is the so-called Bildungsroman, or the developmental novel which is quite well exemplified by Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*. Short story also claimed its literary appraisal in this period and was well accepted by both critics and the reading audience. In the modernist period one can also detect a number of detective fiction novels, pioneer of which is beyond all doubt British female author Agatha Christie, but also Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh and Margery Allingham deserve to be praised for their contributions to the development of this genre.

As far as images of women in literature are considered, according to *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, merciless sirens called *femme fatale* in the nineteenth century were replaced by the so-called flappers in the twentieth century. The newly liberated intellectual or literary women were a cause of great anxiety to the majority of male population, who felt threatened by them. Many suffragists were characterized as insane man-haters and often labelled as lesbians. "The only good women in male-authored modern literature were on the one hand, little girls who had not yet become women, and, on the other hand, adults who were willing to sacrifice themselves completely to the imperatives of male desire and need" (Gilbert and Gubar 1232).

Technological and intellectual innovations affected women of all classes. Even though working-class women still suffered under economic exploitation, this also began to change under the influence of the increasingly active trade unions and social welfare programs. A major factor in achieving the right to vote, and economic, as well as intellectual freedom was the female contribution to the war effort. As men left their wives and went to the front, women were forced to replace them in mines and munitions factories, on farms and railroads. Such change in the economic and sociological structure caused feelings of pride in women, but, on the other side, it also caused a sickened sense of anxiety and exclusion from the society in soldiers. Even though disillusioned by such historical development, men could not entirely deny women their role in

the war, so their efforts were finally begun to be appreciated in the post-war times. “‘War girls’ were among the first ‘respectable’ female groups in Western history who could stroll the public streets unescorted, go to theatres and dances without chaperons etc.” (Gilbert and Gubar 1235). Men also slowly changed their attitude toward the matrimonial institution, which towards the end of the century turned into a companionship, an equal partnership.

Literary women worked in mostly the same modes and genres as their male contemporaries. Gertrude Stein or Virginia Woolf for instance wrote novels, experimental fiction and innovative poetry. Their works explored the dynamics and triumphs of female lives and the ideology of female power. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* demands a stylistic and linguistic innovation in female literature, so that it could reflect female experiences more accurately. She also suggests a break of tradition by e.g. focusing upon a friendship between two women, instead upon the conventional romance between a hero and a heroine. The main point of her argument is that women were no longer to be primarily defined through their erotic relationships with men, but through their intellectual value. Gertrude Stein was “a prolific and daring inventor of new forms” (Gilbert and Gubar 1306). Her prose poems *Tender Buttons* are a demonstration of her creativity and originality as a writer. She was extremely popular because of her excessiveness in real life. She was a lesbian and was not afraid to show it. Her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was a great commercial success. She was also very productive in writing novels, plays and memoirs and even though she spent most of her life in Paris, she gained immense popularity back in America, her homeland.

#### 2.4.3. The Contemporary Female Literature

Contemporary literary period is considered to last for half a century already. It started after the WW II and lasts up to the present moment. This period, similarly to other literary periods, also witnessed a major cultural shift. Malcom Bradbury analyses the culture and fiction of the 1960s and summarizes its main characteristics:

a general image of ‘youth’, and ‘liberation’, of lifestyle revolution, supported by style and fashion, music and icon, sit-ins and love-ins, concerts and protests, a youth underground to challenge the overground. It drew on drugs and psychedelic experience, gatherings and impromptu events, Utopian expectations and inter-galactic space-age dreams. It was

permissively libertarian, erotic and sexual; one went to bed for a good deal in the Sixties.  
(Bradbury 367)

Contemporary authors appear to be divided into two groups. Part of them explored and discussed “social ills in terms of the crises they associated with the rise of totalitarianism and the threat of nuclear catastrophe” (Gilbert and Gubar 1654). However, according to Bradbury this was much more the case with American than with British fiction. He states that “British fiction was not willing to let humanism, fictional character and a sense of common reality go easily. Nor did it generally share the apocalyptic sense of living in an age of distorted history so common in American writing” (377). Others “dwelt on metamorphic possibilities (...), prescribing and predicting new and more harmonious relationships between mind and body, culture and nature, as well as among nations, classes, races and sexes” (Gilbert and Gubar 1654). Similar definition is given by Bradbury. “Writers explored limits of fiction by writing self-conscious books, where the status of the author, the structure of the text, the line of plot, the certainties of ending, were challenged” (Bradbury 378). That the experiments in literary form which contemporary writers engaged in could be really far-reaching is also shown by Doris Lessing’s novel *The Golden Notebook*, which contains five sections and each is divided into another four subsections. The plot moves constantly back and forth and the main focus of the book is on the protagonist Anna Wulf and her inner world. The first group wrote the so-called dystopian literature, presented by for instance George Orwell’s novel *1984* or Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Their topic were people “reduced into cyphers and assimilated into a gigantic military bureaucracy which sought to deprive them of their individuality” (Gilbert and Gubar 1655). The second, more optimistic group consisted of social theorists like Adrienne Rich, “a crucial figure in contemporary feminist experience. (...) Her life – first as ‘faculty wife’ and mother, then as civil rights and anti-war activist, then as lesbian in the women’s liberation movement, teacher and lecturer” (Gilbert and Gubar 2023) was fulfilled to its maximum, since she even tried being married for a certain period of time. Her famous autobiographical essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” is largely about writer’s ability to relieve the body and reconstruct the mind through writing. She also wrote an extensive body of poetry, out of which her later poems are more innovative in style and content. They explore subjects like “women-to-women relationships: mothers and daughters, sister-siblings, lover and lover, friendships, and the spirit-sisters” (Gilbert and Gubar 2025). The contemporary period was also in a way enriched by



the emergence of new professionals – psychologists, psychiatrists, advice columnists, guidance counsellors - all of whom maintained the ideology of well adjustment.

“Women writers expressed both attitudes toward the contemporary world, but – as the women’s movement strengthened during the sixties – the hopes of many feminists became increasingly utopian” (Gilbert and Gubar 1654). Even though most writers of the post-war fiction expressed nihilistic assumptions about the world, due to social disasters such as the Holocaust, “Red Scare”, nuclear crisis etc., later on authors began to change their attitudes as the Third World countries began to develop and as the military tensions in the world subsided. New nations that arose in the 1940s “struggled to recover lost national traditions, and their efforts were reflected in the literature that native artists (...) began to produce” (Gilbert and Gubar 1661). They “drew heavily upon local myths and legends while recording the conflicts of identity experienced by people inhabiting cultures in transition” (Gilbert and Gubar 1661).

