

The Evolution of Feminist Narratives in 20th-Century British Literature: A Comparative Study of Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing

Mona Smadi, Louai Abu Lebdeh, Amal Almasri

Al Balqa Applied University, Jordan

Abstract

In this paper, the author analyses the shift of feminist discourses in British novels of the twentieth century through the lens of Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing. This paper seeks to discuss how these authors used these different techniques of narrative- modernist stream of consciousness by Virginia Woolf and post-modern fragmented narrative by Doris Lessing as tools for addressing women's psychological, political and social oppression. Applying and explaining the Feminist critical analysis, the paper discusses the issues of identity and freedom in Woolf's writings and oppression of political disappointment in Lessing's narratives. The paper shows that both the authors contributed greatly to the discourse of feminist literature and impacted the modern feminism by extending the definition of the female authorship and disrupting the gender stereo types. The modernist feminism of Woolf gives primacy to creativity as does, freedom; the post-war feminism of Lessing deals with the bewildering aspects of women's persona in political and social turmoil. As such, the present work establishes that Woolf and Lessing still remain indispensable to current theories in feminist literary critique, particularly in the ways they theorize gender, freedom, and the politics of self.

Keywords: Feminist Literature, Literary Criticism, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Modernist Feminism, 20th-century British Literature.

A. Background and context

Overview of feminist movements in the 20th century

The feminist movements of the 20th century can be broadly categorized into three waves, each marked by its own distinct goals, methods, and ideologies.

1. First Wave Feminism (Late 19th to Early 20th Century)

This wave mainly aimed at the legal victory of women, including the right to vote. On the social level, success is best epitomized by the United States ratifying the 19th Amendment offering women the right to vote in 1920, and the Representation of the People Act that did

likewise in the United Kingdom the previous year. Great contributors to this period include Emmeline Pankhurst and Susan B. Anthony. The first wave also focused on concerns such as property, education and employment thereby creating the path of form future feminism (James, 2003; Knellwolf, 2001).

2. Second Wave Feminism (1960s–1980s)

This wave did not only include legal rights but also embraced other social and cultural problems like reproductive rights and women's liberation, non-sexual relations in the workplace and much more. Great enlighteners were the feminists such as Simone De Beauvoir-The Second Sex, Betty Friedan-The Feminine

Mystique, and Gloria Steinem. The phrase that came to symbolize the goals of the women 's liberation movement of this time was "The personal is political." The second wave of feminism was distinctive in allowing for a wide variety of methods of action from casual discussion groups right up to proper legal proceedings for equality under the employment section (Knellwolf, 2001; The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory, 2015).

3. Third Wave Feminism (1990s–Present)

Third-wave feminism came into being because of the perceived shortcomings of the second-wave movement especially the movement's focus on the middle-aged, white women. It focused on the notion of intersectionality as the idea that race, class and sexual identity are connected to gender. It is noteworthy that third-wave feminism focused on the issue of diversity and heard voices from non-white and lesbians women. As such prominent writers such as Bell Hooks and Audre Lorde revolutionized the feminist discourse. This wave also brought the use of the internet to foment and raise awareness about Feminist issues such as digital feminism (hooks, 1984).

Each of these waves played a role in the development of the modern-day feminist movement moving from a fight for legal rights to a fight for social and cultural equality. All these movements are still relevant today and are still impacting feminism today.

The Role of Literature in Advancing Feminist Discourse

Feminism has been significantly enhanced through literature since literature is a context and a tool through which society is magnified and changed. It has in the novels, poems, essays and plays of the twentieth century and beyond given a voice for women to protest against male domination, for their emancipation and the elucidation of the issues of gender, color, and self-image.

This alone makes literature beneficial to the feminist discourse because it allows the women to narrate their experience themselves. Such

works of fiction by women writers as 'The Second Sex' by Simone de Beauvoir and 'A Room of One's Own' by Virginia Woolf help the readers understand elements of female independence and freedom in the world of knowledge, and constraint in terms of freedom of gender-role by culture. Such works set the stage for the development of the trends in the subsequent female literary criticism and theory this portraying woman at the center of their stories Em Jacobs (Butler, 1999).

More recently, the intersectionality paradigm has evolved to be a conceptual tool that has dominated most of feminist writings because it explores the relationship between gender and race as well as class among other social categories. Scholars like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins have analyzed how literature tends to disrupt the dominant narratives and open up space for an emancipatory feminism (Collins, 1990). Feminism itself has grown not only more international, but also more nuanced through the incorporation of a wider range of experiences of oppression as literature has changed the terms that have been written into the definition of feminisms (Bracke, 2015).

Moreover, the directions of the progress of the discourse of feminism in the context of the modern English-writing world: Apart from that, contemporary feminist literature and its critics can use digital platforms for their communication on a transnational level. This is because it has enabled the transfer of feminist concepts between countries thereby offering solutions for specific issues, and relating them with other feminist movements (Castro and Ergun, 2017).

To sum up, literature plays a key role in such an internationalization of feminine performativity as a progressive force for them and as a tool for critical advocacy representing women all over the world.

