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At War with Mothers, Male Ego and their Words: Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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Abstract

This paper concerns the analysis of the female identity in the Western world at the beginning of the twentieth century as constructed in the works of Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing. Focusing the attention on the collapse of Western societies during the two World Wars, this study highlights the crisis of traditional patriarchal structures and the resulting emerging of new literary perspectives opposed to this system. Woolf and Lessing scrutinized the deep impact of social fragmentations on women's identity by unveiling the failure of the patriarchal dominant society. Specifically, an attentive reading of the two novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *The Golden Notebook* (1962), is offered as an example of the *de*-construction of a dominant patriarchal language. The entire analysis is founded on the postulate that European women constituted for centuries a subculture developed under the shadow of patriarchy, and that in this context the portrayals offered by Woolf and Lessing should be considered as a significant achievement for women writing. On the basis of these examinations, it is concluded that the fragmented female identity drawn by the two authors represents the attempt to dismantle the overwhelming presence of a predominant patriarchal perspective during the two war times in Western societies.

Key words – Virginia Woolf; Doris Lessing; Feminism; World War; Patriarchy

1. Theories and aims

The following article analyses the complex representation of the female identity during the historical events which caused radical changes in Western societies: the two World Wars. Specifically, it examines women's efforts, as a minority, to emerge from their subservient position and to perceive themselves as independent individuals.

An important starting point, here, is the concept of identity. The question of a "gendered" individuality, as the outcome of cultural experiences, is an essential part of contemporary debates[1], and it is necessary to investigate the way this concept has been

[1] The relation between gender and sexuality and its weight on the female identity has been widely debated by feminists. However, to the benefit of synthesis, this paper will investigate this connection exclusively through the works of Woolf and Lessing. Focusing the attention on the French feminist theory, thus, gender will be considered as a cultural construction which contributes to the creation of a fragmentary female identity. As Irigaray pointed out women are «the sex which is not one», but multiple, since «the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only

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perceived at the beginning of the last century. Taking in consideration the French feminist approach, I will follow Hélène Cixous' assertion that: «a subject is at least a thousand people»[2], so that we cannot simply define our identities as a stable organism. This is a central point in the early Twentieth literature, where the previous representation of a monolithic literary structure is replaced by a fragmented, complex, description of events and characters, especially in the aftermath of World Wars' political failures. It is the complexity of the subject, analysed from a new female perspective, which distinguishes both Woolf's and Lessing's writing, albeit through different approaches. Their female characters struggle with the problem of exhaustively defining themselves in post-war societies where subjects play volatile roles. Their women seem to respond to Cixous' question: «how many I are, which I is the most I of my I's?»[3].

Yet, these questions also cause Woolf's and Lessing's female characters the perception of a double identity: the social identity on one side; the unrevealed, complex, self on the other side. Therefore, I will refer distinctly to a social identity, imposed on women by society and cultural customs; and an inner but not precisely defined self, perceived as the sign of a more profound desire to freely express the complexity of one's own individuality. Although the wide range of feminist theories, I will take in consideration only a few among the most relevant scholars for the following analysis. The question of a female identity related to new post-war scenarios in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *The Golden Notebook* (1962), will be investigated considering the idea of a female common experience dependent on the social environment. Despite the many criticisms addressed to Showalter, her contribution is determinant in this context. Yet, Gardiner's statement about a female identity based on a mother-daughter relationship is also crucial to understand the link between Woolf and Lessing and the representation of women in their novels.

Considering the idea of a literary heritage which inextricably links women writers and their experience of the world, I will debate similarities between Virginia Wolf and Doris Lessing. Their literary perspective towards society gives another reading of the war policy: they both dismantled the patriarchal language unveiling the frailty of the female identity on the background of a chaotic, complex, society.

2. Identity and ideology: a patriarchal perspective

«Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything»[4]. This sentence from *Persuasion* (1817), reveals how profoundly Jane Austen perceived the inequity of being a woman in a men's society. With these words, Austen highlights a central point: the submission of a woman means the «advantage» of someone else, whom she identifies with a social system where only men have the benefit to tell «their own story».

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fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology» (Luce IRIGARAY, *This Sex which is Not One*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1983 [2nd edition], p. 30).

[2] Hélène CIXOUS, "Preface", in Susan SELLERS, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 10.

[3] «What is a human subject, what is that makes us live so well and so badly, so that after millions of years we still do not know how to die or what death is? [...] A subject is at least a thousand people» (CIXOUS, "Preface", SELLERS, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, p. 10).

[4] Jane AUSTEN, *Persuasion. Northanger Abbey*, New York, Mondial, 2008, p. 145.

Austen seems to suggest a point widely debated by modern feminist movements: literary and cultural language is the most effective weapon used by patriarchy to convey the idea of a gender difference and hierarchy, which also insured it the maintenance of its power[5]. To maintain a hierarchical social structure, patriarchal governments needed to justify their political prominence. Therefore, Victorians elaborated the idea of «the natural differences between the sexes»[6]: to give a concrete image of this abstract concept they created the picture of the Angel in the House whose attributes became the symbol of a natural female domesticity to men[7]. The exploitation of women, thus, passes through the manipulation of a female identity represented as acquiescent and asocial. Hence, an actual emancipation from the dominant patriarchal culture has marked, for women, a liberation from the cumbersome image of the Angel in The House.

Based on this issue, this article considers as crucial Gardiner's recognition of a literary heritage which metaphorically links the emancipation of the female identity to their mothers. This heritage roots on a conflicting relationship between new generations of women writers and their literary mothers: if, on one side, women need to emancipate themselves from the role of the Victorian mother; on the other hand, they perceive a urge of identification with this image. In Gardiner's words: «the daughter's identification with and separation from the mother is crucial to the daughter's mature female identity»[8]. The process of resolution to this ambivalence, thus, passes through the conflicting relationship with mothers, that is to say with the role of the asocial, subjugated Victorian Angel. As summarised by Gardiner's statement, in fact, «female identity is dependent on the mother-daughter bond»[9]. As a progressive process of self-determination, women need to compare and oppose themselves to the figure of their mothers. Since literature has been for a long time their only access to the world, it is through it that women have expressed their own self-fulfilment.