Representation of women during the contemporary period was increasingly biologized and sexualized. The second half of the twentieth century reached the extreme opposite of the Victorian ideal with its female imagery, taking traditional polarities, virgin-whore, angel-monster, lady-madwoman, into account again but this time valuing the second polarity. Moral priorities were reversed and instead of virginity and purity, people began appreciating passion, desire and sexiness. Many thinkers resisted this cultural tendency, creating autonomous and intelligent female characters. If the suffragettes knew about these recent social developments, they would probably be turning in their graves, knowing that their fight was so foolishly thrown aside. Female body parts are often fetishized, e.g. breasts, buttocks and legs; and unleashed female sexual energy is often associated with war devastations. Popular cultural icons became women like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor and a whole array of the attractive film stars or female singers.

In the contemporary period new personal, as well as professional options opened for women of all ages, classes and races. However, as already explained above, artistic images of women appeared to be deteriorating in value. Women were simply turned into sexual objects, silent muses for male artists. Women writers began warning the public that sexual liberation was not identical with women’s liberation. Child-abuse, wife-beating and rape continued to exist as social problems. Adrienne Rich’s essay “Writing as Re-Vision” “functioned as a kind of manifesto for both female writers and feminist critics” (Gilbert and Gubar 1677) and was a

critique of the use that the male artist and thinker has made of women. Some other writings like Lessing's *To Room 19*, which "focused on the problems creativity and solitude pose for women" (Gilbert and Gubar 1881), Tillie Olsen's *One Out of Twelve* or Denise Levertov's *Hypocrite Women* also articulated "a deep resistance to male-created social strictures and structures" (Gilbert and Gubar 1677). "Contemporary writers were consistently struggling to define the cultural forces that had formed their personal and artistic identities" (Gilbert and Gubar 1677), which was especially true for writers who belonged to a racial, ethnic or lesbian subculture. Many writers took up the task of creating almost a sociological analysis of the relationship between the individual and the society, female writers focusing naturally more on the conventions and expectations directed towards women. For example, Margaret Drabble is one of the respected British contemporary female authors. In her works she has "analysed both the privileges and the privations of intelligent and well-educated women who seek justice or salvation in their work, in their domestic lives, or, most difficult to obtain, in the integration of these two" (Gilbert and Gubar 2313). She refused to write experimental fiction and rather stuck to realism. "Her heroines are literary scholars, poets, archaeologists and journalists, all of whom try to integrate the detachment their professions often require with the passion and compassion they experience as lovers, wives and mothers" (Gilbert and Gubar 2313).

### 3. Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

#### 3.1. Doris Lessing's Biography

Doris Lessing was born in Kermanshah, which is today's Iran. Due to financial hardships in life, she left school at fourteen years of age to work as a nursemaid and a secretary. However, she continued reading American and European classics on her own. In 1949 she arrived in England, where she "briefly joined the Communist party and began earning her living as a professional writer" (Gilbert and Gubar 1880), who later developed a "remarkably productive and influential career" (Gilbert and Gubar 1880).

"Her autobiographical tetralogy *Children of Violence* (1950-1969) was praised for its social realism in depicting the growth of a heroine, Martha Quest, who comes to terms with her own identity by confronting the racism of Africa and the class stratifications of England" (Gilbert and Gubar 1880). Her most ambitious work, a multi-layered, complex novel *The Golden Notebook* was published in 1962 and it elaborated not only on the differences and conflicts between the genders, but also on the complexity and difficulties of being a writer. Anna Wulf, the novel's protagonist, suffers from the so-called writer's block. She recovers from it after investing a lot of mental effort. The first four notebooks represent a kind of chronicle of her troubles, but the last of the five notebooks – the golden notebook – represents her spiritual transformation. The novel *The Golden Notebook* depicts expertly the moral and intellectual atmosphere of the twentieth century. Lessing also published two moral fables: *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1975). Although her earlier works were rather socio-political in character, "her most recent books (...) transform themselves into science-fiction novels in which Lessing envisions other life forms on alternative worlds" (Gilbert and Gubar 1880). As a writer she "maintained a strong sense of moral responsibility" (Gilbert and Gubar 1880), always bearing in mind that literary works should be as inventive and original as possible. In her work she often "criticized the inequalities of capitalism" (Gilbert and Gubar 1880) and she searched for "a vision of unity that can empower the individual to survive the fragmentation of modern life" (Gilbert and Gubar 1881), under which she understood the discriminating ideologies of the modern world like racism, fascism and patriarchy. With Lessing being a female author, her work contains numerous references to the female problem of creativity, female self-censorship and solitude in the irrational contemporary world.

### 3.2. Analysis of the Novel *The Golden Notebook*

According to Malcom Bradbury, *The Golden Notebook* is Lessing's "most ambitious work of fiction" (Bradbury 378). Doris Lessing emphasized in the preface to the novel that *The Golden Notebook* is not simply about the gender conflict and the Woman's Question, both of which were controversial issues at the time, but one should also bear in mind that it elaborates greatly on the problems of literary creativity and ideological, social and political complexities of the contemporary society. Finally, it should not be left out that Lessing has undertaken a demanding experiment in setting up the formal frame of *The Golden Notebook*. It is "a multi-layered narrative about 'free women' which asked questions about the nature of stories themselves" (Bradbury 378).

#### 3.2.1. Free Women as a Newly Emerged Subculture

Lessing's voluminous novel encompasses "a wide-ranging engagement with contemporary society seen through the eyes of women" (Maslen 17). The central character is Anna Wulf, whose name associates readers of the feminist Virginia Woolf and announces Anna's strong and independent personality. Anna's statement: "If people can imagine something, there'll come a time when they'll achieve it" (Lessing 276) functions as a kind of credo, a guiding star for free women as a subculture. Imagining might seem trivial at first glance, but mind can be a tricky thing. It is surprising how easily our minds can be manipulated. When one has lived believing in certain dogmas for a long period of time, anything out of the ordinary seems insane or impossible. Nevertheless, Anna Wulf is a courageous woman, who despite living in the society of "cannibals, (...) [in which] no one cares about anyone else" (Lessing 274) decided not to comply with the norms, but to fight her way through life as a single parent, earning her money as a professional writer who suffers from writer's block. She thought to herself: "it might be a strain living as I do, but at least I don't live with people like Marion and Richard, I don't live in that world where a woman can't have a male lodger without spiteful jokes being made" (Lessing 279). A similar character in the novel is an American female film producer Edwina Wright. She asked Anna to sell the filming rights on her novel *Frontiers of War*. The two women met during a dinner in a restaurant. Both of them were aware that no business agreement would be reached, since Anna did not want her novel filmed at any cost, still they stayed because they enjoyed each other's company. Edwina left a significant impression on Anna,

I look at the controlled defensive handsome face and I'm sorry for her. I understand her life very well. She orders dinner – she is solicitous. Tactful. It is like being taken out by a man. Yet she is not at all masculine; it is that she is used to controlling situations like this. I can feel how this role is natural to her, what it costs her to play it. (Lessing 290)

