

A Postmodern Study of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* in the Light of Jean-Francois Lyotard 's Ideas

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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. Nevertheless, as **Jean-Francois Lyotard** suggests, evidence of this postmodern emphasis is latent in modernism itself, most particularly in those highly experimental or transgressive works that challenge traditional notions of referential language, rational order, or the autonomous subject. 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.

Key Words: Enlightenment, Postmodernism, Fragmentation, Chaos

*In the first two-thirds of *The Golden Notebook*, the theme of the crack up or breakdown is elaborated in the novels representation of national and global politics. Soviet-inspired Communism, European colonialism and emperialism , Britain society, and national liberation struggles in the Third World are disintegrating, collapsing, crumbling, and fragmenting, under the pressures both internal and external. The last third of the novel relocates the crack-up in the person,[..],of Anna herself.*

-Louise Yelin,

From the Margins of Empire: Christina Stead, Doris Lessing, Nadline Gordimer

Introduction

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. It is what Jean-Francois

Liotard, one of the leading proponents of postmodernism, denies when he urges a rejection of Enlightenment “metanarratives” in favor of arguing that “there is no such thing as the world’s own story, and the only accounts that we can give of the world are local human accounts. There are only varied and conflicting human stories about the world”. The credibility of grand narratives has collapsed for Lyotard. Based on the theory by Lyotard (1984):

In contemporary society and culture-postindustrial society, postmodern culture-the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation (p.37).

Postmodern philosophers say that the idea of the world’s own story, the unified picture of reality is an illusion. Most postmodernism’s core characteristics are: “a skepticism or rejection of grand narratives to explain reality; no objective reality, but many subjective interpretations; no “one correct” concept of ultimate reality; no “one correct” interpretation of a text (Bressler, 2007).

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. Lyotard (1984) expresses that:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer then are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done (p.81).

One of the outstanding examples of postmodern novels which most contain the above-mentioned is Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*. In this novel, Lessing avoids being committed to conventional story-telling, 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 Nobel 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*

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* and the Interrogation of the Communist Party**

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 chaos¹. She senses incoherent in both her life and personality. Given different colors for notebooks shows her fragmented personality in the society. Anna’s life in the fragmented society requires her to express that:

The novel has become a function of the fragmented society, the fragmented consciousness. Human beings are so divided, are becoming more and more divided, and more subdivided in themselves, reflecting the world, that they reach out desperately, not knowing they do it, for information about other groups inside their own country, let alone about groups in other countries (GN, p.79).

What happens to readers as they read the novel is different from each other. The postmodern writer insists on expression without content, which means that the writer puts up a scenario which the reader is free to interpret in whatever way he/she likes to: there is no correct interpretation (Barkholt & Jepsen, 2010). The postmodern celebration of interrogation grand narrative appears in the Red Notebook. When Anna writes about communism in this notebook, it is to inform her opposition to communism and interrogate it. As Jackson (2009) says:

Anna writes of having become disillusioned with the communism into her Red Notebook. Lessing's novel is overtly about the splitting or disunification. The compartmentalization of experience into different notebooks is one of the most straightforward manifestations of this theme. All manner of historical forces, especially the Cold War, are the causes for this splitting.

Lessing, like Anna, writes about Communism (she was a member of the Communist Party in both South Africa and Britain). Paul Schlueter (2003) notes that:

In common with many other British and American intellectuals in the 1930s and early 1940s, Doris Lessing became a Communist as a result of sincere optimistic desires to see the world improved and to have the injustices of a supposedly inhuman competitive system of values eliminated. To a great extent, her decision to become a Communist appears now as naive many other youthful enthusiasms or commitments. She has said, for instance, when I became a communist, emotionally if not organizationally, in 1942, my picture of socialism as developed in the Soviet Union was, to say the least, inaccurate. [...] (p.36).

Through writing about the Communist Party Anna feels depressed. The rejection of being a communist is related to Lessing, too. Doris Lessing herself, in an interview with Hermione Lee mentions that "she has just stopped being a communist and being on the extreme Left".² It becomes clear that Lessing was not really satisfied with joining the Communist Party.

She has said that she decided to leave the party a good time before I finally left it. I didn't leave it when I decided to, because there was a general exodus, much publicized, from the British Party then, and the journalists were waiting for yet another renegade to publish his, her complaints against the C.P. [Communist Party]. To quote another old communist: "I find it nauseating when people who have been in the Party ten, twenty years, stagger out shouting and screaming as if they've been raped against their will." I left it because the gap between my own attitudes and those of the party widened all the time. There was no particular event or moment. The 20th Congress [in February, 1956, at which Khrushchev denounced Stalin] shocked me, not because of the "revelations" but because I thought the "revelations" were long overdue, pitifully and feebly put forth, and no one really tried to explain or understand what had happened (schlueter, 2003, p.37).

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 Marx³, "the aim of a Communist society is to procure genuine freedom, genuine individuality and humanity, genuine democracy" (Habib, 2008, p.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:

Last week, Molly came up at midnight to say that the Party members had been circulated with a form, asking for their history as members, and there was a section asking them to detail their 'doubts and confusions.' Molly said she had begun to write this, expecting to write a few sentences, had found herself writing 'a whole thesis-dozens of bloody pages.' She seemed upset with herself. 'What is it I want-a confessional? Anyway, since I've written it, I'm going to send it in. I told her she was mad. I said: 'Supposing the British Communist Party ever gets into power, that document will be in the files, and if they want evidence to hang you, they've got it-thousands of times over.' She gave me her small, almost sours mile-the smile she uses when I say things like this. Molly is not an innocent communist. She said: 'You're very cynical.' I said: 'You know it's the truth. Or could be .' She said: 'If you think in that way, why are you talking of joining the Party?' I said: 'Why do you stay in it, when you think in that way too?' [...] It's all very odd,

Anna, isn't it?' And in the morning she said: 'I took your advice, I tore it up. (GN, pp.163-164).

