

**LANGUAGE AS A SYMPTOM OF THE SPLIT CONSCIOUSNESS IN DORIS
LESSING'S THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK**

Anca Georgescu, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Valahia" University of Târgoviște

Abstract: The present paper attempts to discuss the multi-faceted structure of Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook from two perspectives. On the one hand, it argues that Lessing has explored the shifting relationships between fact and truth, self and mind, private and communal realities, demonstrating that her novel maps the gradual conversion of madness from negative to positive, from recorder of a reality initially perceived as outside the self to creator of a reality ultimately construed as a function of the mind.

On the other hand, it argues that in The Golden Notebook Lessing has deconstructed not only established narrative and aesthetic forms, but also language and writing itself. By making language a theme of her novel, questioning its stability, Lessing admits that language is an unstable system, in which meaning is always sliding and shifting. Thus, a stylistic symptom of the consciousness I try to approach thematically is the preponderance of coordinating or paratactic construction in the novel at the expense of extensive subordination that is a reflection of the author's desire to avoid a highly determined, hierarchic patterning of experience.

Keywords: *madness, language, subordination, parataxis, self, consciousness.*

In abandoning conventional narrative, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* explores the relationship between language and ideology and the possibility of a new literary form. The novel suggests that, before she can create a new kind of novel, Anna, the artist with a writing block, must not only accept that 'words are faulty and by their nature inaccurate' (653), but also accept the challenge of finding another way to use language. Doris Lessing is aware of the inherent instability of language, as well as of the necessity of using language if she is to communicate with her readers. Thus, *The Golden Notebook* necessarily uses language even if it simultaneously calls this language into question.

In *The Golden Notebook* she takes the novel form apart in order to see how far, if at all, fiction is capable of telling the truth. One of the problems examined in the novel is the writer's block, the cessation of artistic creativity. Lessing considers not only the psychological features of this condition, but also the technical ones. Is it possible that the form of the conventional novel can hinder the writer who wishes to express the irrational and the unconventional? How can an art form, which is a set of conventions, capture the chaos of the contingent world? Should a novel attempt to mirror the world, or should it create its own universe? Is creation without recreation possible?

Doris Lessing acknowledges this difficulty and, in *The Golden Notebook*, she sets out to free Anna's creativity through her exploration of the novel form. Through her fictional character-narrator Anna Wulf, she openly questions how narrative assumption and conventions transform and filter reality, trying to prove that no ultimate truths or meanings exist. Thus, metafictional ploys such as framing narratives, parody, multiple discourses, and paratactic structures seem to be the only tools Lessing can make use of to answer the intricate questions that have loomed large in her literary quest.

The structure of the novel itself challenges many of the conventions of the realistic novel. The frame is a novella, written primarily about a main protagonist, Anna Wulf, and her friend Molly. There are five installments of this novella, entitled *Free Women*. The novel is interspersed with a series of notebooks written by Anna. The Black Notebook is a record of various aspects of Anna's bestselling first novel, *Frontiers Of War* – the raw material, financial transactions and critical commentaries. The Red Notebook documents Anna's involvement with the British Communist party and her various political activities. The Yellow Notebook is a 'romantic novel' called *The Shadow of the Third*, written by Anna; the life of its protagonist, Ella, Anna's alter ego, mirrors aspects of Anna's own life. The Blue Notebook, a diary (Anna's attempt at a 'factual', 'objective', account of her life), explores her ideas regarding art and writing, and their relationship to concepts such as 'truth' and 'reality'. All of these notebooks represent different aspects of Anna's life; she separates them in an attempt to understand herself and the apparent chaos of her life, and more practically, to overcome her writer's block.

Anna has written one novel, *Frontiers of War*, and is obsessed with what she calls its 'lying nostalgia' (70). She has decided never to write again, because she 'no longer believes in art' (232). She repeatedly comments on the limitations of the traditional novel, on the impossibility of conveying 'reality' through that form. Anna is aware that the only 'reality' the individual can be sure of is his or her own perception: for the modern writer, as Lessing herself puts it, there is 'no way of not being intensely subjective' (*Preface* xviii). The notebooks are intended to record Anna's 'subjectivity', that is why she writes part of her diary as factually as possible, in order to see if the plain facts are nearer to the truth than the carefully shaped material that goes into the novel.

The *Blue Notebook* represents an attempt to come closer to objective 'reality', but this raises doubts and questions about the 'reality' of the Notebooks themselves. They emphasize the division of Anna's personality; it is almost as if she were four different persons, adopting a persona to suit each one.