B. Significance of Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing

Introduction to Virginia Woolf as an early modernist feminist writer

Virginia Woolf could prove to be an undisputed titan of modernist literary works as well as one of the earliest voices of what modern feminism embodies. Woolf was an early modernist feminist writer whose writings illustrated the issues of gender, self and culture pervading the early twentieth century. Her essay "A Room of One's Own" published in 1929 is usually referred to as a quintessential feminist diatribe in which she insisted on women's financial and creative autonomy. They also strongly espoused the need for women to have indoor as well as spatial space which they used to critique the male-induced domestication of women (Woolf, 1929).

Virginia Woolf could prove to be an undisputed titan of modernist literary works as well as one of the earliest voices of what modern feminism embodies. Woolf was an early modernist feminist writer whose writings illustrated the issues of gender, self and culture pervading the early twentieth century. Her essay *A Room of One's Own* published in 1929 is usually referred to as a quintessential feminist diatribe in which she insisted on women's financial and creative autonomy. They also strongly espoused the need for women to have indoor as well as spatial space which they use to critique the male-induced domestication of women.

Besides writing, Woolf was the director of the Hogarth Press which she started with her husband, Leonard Woolf who published what could be considered feminist and vanguard writers who had no chance to be published. Organizations availed the formulation of the women's rights ideas and ideas in the early 20th century (Sellers, 2006).

In brief, Woolf is both the brilliant postmodernist of the twentieth-century literary work and the passionate advocate for the women's liberation movement today.

Introduction to Doris Lessing as a post-war feminist voice

Doris Lessing can be considered a crucial post-war feminist, famous for making her

interventions in second wave of feminism as well as for analyzing politically and figural the problem of gender, identity, and individual emancipation. Most works of Lessing exposed societal repression of women and provided thick-skinned representations of female characters who sought either personal or political emancipation.

Her novel published in 1962, *The Golden Notebook* is especially important in the discourse of feminism. Pitting one sister against her another, and presenting Anna Wulf as the microcosm of this struggle of the conflicted women within. Based on this theme of personal and political freedom, the author under discussion probes into the issues of gender equality and the status of women in a man's world. The novel was quickly adopted by young feminist readers who saw in it fulfilled their desiderate depiction of the inner turmoil women experience while in love, working, and fighting for political causes (Watkins, 2007; Lessing, 1989).

In the wrote after the war and especially in her work *The Emer 631* Lessing was inspired by a Marxist and Feminist point of view, although she addressed questions of class, colonialism and gender. Other works include "The Grass is Singing" published in 1950, and "The Memoirs of a Survivor" published in 1974 exemplify her radical exploration of how societies oppress women and exclude them from other structures of power and agency; they also deal with more expansive questions to do with the politics of race and nation (Więckowska, 2013).

In general, Lessing's post-war work is set against the backdrop of Marxism and, to some extent, feminism in showing how class, gender, and colonialism intertwined. Other great works of her include *The Grass is Singing* (1950) and *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974); more details of her works also depict her concern with systemic constraints of social orders on women as well as other issues such as racial and national identity (Więckowska, 2013).

C. Thesis Statement

This paper will therefore go further and analyse how Woolf and Lessing advanced in the practice of feminism in the historical world through their narratives, writing techniques and characters throughout the century.

Feminist Themes in Virginia Woolf's Works

Mr. Fitz MS summarizes the major themes of the novel by pinpointing feminism since female issues as well as roles of women as what mattered for Virginia Woolf's works. Producing one of her most famous works, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf demands that women require money of their own and a room of one's own in order to develop independently and intellectually. This work defiantly addresses the traditional suppressing of women from literature and education and emphasizes women need to occupy space for them to be creative.

In her fiction, Woolf likewise dealt with questions of gender and gender transition, and especially in *Orlando* (1928) a character's shift of sex over centuries is depicted to subvert still binding gender expectations. Women, notably those created by Virginia Woolf, were seen in the company of males because Woolf's use of the stream-of-consciousness narrative style in books such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) provided audiences with insight into the female psyche and their emotional, sexual, and economic frustrations in a man's world (Fernald, 2006; Jenkins, 2023).

While her theoretical perspective was literary, it was also political since Kypria activists criticized the system that trapped women, *Three Guineas* published in 1938, offers a highly critical view of how patriarchy, war and education systems define women's place within society.

Woolf's work remains vital to scholars' current approaches to reading literature through the lens of gender and so remains of great importance to critical discourse on identity and power (Jenkins, 2023; Fernald, 2006).

A. Early Feminist Consciousness in Modernism

The first waves of feminism in modernist culture appeared during the period of social changes mainly between the 1890s and the 30s which is considered unmistakably a period of cultural revolution and change – specifically in the way of painting as art and portraying gender roles. Modernism is therefore defined by its opposition to realistic and mimetic aesthetics, together with other unconventional specificities including fragmentation and stream of consciousness which corresponds to the stance of fight against patriarchy as a social construction of the feminist movement.

At this time women were ascending into higher education institutes and workforce, fighting for their right to vote and forcing political discourse to give attention to sexuality and gender. Such literature of modernism included works written by Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein among other writers whose aims was to challenge patriarchal structures within the society. Of the two early modernists Woolf tried to argue that women should be economically independent and provided with an environment for the creative work in the middle of the 20th century, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) (Mullin, 2006).