However, this debate also considers as essential Elaine Showalter's definition of the women writing as a 'subculture'. In defining the female literary tradition as a minor culture Showalter certainly hits the target. Forced to hide their voice behind a male name or the anonymity, history unmercifully records works written by women. This tendency has undoubtedly obliged them to describe their personal experiences under the shadow of a dominant power which exercised a coercive pressure on women writers, influencing the way they perceived their identity in society. In Showalter's words: «women themselves have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society, and have been unified by values, conventions, experiences, and behaviours

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[5] Following Brown's definition: «Patriarchy defined at its loosest is the control of the economy and polity and family system by men who, through a system of interdependence and solidarity, control and exploit the labour of women for the men's individual and collective benefit. In a class society based on patriarchy, class relations are relations among classes of men» (Carol A. BROWN, "Patriarchal Capitalism and the Female-Headed Family", Special Number on Women «Social Scientist», 4.4/5 (1975), pp. 28-39, pp. 28-29).

[6] Dundas T. PILLANS, "Plain Truths About Woman Suffrage", London, Watts and Co., 1909, cited in Carolyn CHRISTENSEN NELSON, *Literature of The Women's Suffrage Campaign in England*, Canada, Broadview Press, 2004, p. 51.

[7] The term refers to Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in House* (1854), where he idealised his first wife, describing her as the embodiment of the Victorian Lady: submissive, pure and naturally devoted to the private and domestic sphere.

[8] Judith KEGAN GARDINER, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women", «Critical Inquiry», Writing and Sexual Difference, 8.2 (1981), pp. 347-361, p. 356.

[9] KEGAN GARDINER, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women", p. 349.

impinging in each individual»[10]. The notion expressed by Showalter, here, supports the claim of Jane Austen about the existence of a men's dominance that does not represent women's experience of the world.

Nonetheless, the question of what should represent the female experience remains a debated issue in the feminist criticism. When, in *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter traces the line of the female literary tradition, she does not indulge in criticisms against modern writers such as Virginia Woolf or Doris Lessing. In her dissertation, Showalter remarks Woolf's lack of a resolute feminist standpoint, openly criticising *A Room of One's Own* for its «strenuous charm» marked by «repetition, exaggeration, whimsy and multiple viewpoint»[11]. In so doing, Showalter explains Woolf's use of different perspectives as a betrayal of feminist issues, a lack of political commitment. The rejection of a choesive 'I' represents Woolf's refusal to describe her personal experience: she hides herself behind multiple 'I's' and the celebration of an androgynous mind, which is both feminine and masculine.

However, as Toril Moi asserts, Showalter's accusations against Woolf fail to give a complete reading of Woolf's contribution to the female literature, since she only seems to understand feminism in terms of the writer's authentic experience. Besides, in Moi's opinion, Showalter's «insistence on the need for political art is limited to the struggle against sexism. Thus, she gives Virginia Woolf no credit whatsoever for having elaborated a highly original theory of the relations between sexism and fascism in Three Guineas»[12].

Yet, the same criticism Showalter moves against Woolf brings her to a limited analysis of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. As for Woolf, Showalter denounces Lessing's superficial representation of women, whom she defines as «helpless creatures»[13]. Showalter criticises Lessing for the passivity of her 'Free Women', a portrayal which, in her opinion, testifies to the author's detachment from feminist issues, and a consequent abandonment of the sisterhood's unity. As Watkins points out, «Showalter's problem with Lessing's writing resembles her problem with Woolf's attraction to androgyny in her works»[14]. This issue echoes Moi's criticism for whom a correct understanding of Woolf's and Lessing's writings lies on their ability to *de*-construct a unitary self, representative of the patriarchal, monolithic, identity[15].

What Showalter defines as a fragmented feminism is, inversely, explained here as the authors' attempt to relate the complexity of the female identity to a world which is complex and chaotic. The only way to do this, therefore, is to reject the patriarchal discourse from its roots. Language as a means of self-determination becomes the main weapon to reject the unity of the imposed patriarchal identity for both the two writers. This identity is conventionally mirrored by the image of the ego: a masculine, dominant, idea of the self as stable and unbeatable, a role perfectly embodied by the new figure of

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[10] Elaine SHOWALTER, *A Literary of Their Own. British Women Novelists from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing*, Princeton (New Jersey), Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 11.

[11] SHOWALTER, *A Literary of Their Own*, p. 282.

[12] Toril MOI, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, London/New York, Routledge, 1986 [2nd edition], p. 137.

[13] SHOWALTER, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 298.

[14] Susan WATKINS, *Doris Lessing*, Contemporary World Writers Series, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010, p. 167.

[15] «both have in different ways rejected the fundamental need for the individual to adopt a unified, whole and integrated self-identity» (MOI, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 137).

Leaders in the Twentieth century[16].

According to Marcus, it is against this ego that Woolf struggles when she «characterises women's protection as liberation from the ego. For the ego is the enemy»[17]. Thus, the *de*-construction of the ego, which represents the patriarchal authority, becomes a symbol of her rebellion against the political system.

A consideration on Virginia Woolf's works demonstrates her intention to dismantle the patriarchal linguistic definition of the female identity. In *Professions for Women* (1937), she denounces the urgency for a woman writer to kill the Angel in the House before being psychologically killed by her. As a metaphor of the previous generation of women, the Angel embodies a natural deference to the patriarchal overwhelming presence, a submission which prevents women to develop an independent artistic mind.

The question of a language affected by an overpowering androcentric perspective is central in Woolf's writings. As Marcus underlines, Woolf considered the act of writing as «an act of aggression against the powerful», so that «if language was the private property of patriarchs, to 'trepass' on it was an act of usurpation»[18]. Thus, Woolf's murder represents a fight against a language whose words do not correspond to the women's experience of the world. However, the differentiation between the two sexes was particularly prominent in the war discourse. Social and political debates, during the last century, were profoundly permeated by an ideological knowledge which was responsible for the construction of a hierarchical language which included words whose meanings were differently associated to men and women.

According to Bondi this linguistic notion works through an «interrelated dualisms»[19], that is to say that there exists a continuous relation and opposition between words such as culture and nature, subjectivity and objectivity, reason and emotion, all of which are hierarchically related to the two sexes:

> In each case, the terms are defined as mutually exclusive opposites but are not equally valued: the first occupies a superior position and is positively valued; the second is subordinate and negative. And intertwined within this system of hierarchical dichotomies is a distinction between masculinity and femininity[20].

This linguistic device works as a branch of the patriarchal system and its use is a necessary measure adopted by the system itself to maintain a vertical social hierarchy. Based on this issue, it is possible to affirm that the patriarchal ideological language, and the consequent entailed subordination of women to men, is aimed to keep the power in the hands of a limited number of people by constructing specific roles with which the two sexes are expected to conform.

