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## **Hysteria Beyond Gender: Analyzing Male and Female Perspectives in *The Golden Notebook***

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### **Abstract:**

This paper attempts to explore the contemporary understanding of Hysteria, contrasting it with the traditional notions from ancient times. At present, hysteria is considered as an emotional problem, affected by the contemporary social conditions as opposed to its traditional understanding as a physical problem exclusively affecting women. Over the centuries, the concept of hysteria has surpassed the boundaries of medical studies. Since hysteria's dimensions have broadened over time, now, it is not only studied by people working in medical fields but also by sociologists, theorists, critics. Due to this broad inclusive dimension, it has become a part of cultural and literary studies. Its perception from being a disease that arose merely out of a woman's bodily dysfunction has changed to it being seen as an emotional predicament manifesting itself in the form of physical stress, which is not solely limited to women. This paper also explores the different connotations of hysteria in contemporary fiction, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, to see how male and female characters have been portrayed as hysterical characters, and the fact that it is a condition that can affect men and women alike. Thus, this paper is an attempt to degenderize the stigma associated with hysteria through a critical study of the novel *The Golden Notebook*.

**Keywords:** hysteria in males, hysteria in females, gender, isolation, fragmentation, femininity and masculinity.

For centuries, the concept of patriarchy has been prevalent and, due to its intricate relation with cultures and societies, it has long been a subject for academic discussions and analysis. The system of patriarchy is deeply embedded in societal norms and has always placed both men and women in a double bind. On the one hand, where it has always oppressed women: on, the other, it has not spared men either. Society expects men and women to behave according to its set gendered norms. Both men and women have to follow certain "sex-marking and sex-

announcing” factors to make their place acceptable in society. Moreover, just like the concepts of femininity and masculinity, hysteria also falls under social and cultural paradigms. The paper will explore the evolving concept of hysteria, studying its transformation from traditionally presumed female-centric ailment to a modern, well researched concept transcending the boundaries of any gender. In contemporary times, hysteria stands for manifestation of psychological stress that is not limited to any specific gender. For this exploration, the paper will thoroughly analyse Doris Lessing’s seminal work *The Golden Notebook*.

In ancient times, labelling a woman hysteric, indeed, meant perpetration of emotional and mental violence on her. At the same time calling a man hysteric meant a question on his masculinity even if he was genuinely going through the problem. During earlier times, hysteria was referred to as ‘the wandering womb’ and everyone considered it as a female-specific ailment that required immediate cure. People believed that if the uterus wandered in the wrong direction, it could cause serious problems for women, and so to prevent such condition, women were advised to confine themselves to the ideal roles and stay away from any kind of artistic or intellectual activities. This practice started in ancient Greece and lasted till the nineteenth century, although with minor variations. So, whenever one talks about the discourse of hysteria, a common thing that always gets a mention is its association with femininity as it is seen as a disease or a condition that can only affect women and not men. However, the truth is far from this presumed notion:

It is not surprising that the metaphors of hysteria should contain double sexual messages about femininity and masculinity, for, throughout history, the category of feminine ‘hysteria’ has been constructed in opposition to a category of masculine nervous disorder whose name was constantly shifting. (Showalter 292)

However, in reality, no such physical condition existed; instead, it was simply one of the mediums of social control inflicted on women by the male dominated society. Hysteria was never acknowledged in men, and even when it was, which was seldom, different terms were used for it because of the shame and disgrace that the term hysteria carried for men as supposedly it affected only those men who had womanly qualities. If a man was found to be hysterical, his illness was labelled as shell-shock, melancholy or madness instead of calling it hysteria. These labels would free him from the stigma associated with the term Hysteria, and for this, they received different treatments in comparison to the women patients.

When women writers started exploring the stories of women’s struggles, they focused on psychic fragmentation. Elaine Showalter, in the essay, “On Hysterical Narrative”, also notes

that in the late nineteenth century women writers such as “Victoria Ross, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, or Rachilde” often explored stories of psychic fragmentation of their oppressed protagonists, and thus, termed their condition as “hysteria” (25). Sigmund Freud explored and explained the concepts of hysteria based on his case studies. According to him, it was challenging for hysterics to narrate a story or anything about themselves in coherently, so this inability to maintain coherence meant hysteria to him. With various literary narratives, hysteria became a prominent term in literature, and over time, by the beginning of the twentieth century, many female writers also started believing in women-centric narratives written by women writers as narratives of hysteria.