It also affected by other cultural changes that happened in the same period like the emergence of psychoanalysis as well as imperialism critiques in H.D as well as Mina Loy who used modernist feminism in exploring sexuality and female psyche. These writers used features of modernist culture to provoke on the issues of gender and sexual politics (Chatterjee, 2020).

In conclusion, consciousness of feminist principles in the modernism epoch can be characterized by common need to subvert gender roles and find new ways for creating art and giving manifestations political voice. It simultaneously assisted in the formation of the feminist theory and modernism literature; which is still pertinent in shaping modern feminists and literary studies.

Discussion of *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Woolf's exploration of women's intellectual and creative independence

A Room of One's Own (1929) is a recursive text, even a handbook of feminism, written by Virginia Woolf that addresses the necessity of women to possess money and *A Room of One's Own* so as to write. Similarly, in this essay: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction", Woolf tells her audience that women are capable of writing great literature, but have been prevented from doing so by the circumstances which include limited education and financial might. She famously states, from the notion that; a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction, she strongly underscores the propositions suggesting that the material conditions are essential to any woman aspiring to unleash her creative potential (Woolf, 2005).

Woolf uses an invented case of Shakespeare's Sister Judith to prove that should a woman have Shakespeare's talent; she was bound to remain frustrated in domestic work. This exploration shows that women lacked full agency and equal opportunities in workplace due to multiple barriers and people demanded spaces where women could work without any sexual harassment or without being constantly interrupted and needing male support (Snaith, 2000).

In her essay also Woolf protests modernist approaches to canon as they are highly selective simply because women writers have never been given their due chance though that does not mean they lack talent. She provokes patriarchy to liberate women and accept them as future strategists for worthwhile intelligence to join the commuting cultural literary horizon (De Gay, 2006). The essay is still a powerful appeal to increase the representation of women in literature and holds an important place in mainstream feminist scholarship.

B. Gender and Identity in Mrs. Dalloway (1925)

"She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown... this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway." Gender and identity problems are central to Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) as she tried to explore how the idea of society influences human life. Independent functioning of each character and confrontation with social expectations: married woman and hostess Clarissa Dalloway. Her internal experience based on the desire for liberty and love encounter can be viewed contrary to the behavioral patterns she adheres to, regarding gender roles. Woolf does not directly convey Clarissa's lesbianism but she hints deeply at Clarissa's homosexual tendencies by picturization of the event of nepenthe when Sally Seton kissed her on the lips. This portrayal implies that gender and sexuality are more pliable than are permitted by customary culture; hence the dilettante conflict of Clarissa's public space and personal sphere (Humm, 194; Fox, 2022).

Likewise, Septimus Warren Smith adds yet another perspective to what Woolf does in attempting to question gender and identity. Septimus, a war veteran suffers from the trauma of the war and issues of war and aggressive maleness. Indeed, for the humiliation of not conforming to the traditional male model of repression of feelings, anger, sorrow, etc., one can turn to the psychological typicality of 199. Through portraying Septimus's breakdown, Woolf protests against the status of gendered divisions, and shows how both male and female characters give under patriarchy (Fong, 2022; Humm, 2004).

Woolf's representation of these characters brings out the modernist sensitization of performativity of gender. Because of the splitting of the self that Shelley Brown discusses and because of the sudden transformation of Clarissa and Septimius into completely new people, in essence, and accident, the novel puts into question the straitjacket of gender and identity of the late Victorian male, as well as the restrictions

imposed on women; it demands citizenship and an erotic life for both men and women as suffering subjects (Butler, 1990).

Examination of Woolf's portrayal of women's social roles, internal struggles, and psychological depth

Analyzing Virginia Woolf's representations of women in Mrs. Dalloway (1925) this paper shall argue that Woolf does deep psychological analyses of women characters while presenting their frustration of wasting their potential as society cages them into petty roles. Woolf through the stream of consciousness technique provides the reader a chance to take a look at the inner experiences and preoccupations of a character such as Clarissa Dalloway as an independent woman in a society that puts woman in the subordinate position.

From Discussed facts in the novel one can define such important given fact as the role of a wife and a mistress. Nevertheless, Woolf amplifies the internal anger of Clarissa because of the limited space of a wife's life. Women of that period mainly think about the decisions they made in the past for instance, Clarissa was thinking why she decided to marry Richard Dalloway... The novel brings forth the sexual themes hidden from Clarissa's character, especially the relationship she has with Sally Seton: they kiss passionately and this emotion is in an act, which cannot be explained by female sexual propriety conduct, a behavior that was expected from women of the given period (Paterson 2019; Marcus, 2006). These inner thoughts expose a woman in a continuum of what society wants for her and what she truly desires.

Furthermore, Woolf examines the psychological depth of her characters by addressing mental health and trauma through

Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran struggling with PTSD. His inability to conform to societal norms of masculinity leads to his tragic demise, reinforcing Woolf's critique of the rigid rules imposed on both men and women (AlGweirien, 2017). Through these characters, Woolf critiques the social structures that limit

women's agency and explores the mental and emotional toll of such limitations.