In this article the language employed during the two World Wars is evaluated as the highest achievement of this schema observed in modern history. In so doing, the

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[16] From this moment onwards, when referring to the ego I will mean the dominant patriarchal construction of the Self.

[17] Jane MARCUS, *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, London and Basingstoke, The Macmillan Press, 1981, p. 9.

[18] MARCUS, *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, p. 1.

[19] Liz BONDI, "In Whose Words? On Gender Identities", «Knowledge and Writing Practices, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers», New Series, 22.2 (1997), pp. 245-258, p. 246.

[20] BONDI, "In Whose Words? On Gender Identities", pp. 246-247.

emphasis is placed on the unceasing governmental propaganda, the confirmation of a super-ego which aims at reinforcing the role of women as nurses and mothers doomed to sacrifice their children and husbands, and most of all their individuality, to the will of their Leaders.

Despite the growing consensus of a biased political language, however, the advent of the First World War in Europe worked as an escape from the given, 'naturally' asocial, attitude ascribed to women. The chance to fulfil tasks considered as an exclusive male domain, and the failure of the patriarchal policy, allowed women to find new spaces of expression within societies. It is argued, here, that the first post-war period also revealed the frailty of the patriarchal system throughout Europe: the collapse of the economic structure following the 'golden twenties' boom marks the failure of governments as well as the perceived patriarchal invulnerability.

When examining this scenario, it is worth noting that the astonishing shock of the war subverts the notion of a natural predisposition of specific attitudes for the two sexes. Essentially, the social post-war collapse, followed by a re-categorisation of gender roles, was likely to lead to an identity crisis, since, in Lichtenstein's words, «society depends on the stable identities of individuals. When the cultural storehouse of available roles fails to fill the identity themes of enough people, the mismatched persons may suffer identity crisis and the culture suffers catastrophic change»[21].

Another crucial point is that the «crisis of masculinity»[22] due to the failure of patriarchy, is rapidly replaced by the backlash of fascism. The rise of new political ideologies, thus, can arguably be read as the effort of the patriarchal system to restore the order of a hierarchical division of the sexes, reassuring the élite power. What is most significant is that the fascist Fatherland reinstates the economic domain of a patriarchal capitalism which, according to Brown's definition: «is the only form the dialectic of sex takes under capitalism, and patriarchy is necessary for capitalism's continuation»[23].

Throughout the two World Wars the rise of the gendered language reaches its peak, as it is evident in Mussolini and Hitler's propaganda, through which they confirm their refusal to extend the vote to women banning them from any cultural debate. As Macciocchi underlines in her essay *La Donna Nera* (1976), the fascist main purpose is to re-institutionalize the patriarchal gender arrangements, a fact that can be observed in its tendency to re-place women within the boundary of an *a*-social role. Furthermore, Macciocchi argues that a central issue in this policy is that «the body of fascist discourse is rigorously chaste, pure, virginal. Its central aim is the death of sexuality»[24], and women's sexuality is always ignored or denied. The formula «power-joy-sacrifice= joy in sacrifice»[25]

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[21] KEGAN GARDINER, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women", p. 350.

[22] Deborah PARSONS, "Loving Arms: British Women Writing in the Second World War by Karen Schneider", «The Modern Language Review», 93.4 (1998), pp. 1098-1099, p. 1098.

[23] Brown's assertion lies on Marx's assessment: "the maintenance and reproduction of the working class is and must ever be a necessary condition of the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave its fulfilment to the labourer's instincts of self-preservation and propagation" (BROWN, "Patriarchal Capitalism and the Female-Headed Family", p. 29).

[24] Maria Antonietta MACCIOCCHI, "Female, Sexuality and Fascist Ideology", «Feminist Review», 1 (1979), pp. 67-82, cited in Jane MARCUS, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987, p. 79.

[25] Robin PICKERING-IAZZI, *Politics of the Visible, Writing Women, Culture and Fascism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 25.

becomes a key point from which the entire fascist language shapes the female identity.

As a reaction to this overwhelming pressure, however, the post-war literary representation of the world loses its stability. The 'I' in the novel is no more a cohesive individual; but it seems to be replaced by a fragmented 'I' whose complexity mirrors the scenario of a chaotic world order.

The shock of the war, and the questioning of stable patriarchal values, brings to a new literary investigation. Particularly, the second World War era with its swastikas, Nazism and the H-bomb represents a watershed in the Western history. As recorded by Lessing this shocking time inevitably affects the literary debate since «the whole world is being shaken into a new pattern by cataclysms we are living through»[26].

This scenario offers new readings of the female identity, since the present fragmented society reflects its complexity on the way women perceive their social role. Lessing is able to translate the conflict of the new female generation, unveiling the hypocrisy behind the so called 'Free Woman' in post-ideological Western societies. Trapped between a deep desire to express their independence and the need to still accomplish men's desire, Lessing's women seem to be still involved in the battle against the Angel. As Woolf before her, Lessing dismantles the unity of the literary language to find new spaces of expression. Her most famous novel, *The Golden Notebook*, is analysed here as the continuation of Woolf's *de*-construction of the ego. A new literary perspective is employed in the novel as a means of rebellion against the patriarchal call for unity. This point reinforces the idea of a mother-daughter literary bond on which lies the main relation between Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing.

3. The overwhelming Ego: fragmentation as a means for a female rebellion in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Golden Notebook*

3.1. *Virginia Woolf: Clarissa Dalloway and the Invisible Self*

In one of her most determinant essays, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf declares: «we think back through our mothers if we are women»[27]. Through these words Woolf brings to light a significant topic for women writers: the influence that centuries of exploitation have had on new generations of women anxious to affirm their independence from men. Besides, the metaphor of the 'mothers' is a recurrent subject in Woolf's narrative. She often mentions them as an allusion to previous generations of writers who have been oppressed and imprisoned within the boundaries of the stereotyped Victorian Angel in the House. This image has worked as a burdensome mask that, for centuries, women had to wear in order to be accepted members of societies.

This is a matter of great concern to Virginia Woolf, who considers the inheritance of her literary mothers as a burden for the next generation of women writers. Thus, the act of «thinking back through our mothers» is representative of the complex relation which links women to their past and projects them into the future. This idea supports Gardiner's assertion of a mother-daughter relation which is considered, in this context, as a proof of a literary relationship with Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. That being the case, the narrative of these two authors is the utmost example of a literary lineage constructed by

[26] Doris LESSING, *The Golden Notebook*, London, Harper Perennial, 1972 [1962], p. 8.
[27] Virginia WOOLF, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 152.

twentieth century female writers. Plus, their post-war masterpieces are representative of a female modern rebellion flourished in Western societies as well as in literature.