Compared to yet another, already mentioned, female character named Marion, one realizes why Lessing uses the notion 'free women'. Marion is a weak person, who does not know what to do with her life if there is no man to show her the way. Her husband Richard was the first one Marion depended upon. After he had an affair she tried to drown her self-pity and desperation in alcohol. A much younger man, Tommy was the one to save her from this miserable state. Tommy is Richard's son from the first marriage, whose friendship with Marion gets much closer after his attempt of suicide that left him permanently blind. Tommy was a highly intelligent, rational, young man with a sense of justice so sharp, that he remained cold even when it was his own mother who was on trial. Interested in political developments in the world, he asked Marion to read newspaper articles to him. Through this social interaction he managed to awake similar interests in Marion and helped her get rid of the alcohol addiction that was ruining her. Later on, Marion confessed to herself that Richard was bad for her. On one occasion she admitted this to Anna, too. "The point is, [Richard]'s not anything, is he? He's not even very good-looking. He's not even very intelligent. I don't care if he is ever so important captain of industry. (...) For years and years I've been wearing clothes I hated, just to please this creature" (Lessing 398). However, without Tommy it is questionable what Marion's fate would be like.

Intelligence was the main source of power for free women. Lessing denotes this on several occasions throughout her novel. She also remarks that men are afraid of intelligent women. They find not having a worthy competition in a relationship much easier. It saves them from having their decisions questioned. It gives them primacy in a relationship. Saul Green, Anna's final lover in the novel *The Golden Notebook*, remarked that Anna was "the sanest bloody woman [he] had ever known" (Lessing 582). She was good in discussing politics that Saul was also interested in. She was additionally quite an expert in Freud's psychoanalysis, so she functioned as a type of a therapist for the emotionally and mentally unstable Saul. Still, from the very moment they met each other, both were aware of the fact that their relationship would end sooner or later. Saul could not settle with a single woman, nor could he bear the fact that Anna was his superior in intelligence. Even though Anna seemed to be far more rational than Saul, occasionally she too was caught off guard and her emotions took over. Truly free women

despised being caught in such moments, or rather phases of emotional instability. Ella, Anna's fictional character, complained about her failed love affair, touching upon the subject of female emotions.

The truth is that my happiness with Paul was more important to me than anything and where has that landed me? Alone, frightened to be alone, without resources, running from an exciting city because I haven't the moral energy to ring up any one of a dozen people who would be pleased if I did. (...) Women's emotions are still fitted for a kind of society that no longer exists. (...) So what I feel is irrelevant and silly... I ought to be like a man, caring more for my work than for people; I ought to put my work first and take men as they come, find an ordinary comfortable man for bread and butter reasons – but I won't do it, I can't be like that... (Lessing 314)

Whether the inability to stop one's emotions is invalidity or not is disputable. However, it is scientifically proven that in average women are less capable of keeping their cool in moments of emotional crisis than men.

An issue that becomes more frequent in women's literature as the century progresses is female sexual experience. Lessing's Anna Wulf discusses it quite openly. She is aware that different biological and psychological constitution affects female sexual experience. Therefore, she came to the conclusion that it is impossible for a woman to have an orgasm unless she has at least some feelings for her sexual partner. In man's case feelings play an insignificant role. Of course, no generalizations can be made with such statements, since individuals differ in this aspect. However, this is a prevailing opinion among sociologists, medical scientists and general public as well. Anna, i.e. Lessing, finds this irritating in a way. "Free, we say, yet the truth is they get erections when they're with a woman they don't give a damn about, but we don't have an orgasm unless we love him. What's free about that?" (Lessing 458). Still, this does not mean that such an attitude towards sex is a healthy one. On the contrary, Anna complains about not understanding how their attitude can be healthy when they cannot talk about anything but "butts and babies being stacked or packed" (Lessing 560).

Another important source of power for free women are their children. Anna Wulf lives for her daughter Janet. She knows that Janet is the only person in the world who would care if Anna was to vanish the next day. She admits to herself: "I have depended a great deal on that personality –

Janet's mother. (...) When inside I am flat, nervous, dead, I can still, for Janet, be calm, responsible, alive" (Lessing 496).

In her analysis of the contemporary relationships between men and women, Lessing often stumbles upon the neurotic relationship of mutual pain giving. This was exemplified by the relationship that the American Nelson has with his wife and by the relationship Anna had with Saul Green. "Ties between Nelson and his wife are bitterly close, and never to be broken in their lives. They are tied by the closest of all bonds, neurotic pain-giving" (Lessing 494). Similarly, Anna is surprised by her reaction on Saul because "when [they] quarrel, [they] hate each other, then sex comes out of hate" (Lessing 574). The key of this riddle lies probably in the enormous sexual liberation that happened in the twentieth century. Consequences of this cultural change are obvious in the female literature as well. Sex is no longer a taboo for women, erotic language is no longer exclusively reserved for male artists.

Modern women gained numerous privileges due to the persistent fight of generations of brave and intelligent women before them. The first and foremost step in the suffragists' fight was probably gaining self-consciousness and acknowledging the fact that each individual is entitled to equal rights and opportunities. Women first had to break through the mental boundaries of their socially conditioned roles. Only after this step was achieved could they start modifying their previously determined social roles. Lessing's work is an evidence of the high degree of emancipation that contemporary women have reached, especially if one remembers that Lessing chose to name a whole, newly emerged female subculture 'free women'.

### 3.2.2. Reconstruction of Reality in *The Golden Notebook*

Asked to comment upon her literary work, Doris Lessing said: "What interests me more than anything is how our minds are changing, how our ways of perceiving reality are changing" (Schneider 260). For Lessing, storytelling was a way of structuring reality. Her novel *The Golden Notebook* is particularly interesting in this aspect since it contains five different notebooks altogether, all of which deal with different content, i.e. different experience and are written in different form. In fragmenting Anna's consciousness, as she has done with the whole novel, Lessing offers her protagonist a new way of systematization and reordering of reality. It is

a way of compartmentalizing her experience. If all of her thoughts were lumped into a single notebook, the pressure of her mental and emotional chaos would probably drive her crazy.

Reality reconstruction is not an unusual literary technique in contemporary literature.

Like Wilshire, Jane Flax, and other contemporary feminist thinkers concerned with metaphysics, Lessing dissents from Cartesian (i.e. Western) rationalism, positing instead the idea that knowledge ‘comes from many kinds of knowing working together or taking turns’, that ‘no one manner of knowing – not disinterested cognition [if there were such a phenomenon], intuition, inspiration, sensuous awareness, nor any other - is sufficient unto itself to satisfy our need to know ourselves and the world’. (Schneider 263)

Anna Wulf mulled over the present state of the world a great deal. She obsessively read newspaper articles and pasted them on her walls. She was deeply troubled by the communist ideology, but also by the hypocrisy of the Western culture.

