

**SEX WAR, COMMUNISM AND MENTAL ILLNESS:
THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNICATION
IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK***

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Abstract

Right from its publication, Doris Lessing's novel *The Golden Notebook* has been read as a feminist manifesto. However this reading only reflects one aspect of the novel. This article focuses on another central theme: communication.

Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* has doubtlessly become a classic in the context of women's literature. However, viewing it solely under this light doesn't make the novel justice, since as the writer herself states it in the introduction to its second edition, "Other themes went into the making of this book, which was a crucial time for me: thoughts and themes I had been holding in my mind for years came together"¹, and one of these preoccupations that has been neglected by readers and critics alike is the one dealing with the problems of communication. And, having chosen a writer as the central character of the book, this problem of communication can be translated as the problem of fictionalization.

In dealing with this problem, Doris Lessing becomes very much a representative of the different conflicting ideas about the novel that have shaped this genre during the last decades. Although she regrets that "it was not possible to find a novel which described the intellectual and moral climate of a hundred years ago, in the middle of the last century, in Britain, in the way Tolstoy did it for Russia, Stendhal for France..."², she is aware that in her own time "There was no way of *not* being intensely subjective: it was, if you like, the writer's task for that time. You couldn't write a book about the building of a bridge or a dam and not develop the mind and feelings of the people who built it" (p. 13). Thus the conflict between an objective (realist) and a subjective (modernist) relation to reality is

established within the writer herself: although she admires the art of the 19th century realists, she is aware of the fact that her own times demand a more subjective relation to reality. This contradiction between her times and her own preference of realism is even greater because, as a formerly committed left-wing writer, she has been influenced by social realism which demands of the writer a realistic-optimistic description of reality.

In this context, although on a different level, lies Doris Lessing's main problem, shared by the majority of writers of her age: "... the disparity between the overwhelming problems of war, famine, poverty, and the tiny individual who was trying to mirror them" (p. 12). For her

The way to deal with the problem of subjectivity, that shocking business of being preoccupied with the tiny individual who is at the same time caught up in such an explosion of terrible and marvellous possibilities, is to see them as a microcosm and in this way break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does. (p. 13/14).

These problems, although reflected in her work as a whole, are present in a special way in *The Golden Notebook*. In this book "the distortion of experience by linguistic structures is explored. Experience is transformed by the necessity of communicating experience"³. By compartmentalising these experiences with the help of the different notebooks, Doris Lessing can explore how the general problem of the inadequacy of language influences the different parts of life, of experience, and of oneself. The three aspects to be studied here, sex-war, communism and mental illness, represent at the same time Anna Wulff's relation to other people, to the social system (represented by the Communist Party) and to herself, always related to language. Likewise, these different aspects are reflected in the different notebooks: the theme of sex-war is to be found in the *Yellow Notebook*, which is an attempt at fictionalising the protagonist's experiences with men, while Communism is dealt with in the *Red Notebook* and the *Blue*, and later the *Golden Notebook* center on Anna's relation with herself.

The main character's problem in her relation with other people, men in particular, is made obvious by the simple fact that she has to write a novel about her experiences in her relationship with Michael in order to be able to relate to it. She only discovers the real development of this relationship when she writes about it: "it was a remarkable fact that, until I sat down to write about it, I never analysed how sex was between myself and Michael ..." (p. 219). The importance of language and the problems arising from it can be seen throughout the *Yellow Notebook*, and wherever the book deals with a relationship: Julia and Bob never understand each other, Bob doesn't realise that Marion is intelligent because they never talk, etc.

There is, however, one passage that highlights the problems of communication between the two sexes in a relationship. Although the passage I am referring to is

built into the novel as an anecdote that Paul tells Ella to illustrate the reaction of the female medical staff in his hospital when a lecture on the orgasm of female swans is delivered, it is taken out of the context of the novel by the fact that Anna introduces the passage with some comments about "the difficulty of writing about sex, for women ..." (p. 219), and because Ella reacts to it in exactly the same way as, according to Paul, any woman would ("I knew you were going to do that", "I knew you would laugh", "Really, women are most extraordinarily predictable"; all on p. 219).

What this passage, which at the same time is a symptom of the estrangement between Paul and Ella, transmits to the reader is the impossibility of achieving a satisfactory understanding between women and men on the subject of sex. While "women of any sense know better [...] than to interrupt when men start telling them how they feel about sex" (p.222), men totally misunderstand their reaction and are surprised that women "for whom he [Paul] had such respect, were capable of such prudery" (p. 221). As far as this subject is concerned women exclude any possibility of communication, but they do so "out of self-preservation: they want to preserve the spontaneous emotion that is essential for their satisfaction" (p. 219).