However distant they may appear, the female inner conflict portrayed by Lessing in *The Golden Notebook* recalls Clarissa's sufferings in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). As Woolf, Lessing is inscribed within the list of the most inspirational writers of the twentieth century: they both subverted the «interrelated dualism» on which lies the ideological patriarchal language. In so doing, both the two authors unveiled the frailty of a an overpowering ego which, as already stated, has manipulated the female identity through a war propaganda.

Yet, as Lessing in *The Golden Notebook* deals with the breakdown of the second post-war society and its crack up; Virgina Woolf's novel takes place in the aftermath of the Great War. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, a collapsed society is the background of Clarissa Dalloway's personal crisis, a point which proves as society and individuality work as a mirror of each other. It is while observing the inevitable decay of the English society, that Clarissa experiences the alienation from her body and soul because of her ineptitude to perform the role imposed on her by society. The duplicity suffered by Clarissa is comparable to that of Anna Wulf, Lessing's heroine, since both of these two characters are portrayed as victims of a system whose aim is to manipulate women's identity in order to *re*-establish the hierarchical social order undermined by the war and its demands.

Nonetheless, there are many differences between these two authors. Most evidently, the first objection concerns the different political approach Woolf and Lessing have towards literature. In her early works Lessing directly exhibits her political considerations based on her own experience in the Communist Party and in the African colony. On the contrary, politics appears as a subordinate theme in Woolf's novels, her writings being often analysed in the light of her mental breakdown. This issue has inevitably supported the myth of the *a*-political writer, far from a direct involvement in the social debate. However, this label appears to be the outcome of a misleading evaluation recently criticised by many scholars. The excessive attention to Woolf's mental illness has deviated from a more profound analysis of her works, making her a victim rather than an acute observer of society. The misinterpretation of her political opinions[28] plays a part in undermining her abilities.

Despite the wide belief about Woolf's lack of interest in politics and war, an attentive reading of her novels and essays gives evidence of her critical viewpoint towards the patriarchal war policy. According to Henderson after Woolf's death, «the editors and executors of Woolf's literary estate have controlled access to her papers and managed their presentation in a manner that has perpetuated the apolitical myth»[29]. However, the author's interest in social and political issues is corroborated by the content of her essays and novels. Here, the sharp criticism against the patriarchal system emerges from the portrait of Woolf's female characters who are often described as women haunted by the need to demonstrate their intellectual independence. Through the portrait of her

[28] Leonard Woolf described his wife as «the least political animal [...] since Aristotle invented the definition». The same opinion is offered by Quentin Bell who declared: «her prose could never be an effective vehicle for conveying political ideas» (Sandra HENDERSON, "This Preposterous Masculine Fiction: Virginia Woolf and the Intellectual History of the Great War", «San Francisco State University Journal Archive», 16 (2013), pp. 1-12, p. 2).

[29] HENDERSON, "This Preposterous Masculine Fiction", p. 2.

heroines, Woolf tries to subvert ideological gender clichés and to express a language more adherent to the inner female experience. The *de*-construction of the submissive Victorian heroine takes the shape of a new kind of woman aware of her skills, as witnessed by the rebel Lily Briscoe portrayed in *To The Lighthouse* (1927).

Although it is an early novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* already includes these ingredients. In this novel Woolf's attempt to unveil the perfect image of the submissive Victorian Lady is made clear. Despite Clarissa's efforts to accomplish social expectations, the role of the perfect wife causes her an estrangement from herself. What seems to be more significant here, is that this alienation is inextricably tied to the description of a social class that is portrayed as weak and blindly arrogant.

Clarissa's sense of failure follows the decline of the upper-middle class, which metaphorically mirrors the collapsed patriarchal policy. It is Woolf herself who reveals the purpose to expose the weakness of the governing social class, when she writes in her diary: «I want to criticise the social system and to show it at work, at its most intense»[30]. The story of a middle-aged woman who struggles against her fear of being socially inadequate is surrounded by the presence of an indifferent upper-middle class, which fails to notice the devastating results of War. The arrogance of the patriarchal system is, furthermore, inextricably connected with the inner conflict experienced by Clarissa. This issue, according to Zwerdling, is an indication of Woolf's aim to show «how the individual is shaped (or deformed) by his social environment»[31]. The pain suffered by Clarissa represents a crucial element in the comprehension of the novel: her despairing attempt to perform the role of the perfect hostess, symbolically represented by the social title of Mrs. Dalloway, is an indirect accusation against the patriarchal society and its tendency to imprison individuals within the confine of specific gender roles.

What is more, the description of Clarissa Dalloway's inner conflict allows Woolf to realise the murder she claimed in *Professions for Women*. By unveiling the despair behind the woman's attempt to organise the perfect party, the author kills the figure of the Angel in The House. Most importantly, this literary device is employed by Woolf to dismantle the myth of the invulnerable patriarchal ego which collapses together with the image of the perfect hostess.

Contradictions and weaknesses are offered to the reader as a proof of the patriarchal social and political inadequacy. It is through oppositions that Woolf makes clear her intention to show Institutions «at work». A comparison between outsiders and insiders, life and death, war and peace, allows the author to let her truth emerge. In Forbes' words if «Victorians celebrated the idea that the subject was stable, whole, and unified», then any deviation from this recognised subject is evaluated as «violent, demonic, self-gratifying yet ultimately self-destructive»[32].

This issue is also supported by Zwerdling, who recognises in *Mrs. Dalloway* the author's purpose to underline the arrogance of an imposing system in contrast to the frailty of those individuals who cannot conform themselves to it. As Zwerdling affirms,

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[30] HENDERSON, "This Preposterous Masculine Fiction", p. 69.

[31] Alex ZWERDLING, "Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System", «PMLA», 92.1 (1977), p. 69-82, p. 69.

[32] Shannon FORBES, "Equating Performance with Identity: the Failure of Clarissa Dalloway's Victorian "Self" I Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway", «The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association», Special Convention Issue, 38.1 (2005), pp. 38-50, p. 38.

Clarissa and her alter-ego Septimus Smith: «are the outsiders in a society dedicated to covering up the stains and ignoring the major and minor tremors that threaten its existence»[33]. Thus, those who refuse or are unable to conform themselves to social expectations in the novel are not considered as unified subjects, but they are, inversely, alienated members of society: outsiders who cannot find peace but in the complete acceptance of an imposed identity.