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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,p.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, p.170). Immediately, she describes her meeting with John.⁴

Had dinner with John. We meet rarely-always on the verge of political disagreement. At the end of the dinner, he said: 'The reason why we don't leave the Party is that we can't bear to say good-bye to our ideals for a better world. Trite enough. And interesting because it implies he believes, and that I must, only the Communist Party can better the world. Yet we neither of us believe any such thing(GN,p.170).

It indicates that the Communist Party cannot make the world better. Also, we do well keep in mind that fragmentation and split spread in the Communist Party. Anna confesses that the reason to join the Communist Party is a need for wholeness, but fragmentation and split emerge in the Communist Party.

I came home thinking that somewhere at the back of my mind when I joined the Party was need for wholeness, for an end to the split, divided, unsatisfactory way we all live. Yet joining the Party intensified the split-not the business of belonging to an organisation whose every tenet, on paper, anyway, contradicts the ideas of the society we live in; but something much deeper than that. Or at any rate, more difficult to understand (GN, p.171).

Her ambivalence appears not only in the Red Notebook, but also in her speaking with Mrs.Marks⁵ that is written in the Blue Notebook by Anna.

-'Why are you a communist?'

-'At least they believe in something.'

-'Why do you say they, when you are a member of the Communist Party?'

-'If I could say we, really meaning it, I wouldn't be here, would I?'

-'So you don't care, really, about your comrades?' (GN, p.237).

The ambivalence does not happen just for Anna, it is for each member of the Mashopi group. "The representation of Anna's life in the Communist Party exemplifies rupture, division, and doubleness. Like Anna, each member experiences an ambivalence that undermines her or his politics" (Yelin, 1998, p.79). Schlueter (2003) notes that:

Although Anna indicates at various times her reasons for leaving the party—its jargon, its dishonesty, its pettiness, and so on—she does specify in one passage in more detail her exact reasons for both becoming a Communist and for leaving the party. Jack, another party member, comments that society today is complex and technical that no one person can effectively understand it all. Anna answers him: "Alienation .Being split. It's the moral side, so to speak, of the communist message. And suddenly you shrug your shoulders and say because the mechanical basis of our lives is getting complicated, we must be content to not even try to understand things as a whole?"[...] He says: "Not being split, it's not a question of imaginatively understanding everything that goes on. Or trying to. It means doing one's work as well as possible, and being a good person." I say: "That's treachery." "To what?" "To humanism ." He thinks and says: "The idea of humanism will change like everything else." I say: "Then it will become something else. But humanism stands for the whole person, the whole individual, striving to become as conscious and responsible as possible about everything in the universe. But now you sit there, quite calmly, and as a humanist you say that due to the complexity of scientific achievement the human being must never expect to be whole, he must always be fragmented." [pp. 307-8]

Her sense of this fragmentation is such as to demand of her a more coherent, a more unifying life than has been possible through dedication to communism. [...] (pp.39 - 40).

The failure of totalizing grand narratives of communism also emerges in the newspaper cuttings and letters from all kinds of people that Anna describes them in the Red Notebook.

[At this point the red notebook was stuffed full of newspaper cuttings to do with the Twentieth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, letters from all kinds of people about politics, agendas for

political meetings, etc. This mass of paper had been fastened together by rubber bands and clipped to the page. Then Anna's handwriting began again:]

11th August, 1956

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, p.435).

In the fourth Red Notebook we face Olga⁶'s opinions about the Communist Party.

She clasped his hand, and said: 'I will make you a promise. I promise you that when our Party Historians have re-written the history of our Communist Party in accordance with the revisions made necessary by the distortions imposed during the era of Comrade Stalin, I promise you that I will read it' (GN,p.515).

It indicates that the history of the Communist Party cannot become universalized. Even the Party historians should re-write its history and revise it. It reminds us that history can never be completed.

Conclusion

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. It shows that Anna cannot escape from fragmentation and chaos, even in her dream:

I had a dream for my last appointment. [...]I opened the box and forced them to look. But instead of a beautiful thing, which I thought would be there, there was a mass of fragments, but bits and pieces from everywhere, all over the world—I recognized a lump of red earth, that I knew came from Africa, and then a bit of metal that came off a gun from Indo-China, and then everything was horrible, bits of flesh from people killed in the Korean War and a communist party badge off someone who died in a Soviet prison. This, looking at the mass of ugly fragments, was so painful that I couldn't look, and I shut the box (GN, pp.252- 253).

She frequently mediates 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 KeganGardiner'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.

Endnotes:

- 1-When Tommy asks her the reason of writing four notebooks, Anna says: "I've told you, Chaos"(GN,p.272) .
- 2-Lee, H.(2009). *A Conversation With Doris Lessing*. (p.23). Retrieved February 10, 2011, from <http://www.informaworld.Com/smpp/title~content=t716100725>
- 3- The tradition of Marxist thought has provided the most powerful critique of capitalist Institutions and ethics ever conducted. Its founder, Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883), was a German Political, economic, and philosophical theorist and revolutionist (Habib , 2008,p.527).
- 4-John: He is a Comrade.
- 5-Mrs.Marxs: 'Mother Sugar', is Anna's psychiatrist.
- 6- Olga: She is a Comrade.

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