Woolf's nuanced portrayal of women's internal struggles and societal roles continues to resonate in feminist literary studies, as it offers a profound exploration of gender identity, repression, and the pursuit of autonomy.

C. Experimentation with Narrative Structure and Feminism

Woolf's innovative use of stream of consciousness to explore feminist themes, challenging traditional literary forms

Thus, the stream-of-consciousness that Virginia Woolf first employed as a narrative technique at last enabled her to launch Feminist discourses on those fields that had been potentially unfavorable for traditional forms of literature. Focusing on the inner lives of her characters Woolf skillfully managed to portray diverse and often rather contradictory feelings, thoughts, and experiences of female characters in the patriarchal world.

To express such a concept as the disorderly but continuous flow of thoughts in character's heads, Woolf employed a stream of consciousness technique which differs from the narrative one in which events are presented as strictly consecutive – Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse. The given method reveals the subjectivity of experience and constructiveness of gender identity. For instance, the main protagonist Clarissa Dalloway in the novel Woolf symbolizes struggle of womanhood, marital life and submission of same sex love-a higher form of clash between individualism and conformity (Skirec, 2018; Fiveable, 2022).

Using this modernist technique, Woolf celebrated the overthrow of patriarchal frameworks that had forced women into the lack of decisional and creative freedom. The form so experimental form which employed mixture of past and present, multiple perspectives allowed for better explanation of women's potential roles in society given fragments of modern life. By such a style, Woolf advanced not only such narrative forms, but also contributed a discursive

feminism, which still has its reverberations in the understanding of literature today.

Doris Lessing's Feminist Contributions

A. Post-War Feminism and Lessing's Work

Overview of the historical and cultural context shaping Lessing's writing, particularly in the post-war period

As such, Lessing's work was greatly influenced by post war history and culture especially where she was coming from; colonialism, politics, and feminism. The bitter realities of the racially segregated Rhodesia now Zimbabwe bore deeply on Lessing's outlook towards imperialism and race This feature can be felt in some books such as *The Grass is Singing*, which this woman wrote in 1950 and the book focuses on racial injustice of colonialism (Sergeant, 2016).

The Britain in which Lessing lived during her later years for most of the period after the second world war was characterized by political transformation, decolonization, socialist and the influential feminism movements. The early Marxist thinking of Lessing, which caused her to develop anti-colonial and anti-racist humanism were helpful for her to frame her vision. Though her passages towards embracing the Marxist idea and their dream of the perfect world; dissatisfactions of this aspect are evident in her 'The Golden Notebook' (1962) political and personal emancipation, freedom struggles and the relativity of individualism particularly to women.

The Britain in which Lessing located herself in her later years was a post-war, post-colonial country experiencing a change of political dynasty, the emergence of socialism and an active phase of the women's liberation movement. It is worth recognizing that Lessing's early interest in Marxism as an ideology providing kind of anti-colonial and anti-race humanist discloser was decisive for her. However, in her later works, she disillusioned

herself from Marxism and its futuristic Mundaneum and ability to deliver what it promises; for instance, in *The Golden Notebook* (1962) succeeds in dismantling not only political but also Personal Liberation movements, coupled with an ability to harshly portray the bittersweetness of identity and freedom for women (Brazil, 2016).

B. Feminism in The Golden Notebook (1962)

Analysis of how Lessing addresses women's psychological, political, and emotional struggles, using fragmented narrative structure to symbolize the fragmented nature of women's lives.

The *Golden Notebook* is a novel of Doris Lessing and it is most expressive of her tendency towards the fragmentation of the narrative structure to examine women's psychological, political, and emotional unrest. The novel follows Anna Wulf, "The point is, we have to live like that because we are fragmented. People can't live like that unless they're fragmented." a writer dealing with a mental breakdown, who organizes her experiences into four separate notebooks, each representing a different aspect of her life: the social personal political cultural emotional and creative domain. This fractured structure echoes the state of Anna's mind and approximates what is the collapse of the social order that women experience (Lessing, 1989).

It is therefore appropriate that Lessing should choose this particular structure for the novel as it mirrors the compartmentalized lives that women are often required to lead so they might survive their socialization. The notebooks are symbolic of how women – especially mid-century ones – had to organize or 'navigate' their lives in a society that was fragmented and patrilineal (Brewster, 2016).

Furthermore, the use of the first personal and the third personal point of view helps the author to demonstrate the conflict between the personal experience of women and the social setting. It is a fragmented structure that does not fit the traditional linear plot of a novel, which in turn

allows her to focus on the themes of separatist feminism there and herein depict the psychological conditions, especially that of the woman, in response to political disappointment and emotional turmoil (Więckowska, 2013).

C. The Transition from Social to Radical Feminism

Lessing's exploration of individual female consciousness and societal pressures in later works like *The Grass Is Singing* (1950)

In her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), being already an important exercise in the freewheeling, psychological, and political exploration of women's frustrated desires and suppressed pain, Doris Lessing emphasizes the tragedy of Mary Turner. "There was a new air about her, as if she were at the same time possessed by and freed from something." Exploring issues of social expectations and politics of colonial Southern Rhodesia and exploring questions of self and female subjectivity. Mary could not control her essence and suppress herself to conform the calibrated role of the white woman within the patriarchal colonialism Anglia society.