The narratives again began to change when the Second World War offered women some freedom in the sense that they had to come out of the four walls of their houses and start earning their livelihood. Upon the conclusion of the war, there was a rigorous effort by men to reestablish the heteropatriarchal status quo. However, women, having discovered a newly found liberating space during the war, were unwilling to revert to their traditional roles. The profound realization and enjoyment of this newfound freedom encouraged feminists to reclaim the term “hysteria.” Female writers sought to demonstrate that, over the centuries, male dominance has systematically constructed and perpetuated authoritative narratives. This critical examination of gendered power dynamics is explored extensively by women writers in renowned literary texts such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper” and through the character of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. These works highlight the ways in which patriarchal control has shaped and constrained women's voices and experiences throughout history.

The feminists provided narratives for the term, which had been used to persecute them ruthlessly in the past. Although, Hysteria always had a lurking presence throughout centuries, its emergence marked a new point in the nineteenth century when many psychoanalytic theorists started studying the phenomenon and providing treatments for it as “it would be more judicious to say that the nineteenth century was hysteria's golden age precisely because it was then that the moral presence of the doctor became normative as never before in regulating intimate lives” (Porter 242). Over time, the concept of Hysteria became a merging point for literature, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, and medical diagnosis. However, in the past few decades, it has ceased to be a medical issue instead, has become a discourse in literary and cultural studies. As Showalter explains, it has

become the waste-basket term of literary criticism, applied to a wide and diffuse range of textual techniques, and most alarmingly, taken as synonyms for women's writing and the women's novel. Sometimes referring to all fictional texts by women, sometimes to writing about hysterical women... hysterical narrative has taken on disturbing connections with femininity. (24)

As stated by Showalter, whenever there is any discourse on hysteria, somehow it is always related to women; whether by their writings or characters, solely women writers and characters have been portrayed (considered) as hysterical. On the other hand, male characters have always been shown as diagnosed with some medical issue but never labelled as hysterical. Also, if any writing was considered ambiguous or with fragmented narrative, primarily written by women writers.

Society plays a crucial role in constructing one's identity as the socio-cultural conditions affects one's personality and then shapes how a person carries out his/her role. Moreover, that role is decreed for them by society as Simone De Beauvoir writes, "One is not born woman, but rather becomes one" (23). Hysteria's relationship with society began to be explored and came to light when feminist movements grew in the mid-twentieth century. Feminists in the twentieth century brought out the fact that women suffer hysteria because of societal pressures and oppression as well as the cultural duties and rigid norms that a woman is expected to follow. Hysteria was now considered to be a condition from which women suffered because of their "...oppressive social roles rather than by bodies or psyches [...]." Female accounts of hysteria started coming to the people's notice in the wake of feminist movements in the second half of the twentieth century as the feminist theorists gave an entirely new picture of Hysteria, which was beyond everyone's comprehension.

The discourse on hysteria has been extensively examined across various disciplines, including sociology, medical studies, and literature. Even though some scholars assert that hysteria no longer exists and emphasize on its absence from contemporary medical dictionaries, the condition persists within society. Historically, hysteria was associated with femininity, but now it is recognized as a condition that can also affect men also. Although in the early twentieth century, the discourse of Hysteria declined, its use was not altogether abolished:

... theories about women's fears seemed less important by this time (after the first world war) because after the war and the passage of women's suffrage in

England and the United States, it was believed that female hysteria declined and even disappeared. (Showalter 326)

The concept of hysteria, as depicted in the novels, is still prevalent and widespread, though often not clearly visible to everyone, but it has transformed into more complex forms of loneliness, frustration, alienation, anxiety, stress and emotional outbursts that people experience in their day-to-day lives, and one such novel is Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962). Doris Lessing in *The Golden Notebook* shows characters in the grip of hysteria by precisely capturing the minute details of their disoriented lives. The novel is set in the mid twentieth century, and shows the characters dealing with issues such as frustration, loneliness, frustration, anxiety, and sudden outburst of emotions, "They were all of them, all these people caught by the terrible pressure of this city" (Lessing 343). By focusing on the different aspects of Hysteria in men as well as in women, the novel also touches upon the fragmentation of the time and the impact it has on people, and one such impact is their disjointed lives.