In general, communism was a good idea. It promoted peace and equality of all individuals in the society. However, as the time progressed, it proved dysfunctional in praxis. The very core of the communist ideology was a utopian idea. The politicians who maintained the communist policy were only human, which meant that they did not stick to the theory. Since communism occurred during a global economic crisis, it spread like wildfire all over Europe. The idea that all the members of society share the financial means equally seemed extremely tempting. Russia remained communists’ headquarters and the politicians from Moscow controlled all other communist parties. For a long time, members of the CP from non-Russian countries naively followed the Russians. No one believed that the father figure Stalin was capable of corruption or misdeeds he had later on been proved guilty of. However, many intellectuals, among them Lessing’s fictional character Anna Wulf, had certain doubts about the communist ideology. Anna was a Party member for a long time and her task was to promote various pamphlets, leaflets and notifications in England. She realized that the communist ideology failed in the West when the promoting materials turned into a heap of empty, meaningless phrases. “The fact was that the phrases of our common philosophy were a means of disguising the truth. The truth was that we had nothing in common, except the label, communist” (Lessing 295). When Anna thought about communism, not all of her conclusions were reached on an entirely conscious level. Lessing often uses dreams, the level of subconsciousness to reconstruct the reality. This process is necessary to find out the truth about the society that surrounds us; to discover deeper logical



connections among the events and to discover true reasons for all the tragedies that were happening in the world. An interesting dream that Anna had in connection to communism is the dream about a web of colourful fabric. First, she saw a red fabric spreading around the USSR. Then an entirely new, glittering colour appeared, which represented an ideology that is yet to come. Her view fell on Africa which was covered with entirely black fabric. At the end of the dream “somebody pulled a thread of the fabric and it all dissolved” (Lessing 299), which meant that at that point it was clear to Anna that the communist ideology was doomed to failure. Anna reaches the same conclusion on the conscious level during a writers’ meeting in 1952, when one of Stalin’s pamphlets was discussed and somehow all of the present writers seemed reluctant to acknowledge the fact that the pamphlet was bad, its phrases were meaningless, its language broken down; so they ascertained once again that “perhaps the translation is bad” (Lessing 301). According to Nelson, who was an American, “the reason why the communist parties of the West had collapsed, or would collapse, was because they were incapable of telling the truth about anything” (Lessing 481).

Another social ill, that troubled Doris Lessing, was the hypocrisy of the Western civilization. Lessing resented European taking over Africa, while at the same time punishing Hitler for the attempt of taking over Europe under the excuse of belonging to a higher, Arian race. This attitude is exemplified by another one of Lessing’s fictional characters, Paul, who Anna met during her stay in Africa and who drew a comparison between African tribes and the supposedly more civilized Western culture.

So simple. Simple people killing each other for good reasons, land, women, food. Not like us. (...) As a result of the work of fine comrades like Willi (...), or people like me, concerned only with profits, I predict that in fifty years all this fine empty country we see stretching before us filled only with butterflies and grasshoppers will be covered by semi-detached houses filled by well-clothed black workers. (...) This fair scene will be one of factories smoking into the fair blue sky, and masses of cheap, identical housing. (Lessing 430)

He concludes that “it is the reality of our time, socialist or capitalist” (Lessing 431).

In her analysis of Lessing’s work, Karen Schneider also includes observations of other literary scholars, such as Shoshana Felman. Felman explains that

realist texts and their commensurate reading strategies are designed as a stimulus not for knowledge and cognition, but for acknowledgement and *re-cognition*, not for the *production* of a question, but for the *reproduction* of a foreknown answer – delimited within a pre-existing, pre-defined horizon, where the ‘truth’ to be discovered is reduced the natural status of a simple given. Conventional (realistic) novels, Lessing has thus justifiably (if paradoxically) complained, ‘always...lie’. (qtd. in Schneider 264)

*The Golden Notebook*, in Schneider’s opinion, “interrogates realist storytelling and its relation to philosophical systems fundamental to war, [it] is a meta-fictional comment on and an integral part of the Martha Quest series” (Schneider 265).

The technique of reality reconstruction has been employed to its greatest extent in the last section, as Anna analyses male and female role-playing on the basis of her relationship with Saul Green.

This ‘new knowledge’, partial and periodic as it proves to be, leads Anna through a series of waking and sleeping dreams in which she at first identifies with the victims of ideological coercion, (...) but her shifting consciousness insistently illuminates the shadowy underside of her self-righteous revolutionary zeal. (Schneider 269).

In her earlier dreams Anna envisioned a vicious male figure. A potential explanation is that this was a sign she was afraid of being hurt by a man. Later on, as she spent more time with Saul, she got to know him better. She found out his weaknesses and his virtues. This knowledge ensured her a whole new position. She could use this knowledge to control Saul’s behaviour, however, she realized that this would make her a shadowy, vicious figure. Elizabeth Maslen also confirms Lessing’s interest in social change and in “social constraints on men and women [that shape] their gender roles rather than [in] specific explorations of women in terms of solely sexual difference” (21).

### 3.2.3. The Unconventional Form of *The Golden Notebook*

It has already been mentioned that *The Golden Notebook* is a multi-layered narrative. Michael Thorpe offers a clear analysis of the novel’s unusual structure:

despite its bulk [it] is no Victorian ‘baggy monster’ or rag-bag of writer’s scraps. (...) In *The Golden Notebook* the discontinuity reflects, not only the novelist’s viewpoint, but the lack of unity in Anna’s life and life as she sees it: hence her writer’s ‘block’. By means of the Notebooks Anna ‘divided herself into four’ to avoid facing up to the chaos (...). The Notebooks punctuate instalments of a conventional novel entitled ‘Free Women’, in which Anna herself is a character, using experience in the Notebooks selectively. If ‘literature is analysis after the event’, the Notebooks represent ‘event’, ‘Free Women’ the literature or fiction. (26)

