

## THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK TWENTY YEARS LATER

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The history of British literature abounds in women writers. The names of Elizabeth Gaskell, Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf bring to our memories some of the better pages written in English until the first half of the 20th century. Since the end of World War II there has been a strong awakening of women's interest in literature and not only because larger numbers of women began writing about literature. The latter aspect was not new either but the point of view adopted by some women critics differed from the standpoints that had been traditionally taken by men. The female vision of literature as a whole and of the roles played by both male and female characters was different because in adopting feminist ideas, it had to become radically different. Feminist ideology brought sexual politics into literary criticism and led to what a few years later would be known as «gynocriticism».

The vast body of Doris Lessing's fiction belongs to this new «school» because Lessing was from the beginning willingly participating in the creation of what she herself called «new women». *The Golden Notebook* embodies more than any other novel of the period the characteristics arising from women's consciousness that were being called for in women's fiction.

I will not discuss here in depth what *The Golden Notebook* looks like twenty-five years after its publication. It is well known that in the Sixties it became a sort of bible for certain women and that Lessing, along with Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan among others, almost set up a model for female behaviour during the first years of the feminist revival. It is reassuring to see that Lessing was then right in announcing a number of unpleasant and disturbing situations that were likely to affect the lives of «liberated women».

*The Golden Notebook* still remains one of the most important novels and one of the best pieces of fiction written in Britain after the war and not

only in itself but also because it led the way for a number of women writers who were looking for a new voice with which to express a collective experience. Before Lessing, the peculiarly isolated short-stories and novels of Jean Rhys spoke a female dialect but they lacked any other aim besides individual artistic expression. After *The Golden Notebook* the number of women writers soared as if Lessing had demonstrated that they should not be ashamed of narrating frustrations and expectations which, although different from men's, could be publicly discussed as, for example, Lawrence had exposed his. Suddenly women began using autobiographical data as a literary material that could go through a process of elaboration such as that followed by Fitzgerald in *Tender Is the Night*, as if they had realised they could re-tell history in an identical way as Faulkner had done with the American South through the lives of the members of the Compson family. Before Lessing, women's confessional literature was largely limited to diaries and autobiographies written by women like Lillian Hellman and Anaïs Nin, but only after Lessing's first books did the tone of the female literary voice shift. Poetry and fiction witnessed an invasion of works written by women like Grace Paley, Nadine Gordimer, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Sylvia Plath, Marge Piercy, Margaret Atwood and Alice Walker —to mention a few names— that are part already of the cultural history of our times. It is to Lessing's initial impulse that they owe their creative strength.

This confessional fiction —a mode adopted initially by most women writers when elaborating autobiographical material— shows such an appalling degree of psychological naturalism that it has been considered by some critics as irritatingly neurotic. This «neurosis» —which I think is mere honesty— in my opinion, derives from the adscription of women writers to realism, the only difference in their «neurosis» from, for instance, Hemingway's macho overtones being their intention to expose bare facts—instead of trying to disguise them by means of sublimations, as is Hemingway's case—, that is, the difficulties implied in society for those women who choose to break away from traditional patterns of behaviour. Hemingway, on his part, projected his frustrations and inhibitions in his novels by means of building up a fictional universe populated by male heroes/victims who are a superb study case for psychiatrists. The adoption of realism by women writers in general, and by Lessing in particular, meant they had an appropriate vehicle to explore female psychology, ethics and values in confrontation with everyday's life —the origin of neurosis once choices are made. Take for instance Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, so strikingly confessional that its plot coincides with facts of her life almost day to day as her letters show. But one may wonder whether her neurotic obsession with troublesome reality was more so than Hemingway's posthumous novel, *The Garden of Eden*. Here his recurrent

theme of sublimated homosexuality only serves to confirm the long-standing suspicion that what really bothered him were not haphazard heterosexual relations but the social rejection of homosexuality. Why is it so that he depicts androgynous young women who make him have his hair cut and dyed blonde to make him look like one of them?