In the novel, Mary's psychological fragmentation stands in her unhappy marriage to a poor farmer, Dick Turner, who she does not love. She suffers loneliness, discontentment and fear throughout the novel as a result of her black-and-white race struggle as well as her sexual attraction and rejection to her black servant, Moses. This working relationship represents the conflict going on in Mary's mind – the bigotry she at once learns but the unconscious lust she has for Moses that unsettles the racial norms of the period in America that cries out for identification instead of misidentification (Kulkarni, 2019; Greene, 2023).

The idea of memory as a type of plot element is an important one in Lessing's novel; through memory Mary is allowed to confront the constructed nature of her existence. Her early socialization experience characterized by an unstable home and negative racial and gender attitudes significantly constitute her false self.

This conflict over identity is a subtle portrayal of more generalized issues that women find themselves in every so often when trying to find their own voice and independence, which makes Mary's psychological collapse the culmination of such social trends (Więckowska, 2023).

Many critics have paid attention to the way in which *Through The Glass Is Singing* presents a South Africa in which colonial and patriarchal power restricts women's freedom, but none have traced the novel's psychological exploration of the consequences of such oppression on individual women's consciousness as fully as this analysis does.

Comparative Analysis of Woolf and Lessing

A. Shifts in Feminist Ideologies

How Woolf's modernist feminism compares with Lessing's more radical and complex post-war feminism.

Woolf's modernist feminism of the early twentieth century is quite different from Lessing's more militant and intricate post war feminism. Woolf's feminism is considered as part of the evolution of the Modernist since it has concentrated on subjectivity of women and on the freedom of ideas for women. Essays such as *A Room of One's Own* call for the financial autonomy and space, arguing that women need freedom of thought, (Marcus, 2010). Woolf employed stream of consciousness technique and criticized gender roles incubated by society but though she attempted to convey woman characters complexity, her intention wasn't to bring new political order.

While Lessing wrote her works post World War II where she dealt so much with the influence of politics and social change such as the decolonization process and feminism as well as socialist movements all over the world. Among them there are *The Golden Notebook* and *The Grass Is Singing* and all of her works are focused on individual's problems situated in a context of social conflict. Lessing's feminism is much more overt, encompassing both sexual

equality and oppression, racial prejudice, class differences and the paths to political disillusionment. Her notions of the fragmented narrative structures in her work, especially in *The Golden Notebook*, represent women's subjectivity struggling with multiple ideologies (Mullin, 2006; Więckowska, 2013).

If Woolf's position for female subjects is best embodied in the claim for an independent mind, Lessing's post-war feminism explores the politics of female subjects' trauma, making women both objects of post-war traumatization and critical agents of its recognition.

Similarities in their approaches to women's interiority, freedom, and identity

The work of Virginia Woolf being in pre-World War II and Doris Lessing in the post war post-colonial enshelled some similarities in their treatment of womanhood, feminism and female subjectivity of female subject. As with the schemes, both authors provide detailed views into the lives of their protagonists and the psychological turmoil of a woman in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Clarissa Dalloway in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*: Clarissa's interiority and the nature of her thoughts – her freedom, her identity, her desire. For example, Woolf applies the stream of consciousness technique in order to claim that women are subject and society is object and places women's interiority at the core of the work (Marcus, 2010). Woolf's women are trapped between the desire to be compliant wives and mothers or to pursue individual and intellectual freedom; in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf for example advocates for the need for women to have money and a room of their own to be able to write, that is, to create (Woolf, 1929).

Likewise, the works of Dorothea Lessing including *The Golden Notebook* of the author provide an depth insight into fractured self of women and their fight for their freedom in the male-dominated society. Thus, Lessing's novel also explores the psychological perspective of her female character, employing fragmentation

of the plot line. It is noteworthy that Anna Wulf's mental and spiritual 'nervous breakdown' in *The Golden Notebook*, as creatively as possible reflects Woolf's themes of freedom and personality.

The authors also describe women as conflicted human beings that are struggling between the imposed roles and their personal liberation. Hence, Woolf and Lessing engage in a feminist /re-creation/ of identity insofar as they present women in their individuality besides signaling about them as objects of social roles and functions.

B. Literary Techniques and Feminist Narratives

Comparison of Woolf's stream of consciousness with Lessing's fragmented narrative and psychological realism

Woolf and Lessing both employ techniques which greatly help them create profound and complicated prose focusing on characters' subjectivity: stream of consciousness for Woolf and a fragmented narrative for Lessing – both tools work differently due to the distinct priorities of post-feminist agenda.

Clarissa or Mrs. Dalloway in the novel bearing her name, and Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, conceive of Woolf's stream of consciousness as a stream without interruption—continuous. This technique interferes with the conventional straight-narrative approach to give a smooth representation of the inner experience, the *éclair* illumination, the *detente*, and even emotional reactions. The major themes of Woolf's work are the internal conflicts of individual women, or their attempts to find a way to balance their personal and public selves. In this manner the story is a way of presenting the issue of identity in form as well as content, how women specifically can be marginalized and oppressed in society (Marcus, 2010).