Anna, the protagonist of the novel, experiences recurrent episodes of hysteria. The reasons for her hysterical episodes can be attributed to several factors, such as her failed relationships, disillusionment with the Communist Party, and the internal conflict regarding her writing. However, the primary cause of her hysteria is that she is living in a post-war society. Since post-war society was dealing with a sense of isolation and frustration, Anna also suffers from this fragmented self, unable to decide what exactly she wants for herself, "I feel like breaking out and shouting and screaming whenever I set foot on this frozen soil. I feel locked up, the moment I breathe our sacred air" (Lessing 33). The feminists argued that it is not only the society that a woman lives in but also the family which she is a part of that plays a significant role in binding a woman to her feminine duties, such as taking care of their family and performing household chores even if they do not want to. The social and familial constraints are some main reasons that lead Anna towards her hysterical episodes. Anna and Molly (her friend) have been shown as independent women, living on their terms without allowing men to dominate them. They are strong women and proficient in their respective jobs, and they also take care of their kids by themselves. However, they are constantly in a dilemma of wanting male support in their lives. Simultaneously, they both feel stuck in their lives but even then, they both cannot imagine different lives for themselves. Anna is a devoted mother whose major part of her life revolves around her daughter, Janet. But, at the same time, she feels tied to her motherly duty towards Janet. Thus, she finds herself in a constant flux between

being a good mother as society demands her to be and the need to break free from all her domestic duties.

Where on the one hand, Anna and Molly oscillate between considering themselves free and breaking away from their familial and societal bonds. Marion (Molly's ex-husband's wife), on the other hand, never considers herself a free woman; rather, she finds herself chained in the boundaries of a traditional woman, that is, wife and mother and feels burdened by it.

The only freedom that Anna enjoys is that of cracking up and then emerging into a unified self. Even Lessing herself says, "[...] sometimes when people 'crack up' it is a way of self healing, of the inner self dismissing false dichotomies and divisions" (Lessing 8), and this is what exactly happens with Anna. It is only in the end that Anna is able to emerge into an integrated self by unifying the various disjointed threads of her writing when she maintains only one book, that is, the Golden Notebook, out of many coloured books. It is then she understands the true meaning of freedom which she then enjoys by overcoming her recurring episodes of hysteria. Only towards the end does Anna achieve an integrated sense of self by consolidating the incongruent elements of her writing into a single book, the Golden Notebook, as opposed to maintaining multiple coloured notebooks. Through this unification, she comprehends the true essence of freedom, which she subsequently enjoys by overcoming her recurring bouts of hysteria.

Hysteria, as a condition, can affect both men and women, and Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* shows hysterical male characters and what adverse effect they have on the people around them. Her characters Saul Green, Tommy, Ella's father, Michael, and Paul have entirely different personalities. Through this diverse characterization, she depicts that anyone can be hysterical at any point in their life, and among all, the most hysterical person is Saul Green.

Saul Green in *The Golden Notebook* shows the example of hysteria in men. He is an American man who enters the novel towards the end and has been portrayed as a writer with a cracked (fragmented psyche) self, maybe because of the political situations in his country where people feel the same disillusionment with Communism as they do in Britain. Saul, just like Anna, gets hysterical at times. Initially, Anna fails to understand his hysteria, but when she does, she realizes they both are similar. When she first meets Saul, she notices that he has a coldness in his eyes and is always alert, in the sense that he is not someone who ever lets his guard down. Saul has the ability to look deep into people, especially women, "I realized there

was no other man I had met, with the exception of Michael, capable of such quick insight into a woman” (Lessing 482). Saul considers himself above Anna, he does what he likes, he lectures her, advises her, guides her, but also pushes her to the verge of insanity. While talking to her, sometimes, Saul even forgets that she is sitting in front of him, and this is when Anna begins to get uncomfortable as she realizes that she does not exist for him anymore. Saul is full of bitterness and sadness because of the fragmentation that he feels within his personality. Both Saul and Anna feel trapped between their values and political ideas. This leads to their disintegrated self, their internal conflict as writers, or communism and its failure. Anna believes in Communist values, and so does Saul, but she understands that the people working for such values are themselves corrupt, and consequently she leaves the party. Moreover, Saul gets the order to leave the party for being prematurely anti-Stalinist.

