

“It’s odd that there should be no ending”: A Reading of Narrative Form in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* and Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall**

Dr. Madhvi Zutshi, Associate Professor in English, S.G.T.B. Khalsa College, University of Delhi, Delhi (India). Email: madhvi@sgtbkhalsa.du.ac.in

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2025.25.1.1>

Abstract

*This article examines novels by two postwar British women writers, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* and Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall*, within the context of twentieth-century feminism and its experiments with a postmodernist form of writing. The article examines how these two novels, in different ways, use strategies derived from both realist and postmodernist forms to achieve two ends: first, to reach out to a popular female readership by depicting the everyday challenges faced by women both inside the home and outside the household, and second, to subvert patriarchal ideas with innovative uses of a self-reflexive narrative form. I demonstrate that there are diverse and rich possibilities in these mid-twentieth-century narratives that freely avail of several realist and postmodernist strategies to raise feminist questions and offer answers.*

Keywords: *Golden Notebook*, *Waterfall*, postmodernist writing, feminism, Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble

Introduction

Discussions on the question of a feminist aesthetic are often polarized around a debate on realist versus experimental art. Advocates of realism argue for the importance of texts which can authentically communicate female experience, while some critics insist upon the inherently conservative and covert ideological nature of a realist style. Critics of the realist style suggest the alternative of an experimental feminist aesthetic which will subvert existing codes of representation. Carol Watts, in her essay “Cultural Choice and the Woman Writer,” exposes the sterility of such a debate on the choice of a particular aesthetic form. Watts exposes the inadequacies of both models, showing “on the one hand, an Anglo-American model that retains the notion of female authorship in its focus on the realist text as an unmediated expression of experience but which fails to deal with textual signification; on the other, a French modernist formalism that foregrounds literariness and issues of representation, but which erases the question of agency altogether” (Watts 88). Just as textual indeterminacy is not necessarily subversive of patriarchal structures of representation, realist conventions are not necessarily more complicit with the status quo. In the two novels I examine in this article – Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall* (1969) – we see a complex and successful interweaving of realist and postmodernist styles.

Postmodernist theorists question not only certain representations of reality but also any certainty of an objective reality. For example, Patricia Waugh in *Metafiction* says that “fiction can never imitate or ‘represent’ the world but always imitates or represents the discourses which in turn construct the world” (100). However, some feminists attempt to rescue literary realism from its alleged bad reputation. Emilie Walezak notes how realist novels have been read as colluding

* **Article History:** Full Article Received on 31 May 2025. Peer Review completed on 18th June 2025, Article Accepted on 25 June, 2025. First published: September 2025. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

with a political conservatism. She argues against such a connection and shows that writers, like A.S. Byatt in her early work and Zadie Smith, engage feminism within realist novels, noting that they took inspiration from realist novels by George Eliot and Iris Murdoch. Janet Montefiore also counters the idea of realist fiction as “bourgeois pathology” (198) and demonstrates that women writers, from George Eliot in the nineteenth century to Sylvia Townsend Warner in the twentieth century, can reveal the political agency of characters even when using accessible narrative methods of realism. Accessibility becomes a key positive feature of realism for these feminist critics. Carol Watts points out that texts, which concentrate on women's lives without the complication of a ‘difficult’ narrative form, tend to reach a wider popular audience. In the context of feminism, such an issue is important, otherwise a ‘revolutionary’ feminist, yet a solely experimental novel may be perceived as radical only by academic experts. It is only in being read as *literature* that the formal dimension of the text becomes the primary object of the reader's attention, allowing for a receptivity of textual ambiguities and the possibility of multiple re-readings.

It is important to note that both Lessing and Drabble were popular in Britain because, besides using subversive narrative techniques to negate the sense of inevitable reality, their novels grappled with the ground realities that contemporary women struggled against. They were able to realistically depict the contradictions and self-destructive choices that women can make. Rita Felski suggests that “the representation of female experience, by whatever narrative strategy, is a legitimate cultural need” (13). For the common reader, what may be more influential is how the women characters cope, for example, with extra-marital relationships, and would probably miss the feminist implications of postmodern strategies. In this sense, the social function of texts cannot be ignored in the context of reception.

