

Exploration of Postmodernism Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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Abstract

It has become a virtual commonplace of contemporary criticism that postmodern thought challenges the Enlightenment view of human reason, especially its assumption of a stable, autonomous subject capable of directing the forces of history. For this reason, some theorists see postmodernism as pivoting on a reformulation of anti-Enlightenment thought that surfaced during the nineteenth-century and which remained active throughout the modernist period. From this perspective, literary modernism's ambivalent stance toward the integrity of the subject is in part the legacy of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud-- precisely those nineteenth-century thinkers who situate much of the postmodern project. Regarding all the previous criticisms, this study clearly assumes that postmodernism employs quite different critical methodologies from those of modernism. This study, particularly, examines Doris Lessing's major work for which she was awarded Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007, *The Golden Notebook* (1962), in which postmodern elements especially Lyotard's exists. Ultimately, the paper hails this most influential novel as a postmodern masterpiece.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, Enlightenment, Postmodernism, Fragmentation, Chaos

The Enlightenment was a Europe-wide phenomenon, in philosophy, literature, language, art, religion, and political theory, which lasted from around 1680 until the end of the 18th century. Conventionally, the Enlightenment has been called the —age of reason|. For the Enlightenment thinker, truth was available and human reason was the tool by which this knowledge had been achieved and by further application of human reason, one day the whole truth would be available to the human mind. Traditional theory desires for a unitary and totalizing truth. During this time philosophers believed in the world's own story.

Moreover, postmodernist thought rejects universals, the whole truth, unitary and totalization. This is the fragmentation of truth. Postmodernist art, architecture and literature emphasize the lack of any unifying form or method in art. Postmodernist art revels in the fragmentation of artistic standards (Luntley, 1995). Hence, the postmodern literature world is the representation of chaos and fragmentation. In postmodern novels, chaos, fragmentation, and breakdown are in both their contents and structures. Lyotard, too sees society as fragmented. The postmodern novelists would appreciate the readers to explore fragmented society and human beings. Postmodern novelists reject any conventional story-telling and emphasize that there are no pre-established ways for writing. The process of story-telling is different for postmodern novelists. They are interested in discovering new ways for writing. A liberating way of story-telling is clear for postmodern novelists.

In this novel, Lessing avoids being committed to conventional storytelling, and tends to regard unconventional and new ways for story-telling. This essay discusses Anna's skepticism about the Communist Party, as illustrated primarily in the Red Notebook. Doris Lessing, the Noble Prize winner in literature 2007, the greatest English novelist of the postwar period, born in Persia (now Iran) to British parents in 1919. She has written a lot of plays, short stories and novels. *The Grass is singing*, which appeared in 1950, is her first novel. As she has told her interviewers, it is not her first attempt at the novel; she has destroyed the manuscripts of two earlier works. During the 50s and 60s, *The Grass is singing* was followed by the five volumes of her Children of Violence series: *Martha Quest* (1952); *A Proper Marriage* (1954); *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958); *Landlocked* (1956), and *The Four-Gated City* (1969). Also, she has written several other novels and a series of short stories. *To Room Nineteen* (1978) and *Through the Tunnel* (1990) are her best-known short stories. One of her plays is *Play with a Tiger*: a play in three acts.

The main focus of the present essay, as mentioned before, is on Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, which will be closely analyzed in the following paragraphs. Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) opens with a —Free Women section: Free Women is a conventional short novel that is divided into five sections and separated by stages of the four Notebooks; Black, Red, Yellow and Blue, and *The Golden Notebook* appears near the book's end. In these notebooks Anna keeps writing of events in her life. The Black Notebook is a record of various aspects of Anna's bestselling first novel, *Frontiers of war*; The Red one is about her experiences and dissatisfaction with the British Communist Party; The Yellow one is about her romantic novel called *The Shadow of the Third*; in this notebook she writes about Ella which is the mirror of her life; and the Blue one is Anna's diary of her life.