Doris Lessing is sometimes irritatingly jumbly. Her books are about the same story, a story that is retold over and over again with slight variations. Her leading character is a young woman from the colonies, be her name Martha or Anna. To re-read *The Golden Notebook* so many years after its publication leaves one with the feeling that you are visiting old friends, people one has not seen for twenty-five years but who are still endowed with the naive sincerity and intellectual honesty that characterised the political radicals of the Sixties. And this can be applied to Lessing herself. When she finished writing the pentalogy she called *The Children of Violence*, that is, *Martha Quest*, *A Proper Marriage*, *A Ripple from the Storm*, *Landlocked*, and *The Four-Gated City*, one was left wondering where her monumental effort in formal experimentation would lead. The final result of *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979-1983) did not seem to show a way out of her private Star Wars announced in the final section of *The Four-Gated City* a decade earlier. Lessing might have tried to escape from her private hell of horror and lunacy through a devastated interplanetary background where the human mind achieves salvation by means of solitary meditation. This choice may have seemed disappointing for the thousands of women who discovered Lessing in the Sixties and turned her almost into a redeemer of the female troubled psyche. Her later fiction, symbolic as it is, lacks the appeal that her initial realistic expositions had for women. She spoke directly to women—but not only for women, as some critics seem to believe—and about a certain type of woman that came into existence with the first decade of the 20th century, about those women who read with pleasure the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell or Edith Wharton but who did so with a feeling of alienation from their female characters. In a way, Lessing began writing when the topics she chose were being required by large numbers of women who were very different from their mothers and grand-mothers, from women who had shared the middle-class chores of George Eliot's heroines. Lessing took a gigantic step forward when she gave life to female characters—no matter how repetitive they may be—who belong to our times and play an active part in the making of modern history. But what makes Lessing a great writer is not only this. It is her honesty as an artist, the way she deals with her fictional material, whether realistic or symbolic, and how she tries to solve through experimentation the problems that arise from the psychological development of her characters.

As regards the question of form, *The Golden Notebook* was not a novel one could consider easy to read; at least not as easy as 19th century fiction, where linearity facilitated reading. Only since Joyce, has reading become a more difficult task, because style, thanks to Freud and the subsequent use of the stream of consciousness, has got closer to the functioning of the human mind. Therefore literary depiction of mental landscapes turned writing into a more complex art and, in like manner, reading turned away from apparent linearity. After Joyce, certain writers who adhered to modernism, called for the reader's complicity to follow the intricacies of their creative minds. Frequently enough the reader refused to play the game, either because the literary allusions in the text were too complex or simply because he/she thought the story was not worth the effort. Thus the success of *The Golden Notebook* must also be due to extra-literary factors since its complexity of form must have somewhat obscured its thematic appeal. In addition, *The Golden Notebook* was published between *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958) and *Landlocked* (1965), the form of both being far more traditional than that of *The Golden Notebook*, so its readers must have made a consistent effort to get through its four long notebooks that, to make things even harder, constantly overlap.

As I mentioned before, Lessing in *The Golden Notebook* re-tells a story that she had already written in part and eventually would re-tell. Lessing knows her heroine so well, be her name Anna or Martha, that the endings of the stories do not vary much from one to the next. The African setting of the first two books of *The Children of Violence* is also present in *The Golden Notebook*, as the gloomy English environment that surrounds Anna here will be again used in the closing book of *The Four-Gated City* which in turn will become the basis for the location of *Canopus in Argos*. Like the books that followed, *The Golden Notebook* transcends the story Lessing had begun narrating in her previous books by moving the heroine over to the Britain of the days of the Suez crisis and the Russian invasion of Hungary.

All this writing and re-writing of the Martha/Anna's story can be taken as a proof of Lessing's permanent obsession with narrative structure and form. While, during the first books of *The Children of Violence*, Lessing chose to write in the realistic mode, in the following ones—those which deal with Martha/Anna and elaborate interchangeable facts—Lessing begins experimenting with post-Joycean narrative form as her heroine correspondingly develops into a much more complex human being whose mental intricacies can no longer be expressed by traditional narrative structures. As a good reader of Joyce, Lessing knows well that psychological factors require a different narrative structure for which realism is not enough, even though Lessing herself is a realist by heart.



Therefore she makes the hard decision of abandoning her previous style and begins exploring the uneasy road to post-modernism.

Although it is hard for a writer to enter an untested narrative field, Lessing takes the chance with the same appalling degree of naivety and moral confidence that Martha/Anna shows when making the hardest decisions, as if out of some moral obligation. If Lessing's heroines are vitalists that never give up, one is led to think that, at the sight of her artistic stances, so must Lessing be.