While Lessing uses fragmentation in *The Golden Notebook* in a way of form as a symbol of the psychological collapse of her protagonist, Anna Wulf. The fragmentation of the narrative into different colored notebooks represents

different aspects of Anna's life: her political opinions, her friends and her psychological well-being. This division of the structure reflects the main character's schizophrenia since Anna can neither combine all the aspects of her personality. So, although the style of the novel can be attributed to the psychological realism of the work, its fragmented structure exposes not only a breakdown of the subject but also a breakdown of society and politics (Więckowska, 2013).

Whereas Woolf strives to achieve the presentation of the uninterrupted and freely flowing train of thought, Lessing structures her novel in abrupt segments which are reminiscent of the just-named society. But both, do challenge patriarchy and offer a mirror to woman's subjection through identity, freedom and oppression in a new avatar.

C. Representation of Female Characters

Examination of how both authors depict women's roles within their specific socio-cultural and historical contexts

Virginia Woolf as well as Doris Lessing paint a picture of women and their roles from a particular socio-cultural and historical perspective though it appears that the plight of women in the two societies in which the two authors have placed their novels is fundamentally different.

Woolf, a modernist writing in the early twentieth century is concerned with psychological afflictions that women suffer, mainly when they are attempting to liberate themselves, intellectually from the confines of the male dominated society. Her novels: *The Waves*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *A Room of One's Own*, depict women as wife/mother who yearns to be free to write and to study. In the same capacity she unearths the burdens inflicted on women by the society; this is by endorsing the money and individual freedom as the pillars to women emancipation (Marcus, 2010). Woolf portrays how women are objected especially with their attendant males, due to the social roles of the early twentieth century women as

illustrated by Clarissa in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (Paterson, 2019).

After the Seven Years War, or in this case after *Seven Years* Lessing becomes more radical in her discourses on women and their place, which she wrote the novels such as *The Grass Is Singing* and *The Golden Notebook* that addresses problem of colonialism and failure of socialism in relation to self and societal breakdown. Thus, female characters in Lessing's work fight for liberation from the role assigned to them by the male stereotype of society they live in and for the sake of political disappointment and psychological dystopia. As it is with many other women of her time during colonialism, in *The Grass Is Singing*, Mary Turner is captured by society's racism and sexism; her suffering shows that a woman in a marriage and under economic and political oppression due to color and gender cannot succeed (Więckowska, 2023; Greene, 2023).

Woolf uses her historical and cultural realities to depict the freedom of women from their socially imposed roles, whereas Lessing does the same for gender, race, and political status in the mid-twentieth century. Though Lessing is also focused on the freedom of thoughts within the emerging feminism movement, she also highlights the aspects of gender, race, and political identification in the mid-twentieth century.

Comparison of their portrayals of women's struggles for autonomy and self-definition

Woolf and Lessing are both about women's struggle for liberation and acknowledgment of herself as one person and yet they are done in different ways because of different time setting.

The relationship between Woolf and female self-governance is directly connected with the independence in terms of intellect and capital. For example, in her novel *A Room of One's Own* (1929) she claimed that for women to write literature they need money and a room of their own, she insisted on having a space of one's own and the economic power to having it. One of her novels is *Mrs. Dalloway* in which she describes

the lives of women especially wives and mothers in society, but who are prisoners in their own homes and are thus unable to grow into persons. As viewed from Woolf's characters including, Clarissa Dalloway, the characters are trapped into performing their roles and the desire to transverse this role to have freedom (Paterson, 2019).

But the battle for liberation portrayed by Lessing is somehow rebellious and set in the backdrop of the social and political climate of mid-twentieth century as in *The Golden Notebook*, 1962. The political and psychological fragmentation is not only the problem of Lessing's characters but gender roles as well. This paper thus concludes that through the use of the four colored notebooks as a narrative style, Anna Wulf paints a picture of the plight that women had in the post-war Britain in the 1950s and 1960s to achieve the self-unity they yearned for. Lessing also raises such matters as political hopelessness, schizophrenia, and women's sexuality, and while the first two novels show a more covert defiance of patriarchy, the third is revolutionary, in harmony with the revolutionary feminism of the early seventies (Więckowska, 2013; Rubenstein, 2001).

However, Woolf deal more with the psychological aspects of the women who fight for individual freedom within a still male-dominated society while Lessing comments uses colonialism politics and personal breakdown and thus, she presents a more multi-faceted picture of women's freedom.

The Legacy of Woolf and Lessing in Feminist Literature

A. Influence on Later Feminist Writers

Woolf's impact on modernist feminist writers and Lessing's role in inspiring post-1960s feminist movements

Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing are the two writers that influenced the feminist movements of different periods of time. Woolf's contribution belongs to the tradition of modernist

feminism, and Lessing emerged as a figure of post-1960s feminism.

Woolf's Impact on Modernist Feminist Writers

Literary critic, Virginia Woolf, is defined as one of the pioneers of modernist feminism and her *Strike* a modernist feminist critic, however, could not be penned down without the mention of *A Room of One's Own* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. In as much as Woolf championed women's right to intellectual freedom she criticized the old structures that held women down and this stirred many writers during her time and the coming generations. She was able to keep writing about women's lives in a way that had not been done before, thanks to her narrative style, especially the stream of consciousness. Woolf's feminist politics which included demands for women's individual and financial liberation mirrored later feminist voices. Thus, she paved the way to the later post modern criticism especially in terms of gender and identity and the way they are imprisoning women through societal regulation (Marcus, 2006).