Michael Bradbury has also taken up the task of analysing the novel’s structure. He observes the content of each notebook. “The novel contains five ‘notebooks’, each one written in a different style, each divided into four sections. A frame story called *Free Women* is by and about Anna Wulf, also the author of the notebooks, which are inter-cut into the main story” (379). The Black Notebook describes Anna’s life in South Africa and her first novel. The Red Notebook gives an account of Anna’s political experiences in the British Communist Party, of her growing disillusionment with the meaninglessness of the European communist parties, but also of the communism as an ideology and finally an account of her departure from the Party. In the Yellow Notebook one encounters fiction that Anna produces, which mainly focuses on the life of Anna’s autobiographical protagonist Ella. However, certain short stories are included that also comment upon the situation in the contemporary society and the relations among its members. The Blue Notebook, the one in which she tries to be completely honest, deals with Anna’s mental breakdown and her psychoanalysis. “These stories intersect with, mirror, transform or parody one another, or mime different modes of storytelling” (Bradbury 379). What further complicates the form of the novel is the fact that in certain sections of particular notebooks Anna simply uses newspaper cuttings instead of her own words. In a way, this is also a mode of reality reconstruction that was mentioned in the previous chapter. In this case Lessing does not state the logical connections between the events explicitly but leaves it up to the reader. This can be exemplified by The Red Notebook, which at certain point begins to consist only of newspaper cuttings about violence related to the Communist party that occurred in Europe, the Soviet Union, China and the USA. The word freedom was frequently underlined. In the Blue Notebook Anna chose to write only short, factual entries for eighteen months, but this also proved to be a failure, since no logical repetition pattern occurred, so Anna gave it up as another false account of the past events. The Black Notebook which was an account of Anna’s life in Africa, at the

very beginning only contained two columns called Source and Money; and at a certain point it only included newspaper excerpts about deaths, riots, hatred and violence in Africa. A double black line marked the end of each notebook. Such shifting of the perspective and of the narrative voice, constant forth and back moving of the plot and inconsistency of the narration lays down a difficult and complex task in front of the readers. However, it also gives a far more extensive and richer insight into the author's inner world. We discover Lessing's perception of the reality and society that surrounds her. We learn about her emotions, especially about her feelings of solitude, isolation and fear which were common to emancipated and sophisticated woman in the second half of the twentieth century. However, these women never allowed such fears paralyse them, at least not for a longer period of time. Every time they got down, they tried to get up any way they could. These were Lessing's 'free women'. The novel clearly encompasses a wide range of themes and images, and those who have read it will surely feel pleased with themselves for completing such a complex task and for acquiring so much new knowledge.

Another formal aspect that cannot be omitted in this literary analysis is the meta-fictional character of Lessing's work. As Bradbury asserts, "A story about the making of a story, the problems of creating and constructing it, *The Golden Notebook* is no doubt a work of 'metafiction'" (380). Not only does the novel present the problem of literary creativity, i.e. of the writer's block that Anna suffers from, it also includes other fictional works on its sub-levels. One of them is Anna's novel *Frontiers of War*, the other would be the Black notebook, i.e. the narrative about Anna's life in South Africa. Characters that are mentioned in that section are not fictional to Anna, and the story itself has really happened to Anna – however, it still remains the case of story within a story. In the Yellow Notebook Lessing offers several short stories and novels, the most significant of which is the one with Ella as the protagonist. The main story is contained in the sections formed as conventional realist novel called 'Free Women'. The skilful way in which Lessing combines all these fragments into a whole proves that *The Golden Notebook* is of high artistic value and that its author possesses a strong creative talent and a profound aesthetic intuition.

#### 4. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

##### 4.1. Alice Walker's Biography

Alice Walker is an African-American writer born in 1944 in the American South, which is also evident in her literary work, in which her Southern heritage plays a significant role. She was born into a sharecropper family as the youngest of eight children. Although she enjoyed most of her father's sympathies as a small child, this somewhat changed after an accident caused by one of her brothers that left a deep scar on her face. Additionally, her father changed notably during the later period of his life. He started advocating sexism and colorism, which was in deep opposition to his daughter's attitudes. The unfortunate event left a deep trauma in Walker's mind. She became solitary and timid and her efforts in school deteriorated. "In her solitude she discovered the pleasure of reading stories. At the same time she began writing poems" (Kibler 351). After undergoing an operation paid by one of her brothers, her mental condition improved and she also achieved greater success in her education. Walker attended two women colleges, Spelman College and Sarah Lawrence College in New York. "During her senior year, she read Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus, favourite philosophers of student activists dealing with the paradoxical isolation of working collectively for change" (Unger and Litz 1341). As a part of her college education, she also travelled to Africa, an experience that would later on prove to be of great use for her literary work. Unfortunately, she came back pregnant and decided to have an abortion. This led to a new traumatic experience that caused her suicidal thoughts and devastating feelings of maternal guilt. After overcoming her emotional and mental trauma, she began writing poetry intensively. "Poetry is [her] way of celebrating with the world that [she has] not committed suicide the evening before" (Kibler 351). As she earned her degree, Walker resolved to become a professional writer, which proved to be a perfect vocation for an ambitious, powerful and experienced woman like her. Alice Walker was "a major voice among black and women artists, not only because of her creative writing, but also because of her articulation of the role of art and the artist in a complex society" (Kibler 351). Two years after graduation she married a civil rights lawyer and a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, Melvyn Leventhal. Since this was an interracial marriage, the couple had to be careful about appearing together in public. Their marriage lasted until 1976. She never remarried, but rather focused on her literary career and feminist contributions.

Her general readership is growing, however, because of her attention and patience in listening – to the sounds of women in today’s world, to the voices of Southern blacks, to the messages from the cultural past, to the expressions of earlier artists, to the cries of all humanity, and most importantly, to the utterances of her own self. (Kibler 357)

Among her most important literary works are the three of her novels. Her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* incorporated some aspects of her own family’s history. “Grange articulates the vision of survival that is Walker’s major theme. (...) [His] moral awareness of the potential for living in the world is possible because he learns to be introspective and to value being alone” (Kibler 354). The novel provides “a compassionate view of black family life” (Kibler 355) and “an authentic treatment of women” (Kibler 355). Her second novel *Meridian* is divided into three parts and it “undergoes a chronological development for an associative pattern interweaving actions in the present with memories from the past” (Kibler 355). Meridian Hill is a solitary woman, who “renounces all of her worldly possessions to live among and serve her people, rural Southern blacks” (Kibler 356). However, she begins to examine her goals as the civil rights movement increasingly becomes militant. At this point she decides to rather opt for reconciliation with the situation as it is and to no longer take part in the liberation movement. She gives up writing for the causes of the political revolution, however, she continues putting effort in sustaining the older values of black experience. Walker’s third novel *The Color Purple* was published in 1982. It won a Pulitzer Prize and an American Book Award in 1983. It was filmed, it earned numerous reviews in scholarly books and journals and it was an important contribution to consciousness raising among the American public about the sufferings that African American women experienced. “Walker’s novels can be read as an ongoing narrative of an African American woman’s emergence from the voiceless obscurity of poverty and racial and sexual victimization to become a reshaper of culture and tradition” (Unger and Litz 1345).