Thus Lessing, through her fictionalised character of Anna, is quite definite about the impossibility of there being real communication about sexual experiences:

Sex is essentially emotional for women. How many times has this been written? And yet, there's always a point with the most perceptive and intelligent man, when a woman looks at him across a gulf: he hasn't understood. (p. 219).

Here, once more, the problem is language: the relation of women to sex has been expressed in words, but men have failed to understand. And in this way the basis for any relationship has been undermined from the very outset.

As far as Anna's experiences and final disillusionment with the Communist Party are concerned, the problem turns around language as a means of establishing a relation between reality and verbal expression in its broadest sense: written communication, oral expression, etc. Anna joins the Party because she thinks that this is the only organisation she can find that offers a possibility of relating to reality:

I went up the narrow stairs thinking of the first feeling: how many people have joined the British C. P. because, in England, it is difficult to remember the realities of power, of violence; the C. P. represents to them the realities of naked power that are cloaked in England itself? (p. 165)

From the very first moment her relation with the Party is based on language, and she finds she wants to defend it and all it stands for against clear evidence, only as a reaction to the tone in which it is being criticised: "What they [the evening papers] say about it [the Soviet Union] seemed to me true enough, but the tone malicious, gloating, triumphant, sickened me..." (p. 166).

Very soon this need to defend the Party gives way under the pressure exerted by the fact that in her conversations with other Party-members there can be no outspokenness, and that all of them want to keep up an illusion they know to be hollow. Comments such as "of course there is no Party member I could say this to, though it's the sort of discussion I have with ex-Party- people" (p. 170), "at a political meeting the truth usually comes out in just such a speech or a remark ignored at the time because its tone is not that of the meeting" (p. 436), "he speaks of Stalin in the simple, respectful tone that has been familiar for years. I am thinking: yet everyone in this room, meeting in a pub, or on the street, would use a very different tone, dry and painful" (p. 229) all show the dissociation between language and reality, between the words and the thoughts. As Anna puts it "words lose their meaning suddenly. I find myself listening to a sentence, a phrase, a group of words, as if they are in a foreign language –the gap between what they are supposed to mean and what in fact they say seems unbridgable" (p. 299). But this disintegration is, deep down, only a symptom of the fragmentation of reality: "the painful disintegration that is linked with what I feel true about language, the thinning of language against the density of our experience." (p. 301).

This is, at least in part, the reason why Anna finally decides to leave the Party. She is faced with the problem of the relation to reality in one of its expressions (fiction) inside the Party lines, when she is asked to review the novels that are going to be published by a Communist publisher. For her the novels have no real value because "they touch reality at no point at all" (p. 341). It is only when, in the course of an argument with the Party official she realises that "most of the writing is flat, tame, optimistic and on a curiously jolly note, even when dealing with war and suffering. It all comes out of the myth" (p. 343), that she decides she has to leave the Party. She had hoped to find a more honest way of relation to reality inside the C. P., but now has to find that all is "hole-and-corner conspiracy and telling lies about things" (p. 296), and that the fiction sponsored by the Party has to adapt to certain pre-formulated ideas rather than reflect reality, or, at least, establish a relation to reality. This is Doris Lessing's direct comment on Socialist Realism.

It might be noted that, while almost all her experiences with the C. P. are dealt with in the Red Notebook, her final decision to leave the party, which can be seen as the result of her increasing awareness of the dissociation between language and reality, is described in the Blue Notebook. This could be an indication of how deeply personal Anna's disillusionment is, and that this experience for her has to be counted among the rest of her most personal experiences recorded in precisely this Notebook.

Words and their ability to describe the self are very important for Anna in the context of her mental well-being. Although at first the problem that takes her to Mother Sugar, the psychoanalyst, is her inability to feel, the real problem is related to her loss of confidence in words. Words are the means by which she learns about her own thoughts ("Afterwards I thought about what I had said, it

was interesting because I hadn't known I'd thought it until I'd said it", p. 527; "I hadn't known I was going to say it or that I thought it.", p. 599), the means by which she explores previous states of mind, her emotions ("a year, two years, five years of a certain kind of being can be rolled up and tucked away, or "named"...", p. 465/466), and the means by which she is able to "button up" her experiences. Anna needs to write or say things as much as hear things said to give shape to her experiences ("words are form", p. 463). If she finds that words have become hollow, meaningless and that she can't use them to express herself any more, her life and her inner self lose their shape and she finds herself immersed in an inner chaos.