This point explains why when Clarissa perceives the duplicity of her subjectivity, she recognises this feeling as a threat to herself. Haunted by the perception of an inner, submerged, self, in contrast with her imposed role of Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa suddenly realizes that «something awful»[34] may happen to her if she succumbs to these inner feelings. Clarissa understands that the abandonment of her adult role of Mrs. Dalloway, means for her a social alienation. This sense of estrangement oppresses her because of her inability to avoid her «real nature of the subject»[35]. In this perspective, Clarissa's incapability to fully conform herself to her role of a Victorian Lady represents the breaking point with a system that does not admit any deviation from its rules. She becomes, then, an outsider trapped between her adult identity and her young self. Unable to look at the future as well as to face her past choices, Clarissa lives in an endless present where she seems to have lost her personality.

From the beginning of the story the *de*-personalisation of Clarissa is a central theme. Woolf denies her character a proper name in the title, therefore defining the woman only through the epithet of Mrs. Dalloway. By omitting the woman's first name Woolf is also constructing the character of Clarissa entirely through her social status of wife, depriving her of a definite personality. The importance of the social role, furthermore, emerges since the very beginning of the novel, when the author introduces Clarissa with the same, impersonal, reference: «Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself»[36].

The name Mrs. Dalloway becomes, then, an ever-present qualification, a key word offered to the reader: this recurrent 'label' makes him/her understand the source of the alienating conflict the woman will suffer for the entire narration. This issue is supported and made more evident when Mrs. Dalloway, kissed by the wave of youth, suddenly becomes Clarissa and regains her proper name. Overwhelmed by the wave of youth, the woman is now lost between the present life in Bond Street as Richard Dalloway's wife, and the memory of the past, at Bourton, as a rebel girl whose identity is still not contaminated by the need to accomplish social roles. The heroine's split identity emerges when she compares herself to the image of the wild girl she was: this image will haunt Clarissa's day to such an extent that she will feel a sense of detachment from her own body as well as from the external world.

This lack of a definite identity specifically comes out during her walk through the streets of London, when the woman realises the role of Mrs. Dalloway has made her invisible and unknown, even to herself:

> But often now, *this body she wore* [italics mine] (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing - nothing at all. She had

[33] ZWERDLING, "Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System", p. 72.
[34] Virginia WOOLF, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Great Britain, Penguin Classic, 1996 [1925], p. 5.
[35] ZWERDLING, "Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System", p. 72.
[36] WOOLF, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 5.

> the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway[37].

Here, the metaphor «this body she wore» plays a determinant role. It is worth noting that Woolf purposely defines Clarissa's body as a dress to wear. Through this metaphor the narrator implicitly focuses the attention on the importance that the appearance has in the definition of the female identity. The perception Clarissa has of her own self seems to be dependent on her dress and, therefore, on a consumer product which is essential to perform her role of 'Mrs. Richard Dalloway'.

In contrast with her efforts, however, Clarissa's thoughts reveal a sense of detachment from her adult identity to the extent that she perceives her own body as something unknown. The ghost of her young self induces Clarissa to deal with the impossibility to completely adhere to social expectations. Otherwise, the uniqueness of her inner identity is doomed to die under social pressures. From this ever-present sense of inadequacy comes the failure of Clarissa's performance as a wife which also causes her a sense of complete alienation: her body is no more a concrete matter but an abstract object which vanishes under the pressure of «the solemn progress with the rest of them». The presence of an invisible plural «them» is crucial here. She cannot distance herself from the «rest of them», since the consequence would be a complete alienation from the external world. The only possible escape for Clarissa is to perform the role of Richard Dalloway's wife and to abandon herself with the rest of society. In doing so, she is able to become an accepted member of it and, therefore, an insider.

What emerges from these lines is Woolf's aim to mark the relation between the fulfilment of women as social individuals, and the pressure exercised by the invisible «them», the authoritative external presence of society. On this assessment, it may be entailed that women have to conform themselves to external capitalistic rules in order to suitably perform their 'female identity'. As a support of this assertion, it is worth noting that Woolf introduces her main character during the act of buying in order to arrange her party. According to Wicke, this device is employed by Woolf «to emphasize the nature of the shopping trip for one of life's most necessary luxuries»[38].

This hint at consumption testifies to the writer's intention to criticise the social system, demonstrating as its strength lies on the exploitation and manipulation of identities for the purpose of its own survival. As Mies argues, in *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986), patriarchy and capitalism are linked to each other. Both of these two social structures aim at maintaining a hierarchical social division on the top of which power remains in the hands of an elitist minority. Mies calls this system 'capitalist patriarchy', explaining how «the exploitation of women needs to be located within an economic analysis that recognises that economic processes are never gender-neutral»[39]. This definition may help us to ascribe *Mrs. Dalloway* to Woolf's denunciation of the rise of the post-war economic system. The obsessive attention Clarissa pays to the act of buying

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[37] WOOLF, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 13.

[38] Jennifer WICKE, "Mrs. Dalloway Goes to Market: Woolf, Keynes, and Modern Markets", «A Forum on Fiction», 28.1 (1994), pp. 5-23, p. 13.

[39] Sararel BENJAMIN, "Masculinisation of the State and the Feminisation of Poverty", «Empowering Women for Gender Equity», 48 (Globalisation: Challenging Dominant Discourses) (2001), pp. 68-74, p. 68.

seems to be related to her attempt to define her own identity through the possession of expensive objects. Shops in Bond Street, as well as the luxurious party Clarissa organises, are portrayed here as the celebration of an economy which intends to manipulate women's identity in order to preserve hierarchical divisions.

It is through the act of buying, in fact, that Clarissa constructs her external identity as Mrs. Richard Dalloway. She is obsessed by objects of consumption to the point her body itself becomes a dress to wear. This point supports the idea that Clarissa's obsession with her party is related to her need to conform herself to social capitalistic clichés. When she buys flowers, gloves and dresses, the woman is re-affirming over and over her adult identity as a wife, wearing the dress of a Lady and gaining, in so doing, her right to be an approved member of the upper-middle class. This explains, therefore, the reason why she confounds her own body with the image of a dress to wear.