Lessing's Role in Post-1960s Feminist Movements

Doris Lessing was among the feminists who rose to fame after World War II, with her novel, *The Golden Notebook* published in 1962. Lessing's portrayal of the fragmented female consciousness and her mockery of patriarchal society as well as the deficiency of the socialist political movement, for this reason, Lessing became a distinguished component of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. Which in turn made *The Golden Notebook* the symbol of second-wave feminism as the book depicts the problems of women's individual and social emancipation, their search for their identity, and ways of active participation in political life. Lessing's female characters are in search of private and political freedom, but what they are faced with is disappointments inherent in a man's world (Więckowska, 2013).

Her work impacted post-1960s Feminist movements because she dealt with societal and

political concerns that are annexed with Feminism including race, class, and mental health. By tackling the issue from social practice, Lessing was not only a literature but also a feminist, as she despised personal and political frameworks that defined women's roles in society (Rubenstein, 2001).

While Woolf concentrated on the inner and educative liberation of women, Lessing went further than her by showing how politics and society hinder the wholeness of female identity and neither making her work invaluable to modern feminism movements.

B. Evolution of Feminist Narratives in Literature

How their works continue to shape feminist literature and literary criticism today

Feminism as a cultural discourse was transformed throughout the development of female narratives throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing were the leading figures in these regards, the legacy of which remains important to the discipline of feminist literature and criticism today.

Woolf being a modernist writer, she showed ways for a future feminist literature in two of her significant works; *A Room of One's Own* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf insisted on the necessity of complete spiritual and civil liberty for women; she also inaugurates a way of narrating that would permit a more profound discussion about female individuality and freedom. Her work still relevant to feminism today mainly because her writing deconstructs the gender roles that had been placed in the society and demands space for women's intellect. The Woolf's feminism is still important in the discourses of gender, identity and literature; it lays down the foundation of how modern feminists writers address issues of independence and individualism (Marcus, 2006).

While Sandra Gilbert and Susan Friedelman simply gave a critical analysis of female poetic language, Doris Lessing's works especially *The Golden Notebook* typified the more militant post-1960s feminism. The breaking up of the

novel into segments, attention to women's psychological, emotional and political problems, the criticism of male chauvinism, and depicting the women's fight all reflected the concern of the second wave of feminism which also dealt with race, class, and politics. In this respect, her depiction of women's disappointment in both the private and public spheres has remained influential to the scholars and writers of feminism in trying to understand the modern construction of the female subject (Więckowska, 2013). Thus, Lessing's critical approach to the gender stereotyping, innovative and psychologically moving plots and characterization, and innovations in form called upon future feminists to embrace gender, psychological and formal heterogeneity with the portrayal of women's reality (Woodiwiss et al., 2017).

Presently, modern feminism is still developing, and the approaches begun by Woolf and Lessing are now fundamental aspects of transformation process of feminist literary traditions and women's roles, freedom, and subjectivity in the tradition of literary and cultural analysis.

C. Reflection on the progression from early feminist literature to modern feminist discourses

These original works of literature to the modern discourses bear a close resemblance themselves to the subject – feminism evolving not only in ideas but as a broader social justice concept, which is far more varied, intricate, international and multilayered than the first works of pre-second wave feminism.

Women's literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries major concerns include suffrage, legal status, and education. The first women writers to embark upon the principles of feminist criticism were Virginia Wollstonecraft as they helped women to be intellectually free and raise voices against the conventions imposing upon women. Authors like Woolf in her books like *A Room of One's Own* championed for women to have their own money and in these ways, Woolf

and other such writers provided frameworks what would later become early feminism literary critics that rebel against patriarchal values (Mullin 2006).

During the second wave of the feminism movement which was in the 1960s and 1970s, the movement became even more radical in its approach and a sought to bring about change on wider societal issues such as abortion rights, women's employment rights and freedom of women's sexuality. This change is well illustrated by Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, which the focused on the dissolution of female self in the midst of individual and political crises. Continuing from Lessing's work, feminists in the post 1960s wrote and thought about not only gender subjection but also matters of race, class, and political disillusionment (Więckowska, 2013).

Modern feminist movement has embraced intersectionality as the concept aims to group the women's oppression in regard to other forms of oppression such as black people, gay and lesbian, and women of lower class. This evolution has been supplemented with impacts of the international feminism revolutions that sought to embrace cultural diversity and struggle of the women of diverse cultures and economic statuses (Fraser, 1997). In today's world, the modern affiliation to these historical movements is still felt in Feminist discourse with literature used to discover new narratives of identity, resistance and power (Woodiwiss et al., 2017).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be safe to say the Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing are two

renowned figures in feminist literature. Woolf may have employed modernist strategies and methods of analysis and provided a serious concentration on the individual and academic freedom for women that paved for the early foundations for the feminist criticism in the early twentieth century. Her books called *A Room of One's Own* and *Mrs. Dalloway* remain relevant today, as they raise issues connected with desire of woman's gender and search for the freedom in the framework of masculine domination.