The current panorama of British literature in fact lacks this enviable vitality, this need for meaningful formal experiment. Somehow it seems to suggest that contemporary English writers lack a language with which they can depict the social situation of post-imperial Britain, where Lessing would represent the experience of colonial life seen from the inside, illuminated with the moral realism long directed at English life as a fictional subject. With regard to this question of narrative language, Lessing describes psychological events and sexual relationships in a most realistic manner, never before used by a woman in the history of British literature —something that connects Lessing with Lawrence, whose influence on her writings is evident. But Lessing's language is not always successful. Her dialogues are her most evident failure: in *The Golden Notebook* they are often implausible and, in my opinion, irritatingly intellectualised: they sound as if taken either from a treatise on radical politics or from a handbook for middle-class revolutionaries. Anna and Molly's dialogues in *The Golden Notebook* suffer from this lack of naturalistic speech which is however absent in its descriptive passages. Lessing's weakness for dialogue may be due to the fact that she seems to take for granted that strict obedience to feminist theory exempts her from following the rules of naturalism more closely. Lessing has a weakness for preaching as part of her commitment to the creation of what she herself insistently calls «new women» by overtly mentioning what topics women should deal with and in what way they must be approached as part of a basic interpretation of the practice of the fundamental issues of feminism in everyday's life.

In the panorama of contemporary British literature the failure of language is not a failure of Lessing alone but one that stems from the inability to illustrate through naturalistic language characterization developments that go beyond naturalistic expression. Somehow she managed to convey her message to women —who bought *The Golden Notebook* by the dozen— and to create a high degree of interest for her novels in the general public, critics and professors. This was so, I think, because she was honestly looking for a new formal way that would express her inner feelings: that modern society and, therefore, individuals, were, as

Anna repeatedly stated in *The Golden Notebook*, cracking up. Lessing suggests that these crises are brought about by generalised crises of moral values, either social or political: Anna's visits to Mother Sugar were a consequence of the moral dilemma of Communists caused by the Russian invasion of Budapest in 1956, as Martha Quest's schizophrenia was caused by the crisis of Western civilization. Thus Lessing draws a fictional parallel between Martha's desolated mind and the barren landscapes of the external world, a view that is perceived in her apocalyptic tone of *Canopus in Argos: Archives* (1979-83), which, in my opinion, continued to prove Lessing's unending search for a new formal structure that, unfortunately, ended up in failure as well.

As has been mentioned above, Lessing —whose innovative efforts seem to have reached a dead end despite her courage and honesty— is approaching a formal style which is close to what has been labelled as post-modernism. But while writers like William Gass in *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* or William Gaddis in his last novel, *Carpenter's Gothic*, have succeeded in creating a coherent expressive style through the use of monologue, as Gass in «Mrs. Mean», or of a dialogue bare of descriptive passages, as is the case of Gaddis's book, Lessing is still fighting with traditional narrative structure.

The question of the inadequacy of language can be generalised for the majority of contemporary British fiction writers. Authors like Margaret Drabble —Lessing's most direct inheritor—, Ian McEwan, whose *The Cement Garden* seemed refreshingly new when it was published in 1978, or Angela Carter, also seem to be at a loss as far as narrative techniques are concerned. Curiously enough the most vitalistic and interesting innovations in narrative trends in recent British fiction come from Commonwealth writers such as Salman Rushdie, J. M. Coetzee or Wole Soyinka. One is tempted to say that the process enabling them to write a type of fiction that the world reads with fascinated interest may be due to the strength that underlies their works and that is provided by the interplay of the social and political forces presently at work in their young countries. There must be something in this that enables them to elaborate their subjects in such a way that the novelty of the plot runs parallel to narrative techniques which in turn are greatly influenced by traditional modes of oral transmission. The development we are witnessing in the present decade is as promising as Lessing's was in the sixties, before she began writing, in the words of Eliot, about «now and England». This leads us to the old question of the relationship between art and society. That the current crisis of British society and ethics is crippling writers of fiction is a statement hard to accept, since other artists have managed to overcome a similar problem of form, as is the case of Francis Bacon's tortured paintings. One just hopes that time will help to solve a problem that critics can simply point out.