During hysterical episodes, where on the one hand, Anna is capable of maintaining self-control, Saul, on the other hand, finds it difficult to control himself emotionally as well as physically, however, he conceals this from everyone else. It becomes a real struggle for him to control himself, and once he does, he makes it seem like nothing ever happened to him. Since he knows his situation, his fragmentation, and craziness, he is able to disguise it, unlike Anna who is unable to control her fragmentation. Nevertheless, when it comes to controlling someone mentally, Saul subdues Anna. The disjointed self and hysteria that they both suffer from results from the socio-political conflicts of society. But, after a while Anna begins to feel the same suffocation in her own house. The conflicts that she sees in the outer world enter her house in the form of Saul Green. Saul and Anna bring each other's dark side to the surface and, thus, make each other more negative. Around him, she feels as if they have been caged in their flat and are descending into madness. Saul accepts being mad, makes jokes about it and does not look at it as a serious problem with Anna:

The walls of this flat close in on us. Day after day we're alone here. I'm conscious that we are both mad. He says, with a yell of laughter: 'Yeah, I'm crazy, it's taken me all my short life to recognize it, and now what? Suppose, I prefer being crazy what then?' (Lessing 502)

Anna feels hysterical due to many reasons but, the major one is her break-up with Michael. She realizes the extent of her dependence Michael as when they break-up, Anna is unable to handle herself. Instead of composing her emotions, she dives into a weaker personality, which gets worse after she meets Saul. Since Saul remains hysterical most of the



time, switching between his personalities, Anna also begins to lose her sense of time, just like him. Furthermore he, being equally a hysteric man, increases Anna's fragmentation and hysteria. It is because of Saul that her anxiety and terror come back. In the end, she decides that Saul should go away because they are "very bad for each other" (Lessing 539). Finally, Saul leaves Anna; and Anna gets the opportunity to become what she always wanted to be, a free woman. Saul, however, remains the same hysterical person with multiple identities.

"Please don't be alarmed, you'd be surprised how many charming people are walking our streets, the mere ghosts of themselves.... it's all due to the times we live in" (Lessing 501 502). The statement sums up the conflict of contemporary times. Regardless of gender, everyone essentially feels almost same: social alienation, despair, and isolation, but not everyone realizes the severity of his/her situation. The people who are able to realize their situation and the reason for their despair and alienation can overcome it, just like Anna does as she acknowledges that she has a writer's block. After that, she is able to move past it and begins to write a novel. Saul is aware of his situation, and also knows that he cannot cure it, but he is awareness enables him to manage it. So, he knows how to handle his hysteria and at the same time hide it from other people. They both are hysterical and reflect each other's craziness. Saul being a part of the modern world could not save himself from its adverse effects and thus, despite being a man, he suffers the way Anna does.

So, it would not be correct to assign hysteria to a specific gender because both men and women suffer from it at some point in their lives. For women, it is more difficult because of their oppression at the hands of society in several ways, whereas men live with hysteria without having to accept it in those words. Though patriarchy affects both men and women in very subtle ways, nonetheless, women have been and still are its primary victims. Hysteria will always be present in society because it is not possible for every individual to stay contented and live a utopic life. Almost every person suffers from hysteria at least once in their life. Thus, now it has ceased to be a subject in the domain of medical studies; instead, it has evolved into a reflection of society's effect on an individual. Hysteria in men is not much different from hysteria in women as people believed it to be during ancient times. The only difference is that men do not have to worry about the bonds of traditional roles. However, these roles do pressurize men many times, though evidently, they are not allowed to be open and be vocal about it for it might be taken as their weakness and lead to shaming of their patriarchal repute. Nonetheless, they can also get just as frustrated with the isolation and idleness of their roles in society as women do. So, it would not be correct to say that hysteria as a condition does not

prevail today as Elaine Showalter explains, “Hysteria is no longer a question of the wandering womb; it is a question of the wandering story, and of whether that story belongs to the hysteric, the doctor, the historian or the critic. The stories of race and gender in hysteria still remain to be told....” (335). This story of the wandering womb has primarily been associated with women, however, with evolving discourses in literature and texts like *The Golden Notebook*, one can see a shift in the narratives as theorists have been exploring the idea of hysteria as a concept beyond the confines of gender. Socio-cultural conditions become the prime factor for hysteria as it affects people, irrespective of their gender, when they feel overwhelmed by the normative structure of society.

Thus, changing notions of hysteria are intrinsically linked to the ongoing critique and redefinition of patriarchal standards. Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* presents a unique idea of difference and similarities in manifestation of hysteria in women as well as men. So, this re-examination of hysteria in *The Golden Notebook* sheds light on how the norms and standards of society impact both men and women, and also compel them to adhere to specific prescribed roles and behaviours. The move away from considering hysteria as an issue affecting only women is a reflection of a broader societal shift towards a more nuanced understanding of gender, concerns of mental health, and the oppressive impacts of the patriarchal system on both men and women.

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