Anna is aware of this danger and, through the game of "naming" tries to put an end to this situation. She seeks to grasp reality around her by naming all the objects around her, and at the same time tries to relate the small world, representing the "self" with the great universe, representing the outside world: "First, I created the room I sat in, object by object, "naming" everything, bed, chair, curtains, till it was a whole in my mind Sometimes I could reach what I wanted, simultaneous knowledge of vastness and of smallness" (p. 531).

On the other hand, "naming" experiences, states of mind, etc. helps her in facing them and thus fight against them: "'Naming' the state I am in as anxiety state lessened it for a while ..." (p. 537).

The whole problem of her disintegration, of her madness, is related to her loss of faith in the power of words. Of most of her experiences she finds that "there is no way of putting this knowledge into words" (p. 609), and her answer to this impossibility is that she tries to "play with words hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want" (p. 609). In the end, however, her mistrust in words is so great that she decides that "the real experience can't be described. I think, bitterly, that a row of asterisks, like an old-fashioned novel, might be better. Or a symbol of some kind, a circle perhaps, or a square. Anything at all, but not words." (p. 609). And out of this wariness about words comes her attempt at combining different techniques and media to express her experiences: newspaper cuttings, films, etc.

Nevertheless it is the power of words, once more, expressing what she has been thinking all the time, that help her to get out of the state of mental illness, of shapelessness into which she has been driven. It is only when she tells Saul about the reasons that make it impossible for her to write⁴, and when she is thus made to face her problem by Saul, that she is able to say that this experience of madness is "buttoned up and finished" (p. 614). Saul makes her believe in her own plans, in their "beautiful, impossible blueprints" (p. 614), even if they imply that they will be impossible to fulfill. Transferred to the field of writing, Anna has to accept that expressing exactly what she wants to say is impossible, but that, since she needs communication and shaping of experiences by means of words, she will have to believe in them.

If we now look at the three aspects of sex-war, communism and mental illness together, it will become clear that for Anna most of the problems she encounters are related to the limitations of language. In a way, language lies at the root of the failure of a person's relation to another human being, especially when they belong to the opposite sex, to society in general, and, at a final stage, to oneself. Paradoxically, it seems as if this was only a problem as long as the person can't accept the limitation of words and the fact that "one has to believe in one's blueprint" to get on in life. One has to accept that this frustrating experience is shared by many people and that almost everyone is faced at some stage with the feeling of being incapable of expressing one's emotions and experiences through words.

This, at least following Mother Sugar's theories, is one of Anna's main problems: she thinks that her experiences are unique and that she stands alone with all her problems. In this context the psychoanalyst tells her that "here are a great line of women standing behind you into the past, and you have to seek them out and find them in yourself and be conscious of them" (p. 459). Not seeing this "line of women" makes the relation of subjective experiences to the outside world so difficult for Anna: if she can't accept that her experiences are not unique, she won't be able to relate it to events in the "outer world" nor express them by the only means this world provides her with: language.

And it is at this point that the link with Doris Lessing's ideas about fiction can be established. For her "writing about oneself is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions –and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas– can't be yours alone" (p. 13). This is Doris Lessing's personal answer to the question of subjectivity posed by the different literary movements in relation with the genre of the novel. And this is what she tries to express through Anna: the only way of dealing with the problems and experiences in life without falling into madness is to accept that these are shared, and that everyone has to face the same problems, even the ones related to language. In a way, Doris Lessing focuses this problem of shared experiences on the power of words because of Anna's special interest in language as a writer. But, in my opinion, these difficulties lie deeper and words are, as Anna puts it, the way in which she "is becoming aware of it [the breakdown of structures in society]" (p. 463).

On the other hand, seen in the context of the whole development of the novel during the last two centuries, the fact that novelists have to struggle to find an appropriate way of reflecting reality, is just another symptom of the "breakdown" of the formerly structured and organised world. Since reality has lost its universal meaning, the writer is faced with the problem of finding and "naming" his own reality, which is exactly Anna's problem. The different literary movements could thus be seen as attempts at shaping reality in a world that lacks universal truths and structures, and this shaping is, again, restricted by the limited means this chaotic world provides: words.

Notas

1. Doris Lessing, "Preface to *The Golden Notebook*" in *The Golden Notebook*, London, Simon & Schuster, 1972.
2. Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London, Grafton Books, 1972) p. 10. From this point, all references made to Doris Lessing's novel will make reference to this edition.
3. Lorna Sage, *Doris Lessing* (London, Methuen, 1983) p. 45.
4. "that moment I sit down to write, someone comes into the room , looks over my shoulder, and stops me"; p. 614.