## 4.2. The African American Female Subculture

### 4.2.1. Ethnicity Versus Womanhood

As previous chapters demonstrate, obtaining human rights was a long and a severe fight for women. For African American women the fight was twice as hard. Commenting on this issue,

the literary scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha quotes a contemporary female writer Audre Lorde in her work *Woman, Native, Other*;

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance, and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. (...) Now we hear that it is the task of black and Third World women to educate white women (...) as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought. (85)

She also explains the notion of the Third World. It “commonly refers to those states in Africa, Asia and Latin America which called themselves ‘non-aligned’, i.e. affiliated with neither the Western (capitalist) nor the Eastern (communist) power blocs” (Minh-ha 98). However, as the geopolitical map of the world constantly changes, today there are some irregularities concerning this notion. Japan is for instance no longer an ‘underdeveloped’ country, China and some other Asian countries took up the socialist governing system and certain, recently emerged European countries are classified as ‘underdeveloped’, i.e. as countries of the Third World. Consequently, to clear up all potential misunderstandings, one might say that what Minh-ha had in mind are literary members of the non-dominant cultures in a certain country, such as Asian or African Americans or female writers in the U.S. It seems unusual that ‘women’ should appear as a category in this sequence. The first two groups are defined on the basis of ethnicity and the latter on the basis of gender. This leads to the conclusion that African American women were victims of the so-called “double colonisation” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 250). Not only were they oppressed by the imperial, but also by the patriarchal ideology. “In other words, which is the more important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or the fight against Western cultural imperialism?” (Petersen 252). In Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*, one undoubtedly stumbles upon both of these issues. In fact, the question of primacy that Kirsten Holst Petersen has asked appears irrelevant to Walker. After some consideration, one comes to the conclusion that that particular question is not really as significant as it might appear at first glance. Although this was often not the case in history, but criticizing somebody for ‘double activism’ is under no conditions a fair treatment. To return to the subject of Alice Walker’s novel, several examples will be provided to show author’s concern with both issues - African American ethnicity and womanhood.

Quest for self-identity is not an easy task. Breaking out of the role that was defined by the dominant white culture and entrenched deeply in one's mind through centuries of oppression was a great strain for African Americans. Numerous literary works, e.g. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, deal with the white people's invasion on the subconsciousness of African American subculture. Even in Walker's *The Color Purple* men value more black women with lighter skin colour and consider them more beautiful. Aesthetic ideals are simply social conventions and each culture should be entitled to form their own version of these. As Walker presents throughout her novel, her characters are still a long way off this cultural stage. Question of God should also not be ignored in the process of the so-called 'colonisation of the subconsciousness'. Celie's initial vision of God was the one provided in the white man's Bible. "He big and old and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted" (Walker 176). Shug Avery is the one to present her the right image of God. "That's the one that's in the white folks' white bible. (...) Here is the thing (...) I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. (...) God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (Walker 177).

Although white characters are rare in Walker's novel, a reader gets to meet the mayor and his wife, Miss Millie, who gets into conflict with the proud and stubborn Sofia. Unsurprisingly, the racial clash gets resolved in favour of mayor's wife. Miss Millie liked the way Sofia looked, so she asked, i.e. commanded her to work as a maid in her household. Sofia answered with "Hell, no", which naturally offended the mayor. However, as the mayor warned her not to talk to his wife that way, Sofia attacked him physically. White Americans had a strong belief that African Americans were an inferior race. Even the most compassionate among them would sometimes be cruel without even realizing it. A certain occasion with Miss Millie might be taken as an example. It was an attempt of mayor's wife to be noble towards Sofia, who was her maid at the time. She allowed Sofia to pay a visit to her children (which she had not done in years), but since there was some trouble with the car that Miss Millie could not fix, and Sofia knew how to solve it – Sofia was left with only fifteen minutes of free time with her family after she solved the trouble with the car. Irritated, she complained about white people:

They have the nerve to try to make us think slavery fell through because of us (...). Like us didn't have sense enough to handle it. All the time breaking hoe handles and letting the mules loose in the wheat. But how anything they build can last a day is a wonder to me. They backward (...). Clumsy and unlucky. (Walker 100)



Even though African Americans earned their rights fair and square, whites still took advantage of them, especially in the South. They worked for low wages, and fought segregation for a long time. However, not all the whites behaved that way. Mayor's daughter Eleanor Jane truly loved Sofia. The existence of her character proves that Walker was not altogether pessimistic about the fate of African Americans and that she still had faith in the goodness of people, irrelevant to which race they belonged.

Another aspect of identity search is the cultural heritage. Many African Americans respect the traditional African values and look upon native Africans as their brothers. In *The Color Purple* Reverend Samuel reports with pain that the members of the Olinka tribe have very little interest in the painful history of their African American brothers: "No one else [but Tashi] in this village wants to hear about slavery, however. They acknowledge no responsibility whatsoever" (Walker 152). Nonetheless, the memory still remains very hot in their hearts and in one of Nettie's letters to her sister, there is an exhaustive account of this:

Although Africans once had a better civilization than the Europeans, (...) for several centuries they have fallen on hard times. 'Hard times' is a phrase the English love to use, when speaking of Africa. And it is easy to forget that Africa's 'hard times' were made harder by them. Millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery – you and me, Celie! And whole cities were destroyed by slave catching wars. Today the people of Africa – having murdered or sold into slavery their strongest folks –are riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion. They believe in the devil and worship the dead. Nor can they read or write. Why did they sell us? How could they have done it?" (Walker 129)

Naturally, it is pointless to expect later generations to repent for the sins of their forefathers, however, the smallest sign of compassion would most likely suffice.

Women are similarly disillusioned with their social position. In African American families the brutality of men towards women appeared even more serious than was the case with their white counterparts. Many African American husbands made themselves personal slaves out of their wives. However, the situation appeared to vary depending on the height of the social status of the family and of husband's education. The poorer and the less educated husband was more likely to take all his frustrations out on his wife. One must bear in mind that wife-beating was not even a moral crime, much less a legal one for a long period of time. Beating your wife seemed

like a convenient relaxation therapy. Similarly to the ideology of imperialism, patriarchal ideology invaded upon the subconsciousness of both men and women – making the first feel that their dominance was their God-given right and making the second remain silent in spite of all the abuses they had to put up with. Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple*, is a representative example of a servile woman, i.e. until she experiences an identity transformation. She had been refusing to fight: “What good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (Walker 29). She was raped by her father, as a wife she was beaten and did all the work around the house, not once raising her voice at anyone. However, when she met Shug, who she fell in love with, a certain mechanism in her kicked up and slowly began to enhance her inner strength and her self-respect. The process of transformation culminated when Celie found out that Albert was hiding the truth about her sister Nettie’s letters. Nettie was the only person Celie loved, next to Shug Avery of course. At that point her behaviour changed completely. On the day she decided to leave Albert’s house, she gave them all a piece of her mind: “You was all rotten children (...). You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain’t dead horse’s shit” (Walker 182). As Albert reached to slap her, she jabbed a knife into his hand. After this Celie went north with Shug and started her own business of sewing and designing pants. She became a ‘free woman’, as Doris Lessing would put it.