The Golden Notebook is one of the best-loved and most influential of Lessing's novels that invites her readers to discover postmodern fragmented society. When Anna Wulf, the writer

and the protagonist, in the beginning of the novel says —everything is cracking up, it implies that the hope of referring to unity has almost disappeared, and chaos has an opportunity to emerge. Also, Lessing mentions in the preface of *The Golden Notebook*; —its theme is breakdown and fragmentation. Chaos and fragmentation are in agreement with the novel. Anna expresses that writing four notebooks instead of one notebook is just because of chaos. She senses incoherent in both her life and personality. Given different colors for notebooks shows her fragmented personality in the society.

In the Red Notebook, Anna explains she hates joining anything, which seems to her incompatible. In lieu of being satisfied with joining the Communist Party, always she is thinking about leaving the Party. According to Marx, —the aim of a Communist society is to procure genuine freedom, genuine individuality and humanity, genuine democracy (Habib, 2008, 534). But, affirmative political beliefs of becoming a communist in Central Africa play virtually no part here for Anna. She attacks Communism at the beginning of talking with Molly about joining the Party.

In this part, Anna criticizes the very possibility of real freedom and democracy in the Communist Party. She expresses that the Communist Party is too dishonest upon the individual. Although the Communist Party invites their members in the society to express their ideas and doubts freely, but it is not the truth. In fact, they are dishonest toward people. In spite of thinking about leaving the Party, Anna is still in it. So, it is her ambivalent aspect about the Communist Party. Anna says: —I write very little in this notebook. Why? I see everything I write is critical of the Party. Yet I am still in it. Molly too (GN 168). But through reading the Red Notebook, we understand regardless of her ambivalence, most of the time she calls the Communist Party into question. —I see that I wrote yesterday, I would leave the Party. I wonder when, and on what issue (GN 170).

Not for the first time in my life I realize I have spent weeks and months in frenzied political activity and have achieved absolutely nothing. More, that I might have foreseen it would achieve nothing. The Twentieth Congress has doubled and trebled the numbers of people, both in and out of the Party, who want a ‘new’ communist party. Last night I was at a meeting which went on till nearly morning. Towards the end a man who had not spoken before, a socialist from Austria, made a short humorous speech, something like this: 'My dear Comrades. I have been listening to you, amazed at the wells of faith in human beings! What you are saying amounts to this: that you know the leadership of the British C. P. Consists of men and women totally corrupted by years of work in the Stalinist atmosphere. You know they will do anything to maintain their position. You know, because you have given a hundred examples of it here this evening that they suppress resolutions, rig ballots, pack meetings, lie and twist. There is no way of getting them out of office by democratic means partly because they are unscrupulous, and

partly because half of the Party members are too innocent to believe their leaders are capable of such trickery. [...] (GN 435)

Postmodern novelists, like Lessing are interested in interpretations and pave the way for the plurality of possible interpretations. The freedom of the postmodern writers is like the freedom of the readers. The Golden Notebook, then, is a novel informing fragments which encourages the readers to grow discouraged with grand narratives; the Communist Party. The most important matter that Anna, the main character, expresses over and over again in her notebooks, specifically in the Red Notebook is the fragmentation and chaos. Also, the acceleration of fragmentation is all over her life. The Critical moment in her dream is the fragmentation.

She frequently meditates on the difficulty of the Communist Party and regards it inadequate. The red Notebook is a record of a period of history; the Communist Party, but maybe the end of the Communist Party. Most of the characters in the novel, especially Anna realize that they may be at the end of history. They interrogate grand narratives-universal and totalizing stories that give direction to the historical process and legitimize statements of truth. Judith Kegan Gardiner's valuable essay on Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook perfectly describes little of internal communist maneuvering in the novel. In an attempt to leave the Communist Party, she often calls it into question. Gardiner (2007) says that most of the communists in the novel are deceived. Communism in The Golden Notebook thus becomes a set of false beliefs. The readers are motivated to discover whether Anna is interested in communism or not.

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