Despite her endeavours, however, Clarissa perceives the risk of being a social outsider, since memories of her young self represent a deviation from the stable identity imposed by the patriarchal society. Trapped in a limbo from where there is no escape, the fragmentation of Clarissa's identity finds its only solution into the performance of her party: on the success of her party depends the effectiveness of Clarissa's identity itself. Besides, the compromise with her inner self represents her only escape from madness, that is, on the contrary, Septimus Smith's doom.

In sharp contrast with the role of Clarissa, Woolf portrays the image of a stable Victorian and Imperialistic society, often portrayed as the embodiment of the inefficient war policy, the ego against whom Woolf directs her accusations. The frailty of this political system is unveiled by the figure of the veteran Septimus Smith, the «scapegoat»[40] who, traumatised by war cruelties, cannot find any support in society. He refuses to be celebrated as a war hero, a point which collocates Smith at the opposite of all Victorian social values of patriotism and national unity. That being the case, Septimus Smith becomes the anti-hero, the personification of the demonic 'other' who must be marginalised. The description of the veteran allows Woolf to unveil the other face of war and to show the political denial of any responsibility in the social collapse. Smith's presence forces the governing class to admit the untruthfulness of the stereotyped identities on which lies the entire war campaign.

The myth of the Nation whose children will be glorified serving in the war does not exist, and the mental breakdown of Smith warns society about the weakness of the patriarchal system. According to Zwerdling: «Septimus Smith is instantly seen as a threat to governing-class values not only because he insists on remembering the War when everyone else is trying to forget it, but because his feverish intensity of feeling is an implicit criticism of the ideal of stoic impassivity»[41]. It is the dismantlement of this impassivity which represents Woolf's greatest achievement. The patriarchal ego is, step by step, *de*-constructed through the denunciation of the blind, insensitive, institutional figure of the psychiatrist William Bradshaw and the conservative member of Parliament Richard Dalloway.

A resolute condemnation of the War policy and the system that supported this ideology is not new in Woolf's writings. To her friend Duncan Grant she wrote in 1915 lamenting the blind mob mentality of a rising nationalism, to the extent that her words

[40] WOOLF, *Mrs. Dalloway*, p. 29.
[41] ZWERDLING, "Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System", p. 75.

about the Armistice day left no doubt about her opinion: «I felt more and more melancholy and hopeless of the human race. [They] make one doubt whether any decent life will ever be possible, or whether it matters if we're at war or at peace»[42].

In Henderson's words, Woolf's point of view was that «war mobilization had subsumed the individual and left only a monolithic, collective 'we'»[43]. This last subject is undoubtedly at work in *Mrs. Dalloway*: the monolithic collective ´we´ is the enemy against which Woolf opposes the fragmented 'I' of her characters. In the novel this opposition works, to echo Marcus, as Clarissa's liberation from the pressure of the powerful patriarchal ego. Clarissa's difficulty in recognising herself as an accepted member of society supports this aim. She desperately needs to perform her role of Mrs. Dalloway in order to embrace the collective we and to obtain a social recognition, though this aim is never completely achieved.

Her criticism against patriarchy and its policy strikes at the very heart of the social structure and breaks the rules of a not-written code of behaviour which grounds its predominance on the submission of subcultures. The exploitation of women cannot be, thus, analysed if not in relation to a larger context where culture, politics and the ineptitude of Institutions have the same responsibility and must be analysed in connection to each other.

3.2. *Doris Lessing: "Free Women" in a Free World?*

In the preface to her most controversial novel, *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Doris Lessing affirms: «the unease at writing about "petty personal problems" was to recognize that nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one's own»[44].

Her words are of a particular importance especially considering the misinterpretation of the novel since its first appearance. Regardless of how many reviewers have negatively described the novel as an angry representation of a sex war[45], the understanding of *The Golden Notebook* lies on a more comprehensive reading of all its sections. The apparently fragmented literary structure of the novel reveals, in fact, a strong relation among the Cold-War, the Communist collapse, the European Imperialism and the influence these subjects have had on the shape of Anna Wulf's personal breakdown.

A crucial point, here, is the reverberation that the novel had on the female revolution. As the symbol of a new kind of woman risen from the dust of the Victorian mothers, Anna's thoughts and questions, as they are presented in the novel, may be described – to quote Margareth Atwood – as «pretty daring»[46]. Although Lessing published the novel

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[42] HENDERSON, "This Preposterous Masculine Fiction", p. 2.

[43] HENDERSON, "This Preposterous Masculine Fiction", p. 5.

[44] LESSING, *The Golden Notebook*, p. 13.

[45] About *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing wrote: «A researcher will sometimes say to me: "I was surprised what bad reviews the book got at its start". I was surprised at the sourness and bad temper of some of them, full of epithets like "man-hater", "ballsbreaker"» (Doris LESSING, "Guarded Welcome", «The Guardian», Saturday 27 January 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jan/27/featuresreviews.guardianreview25>).

[46] Margareth ATWOOD, "Doris Lessing: a model for every writer coming from the back of beyond", «The Guardian», Monday 18 November 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/17/doris-lessing-death-margaret-atwood-tribute>. The relevance of Doris Lessing's contribution to «The Guardian» has long been acknowledged by critics, who extensively quote them to reinforce their own interpretation. See,

before the Women's Liberation era and the many feminist waves, these themes are already central in the novel. Besides, in a way that seems to foresee one of the most concerning dilemmas of this century, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* questions the honesty of ideologies on which are grounded our present societies, unveiling the failure of those ideals that were supposed to stop the world decline after the Second World War.

As a matter of fact, this novel was a manifesto of a post-ideological era, a description of the disillusionment which overwhelmed the Western World after Khrushchev's revelations about the dystopian side of Communism in the aftermath of the World War.

Lessing's main purpose is to translate in words the psychological chaos caused by the failure of these ideals which had represented a hopeful light for many citizens during their fight against fascism. This issue is made clear from the beginning of the novel, when Anna warns the reader about what will be the central theme of the story when she affirms: «as far as I can see everything's cracking up»[47]. The entire novel is focused, thus, on two major subjects: the post-war social breakdown, and the influence this had on individual lives.

Lessing's refusal to be inscribed within the limits of a label has been, for a long time, read as a rejection of her early social activism. This is, obviously, untrue, since her commitment to human rights has never stopped. However, she was also an attentive reader of society, and her criticism of politics and feminism aimed at highlighting the risk of turning them into something which had more to do with a religious faith than to politics. When referring to feminism Lessing stated: «what the feminists want of me is something they haven't examined because it comes from religion. They want me to bear witness»[48].