On the other hand, it was Doris Lessing, a powerful and political voice in the post-war period, who practiced radical kind of feminism. Thus, in her two novels, *The Golden Notebook* and *The Grass Is Singing*, the author analyzed the condition of the fragmentation of the feminine subject's identity, the effects of oppression on the psyche, race, class, and gender. Lessing moved the concerns of the women's liberation literature further and offered more diverse political, social, and even psychological views on women in the new world.

Woolf and Lessing's contrasting but collaborative positions thereby influenced the overall arc of the feminist project in twentieth-century British literary studies. It is similar to gender, identity and societal confinements as ongoing concerns in contemporary feminism where their legacies are referenced by even current feminist writers and critics alike. Modernist autobiographical writing by Woolf and Lessing is the predisposition of these woman writers for exploration of female consciousness that calls for a reader's mature understanding of woman's subjectivity and voice to change the world, opening a new page in the development of Feminist art.

WORKS CITED

-
- AlGweiri, H. (2017). Virginia Woolf's Representation of Women: A Feminist Reading of "The Legacy". *English Language and Literature Studies*. DOI: 10.5539/ells.v7n1p120
- Bracke, M. A. (2015). Our bodies, ourselves: The transnational connections of 1970s Italian and Roman feminism. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 50(3), 560-580. DOI: 10.1177/0022009415571515.
- Brazil, K. (2016). *Doris Lessing and the Forming of History*. University of Southampton.

- Brewster, S. (2016). *Doris Lessing and the Forming of History*. SpringerLink.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9780203824979
- Castro, O., & Ergun, E. (2017). *Feminisms in translation, translation in feminism*. Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781315182270
- Chatterjee, R. (2020). Undisciplining Victorian Studies. *Victorian Studies*, 62(3), 369-391. DOI: 10.1017/vic.2020.14
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9780203900055
- De Gay, J. (2006). *Virginia Woolf's novels and the literary past*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Fernald, A. E. (2006). *Virginia Woolf: Feminism and the Reader*. Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1057/9780230600874
- Fiveable (2022). *Virginia Woolf: Influence on Later Writers*.
- Fong, I. (2022). Woolf, Virginia, Mrs. Dalloway. In: Tambling, J. (eds) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Urban Literary Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-62419-8_108
- Fox, R., Rudin, S., & Daldry, S. (2022). *The Hours [Motion Picture]*. Miramax Films.
- Fraser, N. (1997). *Reconsidering Feminism Since 1945*. Feminist Review.
- Gibbons, F. (2001). Lay off men, Lessing tells feminists. *The Guardian*. Available from: The Guardian Archive
- Goldman, J. (2013). *Virginia Woolf and the Aesthetics of Modernism*. Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1057/9781137292179_4
- Greene, G. (2023). *Ontological Insecurity in Doris Lessing's The Grass Is Singing*. SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities.
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/springerlink>
- Humm, M. (2004). *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography and Cinema*. Edinburgh University Press.
- James, S. (2003). *Feminisms. The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*, 493-516. <https://doi.org/10.1017/chol9780521563543.025>
- Jenkins, A. (2023). *Virginia Woolf, Literary Materiality, and Feminist Aesthetics: From Pen to Print*. Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-32491-8
- Knellwolf, C. (2001). The history of feminist criticism. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 191-206. <https://doi.org/10.1017/chol9780521300148.017>
- Kulkarni, V. S. (2019). *Analysis of Mary Turner in The Grass Is Singing*. Research Chronicler.
- Lessing, D. (1989). *The Golden Notebook*. London: Paladin.
- Li, X. (2015). *Analysis of The Golden Notebook*.
- Marcus, L. (2006). *Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf*. In S. Roe & S. Sellers (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (pp. 209-244). Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/CCOL0521623936.011
- Marcus, L. (2010). *Woolf's feminism and feminism's Woolf*. Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/CCOL9780521896948.008
- Mullin, K. (2006). *Modernisms and feminisms*. Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/CCOL0521807069.007
- Paterson, L. (2019). *Peripheral Voices: A Feminist Reading of Mrs Dalloway*. Nottingham Trent University.
- Rubenstein, R. (2001). *Yearning and Nostalgia: Fiction and Autobiographical Writings of Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing*. Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1057/9780312299750_2
- Sergeant, D. (2016). *Doris Lessing and the Forming of History*. Cambridge University Press.
- Skirec, 2018. *Modernist Techniques in Woolf's Writing*.
- Snaith, A. (2000). *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. (2015). In L. Disch & M. Hawkesworth (Eds.), *Oxford Handbooks Online*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.001.0001>
- Watkins, S. (2007). Remembering home: Nation and identity in the recent writing of Doris Lessing. *Feminist Review*, 85(1), 97-115. DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400321

- Więckowska, K. (2013). A post-battle landscape: Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* and *The Cleft*. SpringerLink. DOI: 10.1057/9781137292179_4
- Woodiwiss, J., Smith, K., & Lockwood, K. (2017). *Introduction: Doing Feminist Narrative Research*. Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1057/978-1-137-48568-7_1
- Woolf, V. (1929). *A room of one's own*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Woolf, V. (2005). *A Room of One's Own*. Orlando: Harcourt.