Similar transformation occurs with Squeak, who first demands from Harpo that he calls her by her real name – Mary Agnes – and who eventually also decides to leave the South, along with its ways, and to try her luck in the North by singing in public. Two other female characters also demonstrated great moral strength and stern personality from the very beginning of the novel. These are Sofia and Shug Avery. However, as the novel progresses we find out that they too had many difficulties in their earlier life and that they too were fragile, gentle little girls once. However, Sofia grew up surrounded by men, so she had no choice but to get tougher and turn into an Amazonian woman that she was. Shug was let down too many times in her life, which is why she learned to rely only upon herself. James E. Kibler, Jr. notices Walker’s profound skill in building up her characters:

She draws Southern blacks, women in particular, without stereotyping or idealizing, but with a perception of their being lonely people who suffer physical or psychic injury in defining and asserting their identities. (...) She portrays these troubled personalities as products of a dehumanizing culture, as victims of sexual and racial oppression. (352)

Female bonding is a recognizable feature in African American women's subculture, as well as it is the case with other feminists' groups. The strongest solidarity is felt between Shug and Celie who were in love with each other. Their relationship got so intimate that they even slept together. However, their closeness was obvious from the very beginning. Celie combed Shug's hair, and they have been making a quilt together that was symbolically called Sister's Choice. Quilt-making is significant since it is an old African custom. Nettie reports in her letters that the Olinka women, even though they shared the same husband, often spent time together sewing, gossiping and nursing each other's children. They "made beautiful quilts which are full of animals and birds and people" (Walker 170). As both women left the South to live together in Shug's house in Memphis, a golden age of their relationship started. They enjoyed every moment spent together. They knew they could rely on each other and Celie felt that the only thing that was missing in her life was her sister Nettie.

Nettie and Celie are also related by a deep bond of sisterhood. Ever since they were little children they took care of each other. Since Celie was the older one, she prevented Alphonso from raping Nettie and fought for her sister's continuing her education. Nettie helped Celie in her marriage as much as she could. All the compliments she received from Albert, she transferred to Celie, as if she was the one they were meant for.

The most interesting example of female solidarity is found between Sofia and Eleanor Jane, without whom Sofia would not survive while working as a maid in mayor's house. The little white girl was the only one who treated her fair and with affection. In turn, as Eleanor Jane grew up, she was always welcome in Sofia's house.

Mary Agnes, or so-called Squeak, proved to be of noble heart as well. She was Harpo's girlfriend who got knocked down by his Amazon wife Sofia. Nonetheless, when she got the opportunity to help Sofia get transferred from jail into the mayor's house to work as a maid, she seized this opportunity even though it did not concern her personal interests how difficult jail was for Sofia. Squeak's uncle worked as a warden in prison and when she went to talk to him about Sofia, she got raped by him. Still, she never held this against Sofia or asked for a favour in return.

Similarly as in Doris Lessing's novel *The Golden Notebook*, Alice Walker dwells on the subject of female sexual experience. One notices that both female writers talk openly about this

subject. Walker's Shug Avery even uses vocabulary formerly reserved strictly for men to express her opinion on the subject:

Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lot of sucking go on, here and there, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work. (Walker 79)

Female friendships were like a safe haven from the brutality of men. As Celie decided to leave Albert, he summed up all the disrespect he had for her and he threw the insults directly into Celie's face: "Who do you think you is? He say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you poor, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (Walker 187). Harpo also had a difficult time accepting that Sofia will never become an obedient wife: "If she talking when Harpo and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ come in the room, she keep right on. If they ast her where something at, she say she don't know. Keep talking" (Walker 42). Sofia would kill Harpo dead before she would let him beat her. And truth be said, he really did try, but Sofia was stronger, so he failed every time. The devaluation of women is deeply rooted in the African American consciousness since they descent from an explicitly patriarchal culture. Nettie's letters again testify about the customs of the Olinka tribe. Their women

indulge their husbands, if anything. You should just see how they make admiration over them. Praise their smallest accomplishments. Stuff them with palm wine and sweets. No wonder the men are often childish. (...) If he accuses one of his wives of witchcraft or infidelity, she can be killed. (Walker 153)

In the literary anthology entitled *American Writers* and edited by Leonard Unger and A. Walton Litz, one finds a reference to this type of behaviour as "the psychic illness of African Americans [that] has to do with their inheriting attitudes and genes not only from black slaves but also from rapacious black slaveowners" (Unger and Litz 1344).

#### 4.3. Symbolism in *The Color Purple*

There are several different elements that bear symbolic significance in Walker's work. These are colours, pants, singing and journey to the North.

As the title itself announces, colour purple is of great significance in the novel. It is a royal colour and, similarly to other vivid colours, it symbolizes the life energy of a person who wears it. Shug Avery is the most dominant character when it comes to wearing bright colours. Her house in Memphis is painted pink and she wears bright red dresses on several occasions throughout the novel. When Celie first saw Shug, she was "dress to kill. She got on a red wool dress and chestful of black beads. A shiny black hat with what look like chicinhawk feathers curve down side one cheek, and she carrying a little snakeskin bag to match her shoes" (Walker 50). Even though on that occasion she was "weak as a kitten, (...) her mouth [was] just pack with claws" (Walker 53). She also wore a tight, red dress as she sang in Harpo's jukejoint for the first time and everyone in the room knew she realizes that all eyes are directed at her, and still she does not feel one bit insecure about herself. This proves how strong a person Shug Avery was.

The following symbol are pants, which for Walker represent the dominant status formerly enjoyed by men, but as the time progresses it is increasingly enjoyed by women as well. Women who wear pants are aware of their moral strength and are not afraid to show it, even at the cost of being ridiculed at or isolated from the society. However, Walker's fictional character Albert, who represents the primitive male-oriented way of thinking, disagrees strongly: "Men and women not suppose to wear the same thing, he said. Men spose to wear the pants. So I said, You ought to tell that to mens in Africa. Say what? he ast. First time he ever thought about what Africans do" (Walker 238). Albert's statement thus proves that men were often narrow-minded in their definition of female and male social roles. Pants as a more practical and more functional clothing item were once reserved for men only, who had to do the more difficult part of the housework. However, if a woman took over his share of the work, it was only just that she also gets his status, which in this case is symbolically represented by pants. Additionally, it is interesting that Celie started her own business by sewing pants of various designs, colours and patterns.

Singing is an activity that female characters in the novel took up as they became independent. Shug Avery was an independent woman and a jazz-singer. Mary Agnes also decided to sing in

public. This decision marked her final stage of becoming an independent woman. Singing is inescapably associative of the phrase ‘having your voice heard’, i.e. stating your opinion and making decisions on your own. This is the potential reason why Alice Walker chooses the vocation of a singer for Mary Agnes as she decides to make her more self-conscious and self-reliable.

Finally, there is the symbolic value of the American North. It seemed like a ‘promised land’ to African Americans for centuries. It was a land of opportunities, a land of freedom. This is why many of them have travelled North – just as three of Walker’s characters: Shug, Celie and Mary Agnes did as they matured and became independent, free women. Journey to the North symbolizes the final stage of female liberation in Walker’s *The Color Purple*.