These comments do not represent a refusal of feminism, since she firmly believed that «women are second-class citizens»[49]. She underlines, instead, the urgency to look at the World from a more comprehensive point of view, embracing, in so doing, a larger vision of the complex worldwide situation. However, her criticism of feminism, politics and the blind faithful passion which drives ideologies to extremisms is the result of the author's own experience. Feminism and the involvement in the Communist Party are recurrent subjects in Lessing's early novels where the author transposes her personal ideas.

The Golden Notebook is not an exception. Anna Wulf's opinions resemble those of her creator: as Lessing, Anna strenuously fights against blind supporters of a communist ideal which has lost its meaning after Khrushchev's speech. Furthermore, Anna also refuses to be part of the hypocrite English middle-class, portrayed as a symbol of the capitalistic bourgeoisie to which the new Labour party seems to be devoted.

Lessing's early novels are undoubtedly focused on specific subjects. The arrogant European politics and the complexity of the female self-consciousness in modern societies are central themes in her works at the beginning of her career. Although her refusal to be exclusively imprisoned within the label of feminism, the role of women in Lessing's novels is decisive for an accurate understanding of the women's identity in contemporary societies. Female characters in Lessing's works often symbolise a new modern woman whose independence is always too fragile. Freedom is a disingenuous

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for instance, Alice RIDOUT, Roberta RUBENSTEIN, Sandra SINGER (eds.), *Doris Lessing's Golden Notebook After Fifty*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015.

[47] LESSING, *The Golden Notebook*, p. 25.

[48] Cited in Leslie HAZELTON, "Doris Lessing on Feminism Communism and 'Space Fiction'", «New York Times», 25 July 1982 <https://www.nytimes.com/books/99/01/10/specials/lessing-space.html>.

[49] LESSING, *The Golden Notebook*, p. 8.

word for Lessing who ironically pictures women as still dependent on the male judgement. The unconcerned capitalistic system, which has caused the colonisation of the African soil and corrupted the Western social structure, takes in Lessing the form of the ego against which Woolf had already engaged her fight. This system, as patriarchy, has the power to confine women within the cage of the submissive Victorian Angel. Women, in Lessing's narrative, cannot escape from a confrontation with the complexity of capitalism and the false female freedom it has created.

The presence of the symbolical Victorian lady is essential in Doris Lessing's novels since, according to Sukenick: «this sort of lady [Victorian ladies] (to use the word "woman" would be inaccurate) is very much apparent in Lessing's fiction and serves as a key to the development of the women of the generation after her, those "free women" whom Lessing describes so well»[50]. From Marta Quest (*Children of Violence*, 1952-1969) to Anna Wulf, the antithetical relationship with the image of the Victorian mother recurs in Lessing's writing as an echo of Woolf's effort to kill the Angel in order to find a space for a more independent artistic expression.

As Woolf before her, Lessing fights against the powerful patriarchal presence by unveiling the frailty of a fragmented female identity. The representation of fragmentation allows the author to *de*-construct the myth of the unbreakable authority, also giving to her the opportunity to foreground the complexity of women's inner conflict. Specifically, Lessing's women deal with the stereotyped image of the sentimental wife. As an echo of Mary Wollstonecraft's words, Lessing blames the female tendency to submit intellect to sensibility, a tendency which mirrors the inner struggle of her female characters[51]. Adherence to rationality is the light which saves Lessing's female characters. In *The Golden Notebook* Anna Wulf, overwhelmed by sentimentalism begins to cry and, while scrutinising herself from an external point of view, she compares the emotional woman she is observing to a sick individual defeated by emotions: «Good Lord, if I were sitting here watching myself I'd feel quite sick at all this sentimentalism. Well I'm making myself sick»[52]. Her adhesion to rationality becomes, here, a means for intellect which in Lessing's view represents the most powerful weapon women have to distance themselves from the Victorian female identity. To claim the supremacy of reason over emotion is a way to free women from the trap of the «interrelated dualism». Reason is for Lessing the most reliable engagement of her life. In Sukenick's words: «Rationality is personality; for Lessing it is intelligence that gives one a sense of self and preserves some approximation of integration in the face of invading irrationalities»[53].

The conflict between emotion and rationality appears as a metaphor of the contrast between the identity women are expected to perform, and their inner desire to demonstrate their value as individuals. This association is deeply examined in *The Golden Notebook* where the heroine Anna Wulf faces the problem of being a free woman in a modern society.

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[50] Lynn SUKENICK, "Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing's Fiction", «Contemporary Literature», 14.4 (1973), pp. 515-535, p. 518.

[51] «this overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining the sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a ration creature useful to others» (Mary WOLLSTONECRAFT, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Dublin, C.K. Ogden Collection, 1793, p. 7).

[52] LESSING, *The Golden Notebook*, p. 452.

[53] SUKENICK, "Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing's Fiction", p. 521.

At the beginning of the novel she presents herself as a rational individual, far from those sentimentalisms which separate women from their personal fulfilment.

Nonetheless, contrasts and fragmentations characterise Anna's self-description. Her decision to separate the personal narration of her inner self into four notebooks, testifies to her inability to perceive herself as a cohesive individual. The anguishing psychological detachment she perceives throughout the story is a representation of her struggle against the simplification of her identity into a well joined-up self. This is a fight against the egotistical patriarchal presence which imposes a biased representation of the female identity as well as of the world: as in *Mrs. Dalloway,* Lessing is contesting the ego.

It is through this literary contrast that she let her true emerge, since opposite to the personal fragmentation of the four notebooks is the Victorian, impersonal, narrative voice of the 'Free Women' section. Here, Lessing underlines a central debate for her generation. As she affirms, in fact: «when I began writing there was a pressure on writers not to be 'subjective'»[54]: being subjective means, thus, not to be 'committed' to the overwhelming problems of the world such as famine, fascism or wars. This issue recurs in the writer block which haunts Anna Wulf. Her only successful novel, in fact, represents for Anna a betrayal of the artistic engagement to the truth. When she decides to transform her experience in the African colony into a compromising love story, she voluntarily omits the hypocrisy and complexity of her real experience.

Her artistic block, thus, seems to come from her inability to give a complete picture of the chaotic world she is experiencing, an issue which torments her to the point she will divide her personal diary into four different notebooks representative of her different feelings. In this perspective, the contrast between the conventional novel and the personal fragmented narration of Anna's inner feelings, underlines a crucial point: the monolithic voice of the conventional novel cannot offer a truthful representation of the world, since it is only through the four divided selves of the notebooks that we learn something about Anna and her experience of the world. That a new literary order represents a crucial point for Anna is made clear by her words: «I am incapable of writing the only kind of novel which interests me: a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life»[55].