Both Lessing and Drabble successfully combine realist writing with postmodernist strategies in interesting ways. They foreground the literariness of the texts and thus, by implication, the constructed nature of reality. They reject the idea that external reality cannot be represented, but do not yield to abandoning a search for certain ethical standards, albeit through constant questioning. Feminism seeks to expose the illusory nature of patriarchal discourse. But it can go beyond a strategy of negation to the development of alternative cultural and political positions. Carol Watts points out that “while it is evidently important to challenge the gender bias of particular forms of philosophical universalisms, values such as reason, truth, freedom and objectivity are no less necessary to women's movements that organize in the name of justice and equality, knowing in their various ways the *truths of oppression*” (87). Both *The Golden Notebook* and *The Waterfall* dramatize the possibility of change not by simply “casting off an ideology or learning phrases about it”, but as Raymond Williams puts it, by “confronting hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships” (212). On the other hand, postmodernist strategies help in undermining the normativity of a socially-constructed reality and the protagonist's negotiation with it. If subjectivity itself is a social construct, any exploration of the processes by which it is constructed would be an implicit analysis of the dominant ideology of that society. Molly Hite points out how postmodernism shares an agenda with feminism -- “because feminism has a stake in the undoing of hierarchy and containment, [some of the] writing described as avant-garde or postmodernist can be seen as feminist” (16).

The Golden Notebook: There is no truth apart from the telling

The Golden Notebook has ensured for Lessing her place as one of the foremost women writers of a radical literary tradition (Rowena-Epstein 2016). In Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, we see how the ‘truth’ is not a fixed reality that lurks behind the distortions of narrative form but a product of ‘tellings and retellings.’ In this novel, there is no truth apart from the telling, no viewpoint that makes it possible to see experience holistically. For instance, the climactic

section in which the central character Anna Wulf's psychological 'breakdown' occurs is itself divided into two versions that cannot be reconciled. Anna and her lover Saul Green's interactions are described in the Blue and Golden notebooks in a lengthy, passionate first-person narrative, followed by a shorter, more detached third-person narrative in the "Free Women" section. Both are versions of a single story. But what is important about the accounts is not that one contains the other, but that each version is about the same event of a social and personal breakdown.

Despite the shifts in narration with each version seemingly questioning the other in the different notebooks, what remains in *The Golden Notebook* is the delineation of portraits of contemporary women with varying degrees of 'freedom'. The novel shows how women may choose to be economically independent or free of marital bonds, and yet may not be really independent of patriarchal subjugation. Due to the breakdown of certain traditional values like the sanctity of marriage, women are, in a sense, forced to cope in a 'free' state and confront new aspects of freedom with unease. These free women cannot derive satisfaction from defying traditions because certain privileges of security are withheld from them. That is perhaps why all the women characters in the novel – Anna, Marion, Ella, and Julia – reveal a parasitism in their sexual relationships.

The problem of social conditioning is an important feminist issue that Doris Lessing depicts without any illusions of an easy change. This is because, as Kate Fulbrook puts it, "women are born into social structures which place boundaries around them making it hard to alter who and what they are. Women, like men, are irretrievably creatures of history" (11). Maggie Humm in her book, *Border Traffic*, comments on how the different notebooks in Lessing's novel demonstrate the inability of political or historical representations to adequately categorise women (52). In keeping with the multiple structure of realities in the different notebooks, there is no 'normal' femininity offered in *The Golden Notebook*. Lessing skilfully avoids the closure demanded of a traditional linear narrative, which often closes off options for the women characters. Molly Hite comments that "in the absence of a gap through which the future can flow in a different shape, there can be no future" (70). Lessing refuses the inevitable conclusion of a linear plot that resolves itself so economically that the conclusion is implied from the start.

But Lessing's unswerving belief in social change is made possible by her depiction of the individual as unfixed and always in a process. This is clearly brought out in Anna's sessions with her psychoanalyst, Mrs. Marks. Anna challenges Mrs. Marks's Jungian proclivities and the rigid humanism that is the premise of her therapy. Human nature is an immutable essence that can only take on a limited number of pre-existing forms, according to Mrs. Marks' theory. However, Anna views individuals as difficult to categorize because they are difficult to contain. Anna works beyond the concept of a stable 'real' self. She desires to separate in herself what is "old and cyclic, the recurring history from what is new, what I feel or think that might be new" (*Golden Notebook* 416).

The section *Free Women* in the novel constitutes the more traditional narrative form where an omniscient narrator and the use of free indirect discourse convey what might have been a novel in itself. The title of the section is a term that Anna and Molly imagine other people saying about them as single women. Lessing punctures the traditionally seamless narrative style of realist novels by interspersing the different notebooks in the Free Women sections. This is done not to create fragments but to simulate the different parts of the character that may get erased in a traditionally unified narrative form. In her Preface to the 1972 edition, Lessing notes with regret that in the reviews and critical attention to the novel, more attention was given to questions of gender, and less to the form of the novel which was as important to her (13).