#### 4.4. Formal Aspects of *The Color Purple*

*The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel consisting of letters written by Celie and her sister Nettie. Nettie addresses her letters to Celie, whereas Celie initially writes to God, since He/She/It was the only one to whom she was allowed to confess the awful secret about having been raped by her father. Minh-ha analyses the form of Walker’s novel and remarks that “emphasis on the personal, the intimate, and the domestic has always been determinative to the Women’s Movement, hence the importance, for instance of the personal diary form, which remains an effective means of self expression for women to whom other avenues are often closed”(35). The first line of the novel is written in italics and is presumably a warning uttered by Celie’s father. It says: “*You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy*” (Walker 11). This is one of the two parts of the novel that fall out of the general frame of the novel. Namely, at the very end of the novel we encounter one more line of direct speech: “I thank everybody in this book for coming. A.W., author and medium” (Walker 253). It becomes clear now that author has been present throughout the novel, but her presence was simply that of a medium, she is here to tell the story of black women. Trinh T. Minh-ha claims that memories of women were “the world’s earliest archives or libraries” (121). Telling stories is a liberating process.

The simplest vehicle of truth, the story is also said to be ‘a phase of communication’, ‘the natural form for revealing life’. Its fascination may be explained by its power both to give

a vividly felt insight into the life of other people and to revive or keep alive the forgotten, dead-ended, turned-into-stone parts of ourselves. (Minh-ha 123)

The fact that Alice Walker wrote the story down instead of an uneducated, simple black woman, tells a lot about Walker's sympathy for and understanding of African American women and her awareness of the contemporary social situation. However, not everything is as black as it seems. It should also be taken into account that the novel ends optimistically, with a family reunion. Also, Albert and Harpo experience a complete shift of identity forced upon them by the women in their lives and consequently they start treating their women with respect that they deserve. Celie's son Adam is of particular importance in this aspect, since he and Tashi are an example of what love should be like. Adam agrees to scar his own face just to ensure his beloved one that no matter what, he will be there by her side. Even if others disapprove of her, mock or disparage her because of her scarred face, her African religious heritage or for any other reason, he will not abandon her or be ashamed of her. Walker sends out a message of hope that one day it will be normal that people act like this toward each other, until then she and other writers like her will keep reminding us about our social reality and encouraging us to constantly improve it.

Another important aspect of the novel is the use of vernacular language, i.e. the use of dialect as means of characterization. There have been several critics who attacked Walker's use of folk language. "In 1984 (...) an Oakland mother asked the school system to ban [the novel] because (...), although she had not read the book, she believed it was too sexually explicit and that it stereotyped blacks and degraded black people by using folk language" (Unger and Litz 1344). In addition, a black women's magazine to which Walker had initially sent *The Color Purple* also objected to Celie's language: "Black people don't talk like that", the editors insisted" (Unger and Litz 1344). However, degradation was never Walker's intention, but rather a realistic depiction of the social situation. "Walker defended the realism of Celie's language and its importance to the raising up of the marginalized, almost lost histories of people like her" (Unger and Litz 1344).

## 5. Conclusion

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, British writer of the classic high fantasy works, said that “a single dream is more powerful than a thousand realities” (Goodreads Inc.). At the core of every political upheaval, of various liberation movements, such as the Black or the Suffragist Movement and at the core of fights and wars for freedom and equality lies an idea, a dream, a belief. As long as we believe in its truthfulness and morality, we keep on fighting. A good idea with an apt leader can be so powerful to move the entire nation to fight for the identical cause. History abounds in such examples. The French Revolution, The American Revolutionary War, the beginnings of Communism are among the most obvious examples. The Suffragist Movement was founded on the belief that both genders are entitled to same privileges, especially after women started doing all the jobs that were formerly defined as physically more difficult and therefore reserved for men only. As the initial chapters explain, women basically started from ground zero and ended up with equalization of social statuses and legal rights.

There are two aspects of significance of the female literature in the women’s emancipation. First, it helped greatly in raising the general female self-awareness. Through literature the idea of free women spread and helped the brave female individuals to gather an army that would fight for their cause. Second, female literature is a mirror and a historical record of female emancipation. Through the variety of genres, topics and linguistic styles one deduces the height of intellectual level that women reached during a certain literary period. As the time went by, the number of educated women was constantly rising, and the female literary thesaurus became increasingly richer.

Doris Lessing and Alice Walker are exemplary women writers of the contemporary literary period. They have written works of various literary genres, however this paper analyses their novels. *The Golden Notebook* and *The Color Purple* are significant since they explore the female subculture in the modern society. The two writers elaborate on the complexities of female lives and propel their readers to fight for the improvement of their own lives. Lessing’s novel has an additional issue, beside the topic of gender conflict, which is the question of literary creativity. Lessing’s protagonist Anna Wulf suffers from writer’s block. She finds it impossible to be literary creative in the modern world full of devastation, suffering, hypocrisy and injustice. However, she eventually overcomes her mental and spiritual breakdown and finds her own way of dealing with the cruelty of the world. Walker’s novel, on the other hand, is specific because it



deals with the complexity of the position African American women have been in. These women had a double task in front of them. They had to fight for their rights as members of the African American subculture, but they also had to be aware of their sisters fighting for improvement of the female social position. Additionally, it often seems that wife-beating was more frequent and more brutal in African American than in white families.

Both Lessing and Walker have innovative writing styles. Numerous critics commented upon the complexity of structure in *The Golden Notebook*, and emphasized the directness of approach in the epistolary novel *The Color Purple*. Additionally, both novels use linguistic expressions formerly reserved exclusively for male literature. Namely, protagonists of both novels are twentieth century women, who no longer consider their sexual experience a taboo, so they discuss it quite openly, with no inhibitions whatsoever.

Female and male genders differ greatly, but who can judge one worthier than the other? Distinction is the same in relation to the female and male literature. Female authors should under no conditions require a special treatment on the basis of the historical oppression of their gender. However, it should be taken into account that female authors had less time and consequently less opportunity to offer great literary geniuses like Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway and many other famous authors from the male literary tradition. However, women also proved to be quite successful in creating artful literary works. Some of the pioneers of female literary tradition are Gertrude Stein, Jane Austen, Brontë sisters, Agatha Christie, Emily Dickinson, Margaret Fuller, Virginia Woolf, Leslie Marmon Silko, Adrienne Rich etc. Modern women should be familiar with the efforts of these exquisite women. In the end, it is them and those like them that we have to be grateful to for the comfortable lives that our generations enjoy. Women can get a proper education, they can pursue various careers, obtain a divorce and marry the man of their own choosing. Woman's Question is finally solved. The time has come for both genders to join their forces and fight other social ills in order to make our world even a better place to live.

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