It is precisely this new way to look at life Lessing's main purpose, and it is through the fragmentation of the self that she succeeds in giving a full understanding of her female character and the spirit of her time. Yet, in the end, it is the pain caused by this chaotic experience that will lead Anna to bring back together all her pieces into the Golden Notebook.

This literary device helps Lessing not only to demonstrate the failure of the impenetrable voice imposed by an ideological patriarchal language, but she also demonstrates the impossibility for the self to survive to this system. The 'Free Women' section, as Lessing explicitly declares, ironically represents a false female independence, as supported by the compromise that the two female characters are forced to face at the end of the story. According to Gardiner, the word 'freedom' «echoes constantly throughout the book, from political slogans to Anna's birth name 'Freeman', to Anna and Molly's insistence that they are new social phenomena, 'Free Women', who can use men's language, share their sexual adventures, and flout

[54] LESSING, *The Golden Notebook*, p. 45.
[55] LESSING, *The Golden Notebook*, p. 76.

bourgeois marriage»[56].

Nonetheless, this freedom assumes an ironical tone when women are forced to deal with their independence. Every time they try to take a distance from men's judgement women succumb to men, fearing to be defined as 'castrating'. A solution to this contrasting duality is never achieved, as supports the fact that sexual and intellectual freedom never find a concrete realisation in Anna's life. As Clarissa, Anna cannot escape from her breakdown unless she compromises her inner self. They both must deal with the pressure of a «collective we», a dominant 'I' represented by social expectations to which women are expected to conform with. Thus, Anna's final intention to «be integrated with British life at its roots»[57], claimed at the very end of 'Free Women', can be read as a capitulation to social impositions: a compromise which invalidates those ideals of independence and freedom so deeply supported by Anna and her friend during the novel.

The submission to a conformist social structure is indirectly confirming the impossibility for women to autonomously fulfil their inner individuality unless they find a language free from the cumbersome pressure of the ideological patriarchal language. It is not a coincidence that only *The Golden Notebook* section offers a solution to Anna's artistic block and a happy ending to her personal breakdown. Differently to Woolf, Lessing suggests an escape from the cage of the female isolation: the acceptance of fragmentation and the unity which comes from it.

On the other side, Anna's compromise in the 'Free Women' section appears as a capitulation to the governing class and the *re*-establishment of a conservative order after the failure of post-war revolutionary values. As for Clarissa Dalloway, this final compromise is offered as Anna's only solution from the painful duality of her identity crisis. Both the two heroines are puzzled by a frustrating question: to express their inner self, running the risk of being alienated from society, or to resign to an imposed, impersonal, identity.

In *The Golden Notebook*, as in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the struggle against the dominant system is read from a female perspective, that is to say from the perspective of a minority whose words are not socially recorded. In Lessing's view the silencing oppressor takes the form of a left party corrupted by the capitalistic promise of a shining future, as well as she criticises the blind communist thought unable to face its faults[58].

However, the portrayal of female characters in Woolf and Lessing passes through the same representation. Anna, as Clarissa, suffers of an inner alienation which is first of all experienced through a rejection of her body. As an object of consumption manipulated by the market, the female body metaphorically embodies the battleground where women's freedom is negotiated. Anna, as Clarissa Dalloway before her, experiences a physical alienation from her own body which is, furthermore, the first sign of a descent into madness. This feeling grows within Anna's soul as an inner pain which haunts her until she perceives her identity as completely detached from herself: she is no more Anna, the reasoning woman writer, but another creature, unrelated to herself. This

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[56] Judith KEGAN GARDINER, "Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook", in Judith KEGAN GARDINER (ed.), *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945-2000*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, pp. 376-387, p. 384.

[57] LESSING, *The Golden Notebook*, p. 576.

[58] «I am in a mood that gets more and more familiar: words lose their meaning suddenly. I find myself listening to a sentence, a phrase, a group of words, as if they are in a foreign language- the gap between what they are supposed to mean, and what in fact they say seems unbridgeable» (LESSING, *The Golden Notebook*, p. 272).

personal suffering engages her into a strenuous struggle: she performs the role of the jealous woman, the wife she had never wanted to be, and, at the same time, she is conscious that by performing this role she is losing her reason. Anna experiences exactly the same perception which afflicted Clarissa Dalloway when she realised that she was wearing an identity that did not belong to her.

As Woolf, Lessing describes the estrangement felt by her character, when, closed within the boundaries of her room, Anna observes her body from an external point of view: «I sat on my bed» she confesses, «and I looked at my thin white arms, and at breasts […] this feeling of being alien to my own body caused my head to swim, until I anchored myself, clutching out for something, to the thought that what I was experiencing was not my thought at all»[59].

The intimate relation between a woman and her body constitutes the actual revolution realised by Woolf and Lessing. Through the description of a sense of dissociation from a body which has been manipulated and delineated by patriarchy, the two authors are actually *de*-constructing the patriarchal ideological language. They both free women from the burden of a dress which is not their own to find a more suitable expression for themselves. According to Cixous, the writing of the female body gives back to women their territories, since «a woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow»[60]. Thus, Woolf and Lessing are consciously freeing women from a language which was not their own and, most importantly, they give women back the power to describe their own body with their own words.

Both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Golden Notebook*, portray the conflict suffered by women who desperately try to solve the duality of their identity, struggling to find new means of personal expressions. What is most important, this conflict allows the two authors to disrupt the unity of a dominant patriarchal 'I', a prevailing strength whose pressure is reinforced by the ideological war language which dismisses the female identity.

Woolf's legacy is determinant to Lessing's representation of a complex relationship between society and individuals. The inner suffering of Clarissa Dalloway opens the door to Anna Wulf's personal breakdown. As Gardiner pointed out the mother-daughter relationship is essential, since *The Golden Notebook* carries on the dismantlement of the patriarchal language already began with *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf and Lessing rejected a culture which did not represent them and began a female revolution where women writers, to quote Jane Austen, did not «allow books to prove anything».

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[59] LESSING, *The Golden Notebook*, p. 532.

[60] Hélène CIXOUS, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), in Tonya KROUSE, "Freedom as Effacement in 'The Golden Notebook': Theorizing Pleasure, Subjectivity, and Authority", «Journal of Modern Literature», 29.3 (2006), pp. 39-56, p. 43.

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