The Metafictional form of *The Waterfall*

Margaret Drabble is perceived as a novelist who is not usually experimental with the novel form. According to Miho Nagamatsu, although Drabble is said to have initially opposed experimental writing, by her fifth novel *The Waterfall*, Drabble felt she needed to experiment with a mix of first-person and third-person narrators in a self-reflexive style in order to explore the heroine more deeply (387). However, despite this narrative experimentation, the success of her novel *The Waterfall* in England has often been attributed to her supposedly cautious feminism. In an interview with Diana Cooper-Clark in 1986, Drabble explained her position on feminism thus: "I'm a 'cautious feminist' in that I think that there is no way of producing revolutions overnight. In order for a change to work, it has to be slow" (Drabble qtd. in Cooper-Clark interview, 47). But what makes Drabble's women characters appealing is the painful process through which they try to discard conventional norms in the novels. A need to find a new moral schema is a result of Jane's close questioning and subsequent rejection of the values inherited from her middle-class, Church of England parents, whose values are "monogamy, marrying for love, free will, the possibility of moderation of the passions, the virtues of reason and civilisation" (*Waterfall* 53). Jane's view of events as born out of socially conditioned reasons keeps it more in line with the view of social determinism rather than the illusion of free choice: "Grace and miracles. I don't care much for my terminology. Though at least it lacks that most disastrous concept, the concept of free will... Necessity is my God. Necessity lay with me when James did" (*Waterfall* 52). In an interview with John Hannoy, Margaret Drabble talks of life being largely controlled by others: "this is what's so interesting, the interconnection between one's own control and other people's control over one" (Drabble, quoted in Hannoy interview, 149), and Drabble desists from giving an unrealistically easy autonomy to her protagonist in the novel.

Jane's sexual awakening and growth in the novel because of her relationship with James, would seem to put women in the position of sex objects and within the cultural scenario of feminine dependency. But Jean Wyatt cogently argues how Jane in fact becomes a sexual *subject* through this affair: "The sexual experience that gradually enables Jane to credit her own sensations is a corrective to the abstractions of romantic love. By putting her back in touch with her own immediate sensations, sex reopens the channel to all the varied concrete experiences of everyday life" (Wyatt 130). The complexity of Jane's consciousness reveals James to be merely one instrument amongst others, like her creative writing or her role as a mother, in her evolving self-construction.

Margaret Drabble did not endorse the institution of marriage as it existed. For her, "this institution is at fault. This is one of the things that novels can explore without any preconceived ideas as to what the answer should be" (Drabble, Cooper Clark interview, 51). In Drabble's novel *The Waterfall*, the heroine Jane sinks into a state of inertia after her marriage to Malcolm: "Somehow the fact of being married took all life from me -- it reduced me from the beginning to inactivity" (*Waterfall* 105). Later in the novel, Jane experiences and articulates the social constraints imposed by marriage: "All women are isolated, to some extent, by marriage and small children" (*Waterfall* 114). But in the final section of the novel, Jane does find satisfaction in the most conventional settings – in motherhood and love. Drabble sees sexual and maternal instincts as enhancing rather than diminishing women's energies, which is a fundamental difference between her and Doris Lessing, who views sexual relationships as problematic and often debilitating. But it is in Drabble's self-reflexive narration that all certainties of plot and reliability of a narrator are undone.

Drabble has referred to Doris Lessing as "both mother and seer", and nowhere is her indebtedness more apparent than in the metafictional form of *The Waterfall*. Her remarkable interrogation of narrative makes the novel open-ended. Drabble's deliberate dialogizing in the novel makes *The Waterfall* a polyphonic text. The constant switch from third-person account to

first-person narration often reveals the inadequacies of either account. In one such sudden switch in narrative, she discounts all that has so far absorbed the readers: "It won't of course, do: as an account, I mean, of what took place. I tried for so long to reconcile, to find a style that would express, to find a system that would excuse me, to construct a new meaning, having kicked the old one out, but I couldn't do it, so here I am, resorting to that old broken medium" (*Waterfall* 48). By making the reader part of the production of meaning and by revealing the contradictions involved in those processes, *The Waterfall* can be seen as a writerly text: "In fact I have already told two lies about this event, and who can tell if I will now risk a true account?" (*Waterfall* 117).

Like Lessing, who does not impose closure in her novel *The Golden Notebook*, Drabble too in *The Waterfall* refuses to conclude the novel with the conventional ending of a romance plot. Gayle Greene observes how the romance plot "which centres on love and concludes with the woman's marriage or death, reinforces particularly conservative assumptions about woman, the 'happy ending' signifying her integration into society, the unhappy ending signifying her failure to negotiate the teleological love relation" (Greene 51). In Drabble's novel, Jane resigns herself to the ambiguities of her experience: "There isn't any conclusion. A death would have been the answer but nobody died... We should have died, I suppose... It isn't artistic to linger on like this. It isn't moral either ... It's odd that there should be no ending" (*Waterfall* 249). In the release from the telos the story was moving to, Drabble avoids sealing the fate of the heroine, Jane. As Greene observes, "Drabble's re-working of narrative convention may not be as explicitly revolutionary as Lessing's in *The Golden Notebook* but in its subversion of the romantic tradition that has defined women so problematically, it transforms an 'old story' to 'something new'" (Greene 64-65).

This kind of self-conscious fiction by Drabble received mixed reviews at the time. Jane Campbell noted the preoccupation with story-telling and Drabble's resemblance to George Eliot. Stovel notes the inconclusive endings of all her novels as a refusal of closure for the heroines, as Drabble chose open-ended endings without any conclusive event like marriage or death. But in a review of the novel for the New York Times, Maureen Howard saw Drabble's novel as falling short because of this self-consciousness and declared that there was a lack of artistry holding the novel in shape.

Conclusion

Both *The Golden Notebook* and *The Waterfall* reveal significant ways of negotiation on the part of both writers in countering social conditioning about gender in their experimental novels. This is done primarily through demonstrating a plural subjectivity – in showing the self as an ongoing process – and also the significant fact of both the women protagonists in these novels being *writers*. The latter point is important because in 'writing' their lives, they make possible a space for change. For instance, in *The Waterfall*, Jane says that "I will reconstitute my life in a form that I can accept, a fictitious form. If I need a morality, I will create one; a new virtue. If I need to understand what I am doing, if I cannot act without my own approbation--then I will invent a morality that condones me. Though by doing so, I risk condemning all that I have been" (*Waterfall* 55).

Both writers show that even though we are largely constructed in society through its language, we are not doomed by it. But ideology is also shown to be all-encompassing, making it a challenge to offer a perspective outside prevailing ideologies. In his theoretical writings on the subject, Althusser cites educational institutions in particular as pretending to occupy a position devoid of ideology. They teach a form of humanism approved by the ruling (bourgeois) elites. Doris Lessing's awareness of such a problem is reflected in her Preface to *The Golden Notebook*: "As in the political sphere the child is taught that he is free, a democrat, with a free will and a free mind, makes his own decisions. At the same time, he is a prisoner of the assumptions and

dogmas of his time, which he does not question, because he has never been told they exist” (Lessing, Preface 11). The partial solution she offers is to make people aware of the construction of social structures: “Ideally, what should be said to every child, repeatedly, is something like this: ‘You are in the process of being indoctrinated. We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination. What you are being taught here is an amalgam of current prejudices and the choices of this particular culture. The slightest look at history will show how impermanent these must be. Those that stay must remember that they are being moulded and patterned to fit into the narrow and particular needs of this particular society” (Lessing, *Preface* 11). Lessing’s powerful injunctions have been praised but have also been met with scepticism about the success of such reflection (Darlington 2016). Yet her commitment to questioning certainties remains relevant today, as does her reliance on imaginative writing as a counter to political limits.

In our context, the problem of agency has been articulated best by Judith Butler through her idea of gender roles as performative in action. Her pioneering work on gender shifted the grounds of change from a nature vs. culture debate to show how the very idea of nature is culturally constructed. In her early essay entitled “Variations on Sex and Gender,” Butler explored the ambiguity in the notion of ‘becoming’ with its dual sense of both ‘being constructed’ and ‘constructing oneself’. In other words, gender identity for her was not simply a matter of cultural construction but also a volitional set of acts. Yet she is conscious of the problem in simply asserting that men and women are free to choose their gender roles. Butler points out that “an individual is clearly not able to interpret her gender as she pleases in an act of free invention, but must comply with those social constraints which seek to define her within binary gender norms” (84). Doris Lessing and Margaret Drabble demonstrate how negotiating gender identity is a complex and contradictory process if we define culture as the forms, beliefs, stories, and images that have their roots in institutions and social relationships. The novels of Doris Lessing and Margaret Drabble have aged well and are still relevant for our times. Wisker and Bibby have traced the influence of writing from the twentieth century on contemporary writers especially on themes like women and politics, and women’s negotiations with family. Both writers continued to write well into the 21st century and K. Sako observes the significance of these postwar British writers on themes like ageing and care in our times (2023). Drabble has written on more global issues recently and continues to be relevant to contemporary politics (Talla 2023). Humm notes how early feminist literature like Lessing’s and Drabble’s broke genre boundaries and paved the way for new representations of women that remain relevant, as questions about cultural identities resurface time and again (2024).

It is clear that constant reinterpretation of cultural norms and social constraints, evident in both *The Golden Notebook* and *The Waterfall*, may lend itself to a politicisation of personal life. It can show how norms are a matter of invention and thus open to alternative choices. As Drabble observes about the possibilities within fiction while explicitly drawing on Lessing for inspiration -- “In a way, fiction is a search for an alternative life. Doris Lessing says in *The Golden Notebook* that we’re all looking for the beautiful and impossible blueprint and it’s the search that’s important. In fiction, you can create things that you can’t necessarily create in life. It is a search for a new model” (Drabble qtd. in Cooper-Clark, 52). For both Margaret Drabble and Doris Lessing, literature is an important cultural site providing a forum where social experience can be worked through and, to some extent, collectively possessed.

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Monthly Review Press, New York, 1977.
 Arnett, James. “What’s Left of Feelings? The Affective Labor of Politics in Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*.” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2018, pp. 77–95.
 Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1949.

- Butler, Judith. "Variations on Sex and Gender." *Feminism as Critique*. Ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987.
- Darlington, Joseph. "An Education in Impermanence: Historical Intermittency and Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*." *Textual Practice*, vol. 30, no. 5, 2016, pp. 933–948, doi:10.1080/0950236X.2015.1084367.
- Drabble, Margaret. *The Waterfall*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1965.
- . Interview with Diana Cooper-Clark. *Interviews with Contemporary Novelists*. Ed. Diana Cooper-Clark. Macmillan Press, Houndsmills, 1986.
- . "Margaret Drabble: An Interview." Interview with John Hannoy. *Twentieth-Century Literature*, vol. 33, no. Summer, 1987.
- Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Hutchinson Radius, London, 1989.
- Fullbrook, Kate. *Free Women: Ethics and Aesthetics in Twentieth Century Women's Fiction*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York, 1990.
- Greene, Gayle. "Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall*: New System, New Morality." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 51, 1988.
- Hite, Molly. *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives*. Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, 1989.
- Howard, Maureen. Review of *The Waterfall*, by Margaret Drabble. *The New York Times Book Review*, 23 Nov., 1969.
- Humm, Maggie. *Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Women Writers*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991.
- . "Literature or Feminism?" Eds. Rachel Carroll and Fiona Tolan. *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Feminism*, Routledge, London, 2024.
- Kennedy-Epstein, Rowena. "The Politics of Form: The Golden Notebook and Women's Radical Literary Tradition." *Doris Lessing and the Forming of History*. Ed. Kevin Brazil, David Sergeant, and Tom Sperlinger. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2016.
- Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. Paladin, London, 1962.
- Moan Rowe, Margaret. "Margaret Drabble." *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel, 1945-2000*. Ed. Brian W. Shaffer. Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2005.
- Montefiore, Janet. "Listening to Minna: realism, feminism and the politics of reading." *Paragraph*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1991, pp. 197-216.
- Nagamatsu, Miho. "The Development of Writing Techniques in M. Drabble's Works Focusing on *The Waterfall* (1969) and *The Seven Sisters* (2002)." *New Writing*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2014, pp. 387–395.
- Rashid, Talla A. *Gender, culture and social change in the fiction of Margaret Drabble*. Anglia Ruskin Research Online (ARRO). Thesis. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/aru.23766936.v1>, 2023.
- Sako, K. 'Ageing and Care in Contemporary Women's Writing: Doris Lessing's *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* and Margaret Drabble's *The Pure Gold Baby*'. Eds. G. Wisker, L. Bibby, H. Yeandle, *Legacies and Lifespans in Contemporary Women's Writing*. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.
- Stovel, Nora Foster. "A Feminine Ending?: Symbolism as Closure in the Novels of Margaret Drabble". *ESC*. Volume 15, Number 1, March 1989.
- Walezak, Emilie. *Rethinking Contemporary British Women's Writing: Realism, Feminism, Materialism*. Bloomsbury, London, 2022.
- Watts, Carol. "Releasing Possibility into Form: Cultural Choice and the Woman Writer." *New Feminist Discourses*. Ed. Carol Armstrong. Routledge, London, 1992.
- Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction*. Methuen, London, 1984.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977.
- Wisker, G., Bibby, L. "Introduction: Writing Back and Looking Forward." Eds. G. Wisker, L. Bibby, H. Yeandle. *Legacies and Lifespans in Contemporary Women's Writing*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2023.
- Wyatt, Jean. *Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women's Reading and Writing*. University of Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1990.