Metafiction pursues such questions through formal self-exploration, drawing on the traditional metaphor of the world as a book. Patricia Waugh, in the article 'What is Metafiction and Why Are They Saying Such Awful Things About it?', comments that if our knowledge of this world now seems to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (relying entirely on language) becomes a useful way of investigating the construction of 'reality' itself. Language, she further explains, has the role of exploring the relationship between the world of fiction and the world outside fiction. The metafictionist, mentions Waugh, 'is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to 'represent' the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such, cannot be 'represented'. In literary fiction it is, in fact, possible only to 'represent' the discourses of that world'. (Waugh, *Metafiction* 3)

The Golden Notebook is central to Lessing's work for both thematic and formal reasons. Thematically, the novel documents – through the figure of Anna Wulf – Lessing's disillusion with, and ultimate rejection of the Marxist metanarrative. For Lessing, this loss of faith in politics, which led to an increasing awareness of social fragmentation and alienation, had a direct effect on the novel's form. Lessing, through Anna, expresses thus her disillusion

with both realism and the notion of an encompassing view of life. Aiming to ‘break a form’ and ‘certain forms of consciousness’, Lessing ‘commits’ herself to fragmentation and discontinuity. For despite the rhetoric of wholeness informing this encyclopaedic novel, her emphasis is on the complexity of experience, its difficulty to integrate, the difficulty of achieving coherence without inevitably succumbing to reduction. As a consequence, discontinuity achieves a significance that does not allow it to be simply subsumed under a higher unity; fragmentation, gaps, and lapses are precisely what allow for the unexpected.

Anna perceives the events of the post-war period as ‘a record of war, murder, chaos, misery’ (251). She herself functions as a microcosm, and her internal conflicts and eventual healing through psychological disintegration are synonymous to the reality of the world in which she lives.

The Golden Notebook does not, however, delight in despair, for its reason is to work through the chaos and to go beyond it. As Lessing observes in her *Preface*, ‘the essence of the book, the organisation of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalise’ (*Preface xv*). But in an effort to resist the pull of madness and the dissolution of the self in chaos, Anna can only maintain a hold on reality by dividing her experience into four categories. The four notebooks are, in short, an admission of defeat. Contributing to Anna’s writing block by consuming her creative energy, they also disclose her inability to perceive herself and her society holistically. In order to heal herself, to put ‘all [her] self in one book’ (585), she must succumb to temporary madness in the *Golden Notebook*. By doing so, she overcomes her creative impasse and gives us *The Golden Notebook*, which contains both the orderly parodic frame *Free Women*, and the disorderly notebooks.

By presenting human beings as a multiplicity of dispersed personalities, the novel reveals that the notion of a centred self is only an illusion. Lessing seems to reflect the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who advance the notion of the postmodern subject as schizoid. In their postmodern treatise *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1977), (Deleuze, one of France’s most celebrated philosophers of the late twentieth century, and his co-author Guattari, a radical psychoanalyst) oppose orthodox (both Freudian and Lacanian) theory. In an attempt to undermine the normative power of categories such as Oedipus and castration in psychoanalysis from the inside using psychoanalytic concepts against the colonizing conceptual logic of psychoanalysis itself, they contend that the Lacanian account of desire, insofar as it binds the subject to the social order, works in the service of repression. They argue that psychoanalysis, both Freudian and Lacanian, functions to personalize desire. The concept they propose, ‘Schizophrenia’, ‘is desiring production at the limit of social production’ (G&D 35). They try to place schizophrenia over neurosis, the flows of desire over lack of it, fragments over totalities, difference over uniformity.

Lessing is not romanticizing madness or idealizing schizophrenia. Instead, by shifting the emphasis away from the individual’s abnormality, Lessing exposes the arbitrariness of society’s systematic labelling the difference. How to define the individual is the question that underlies most of the debates in *The Golden Notebook*, whether one thinks of politics or aesthetics. Moreover, Lessing consistently links psychic disintegration to social psychosis. Once she has accepted the world’s chaos by willingly descending into madness and by writing

in only one notebook, the Golden Notebook, Anna not only recognizes that ‘a world of disorder lies behind’ (633) the surface of things and people, but she also accepts that she is made up of irreconcilable selves. Although Anna feels ‘threatened with total disintegration’ as she sinks into chaos through dreams, her experience of seeing herself ‘sleeping, watching other personalities bend over to invade her’ (587) as she becomes ‘an Algerian soldier’ and a Chinese ‘peasant woman’ frees her from her divided self.

One of the most fascinating aspects of schizoanalysis is that it involves the recognition not just of multiple individualities, but of transgender experiences. Man and woman are as unnameable as experience is. As Deleuze and Guatari point out, neither man nor woman are ‘models’ of anything; they are not clearly defined categories, essences, or identities, instead they are vibrations, ‘schizzes,’ flows (D&G 360-62). This helps explain why the image of a flow recurs repeatedly in the novel: Anna records the flow of lovemaking, the flow of words, and the flow of one personality into another. Even observations that belong in one notebook repeatedly flow into others.

Anna’s breakthrough comes when she identifies this principle as part of herself (her ‘selves’), and strives to transform it into something creative. Lessing suggests that madness and sanity, male and female are boundary concepts, hardened into prescriptive behavioural formulas that are socially and politically repressive. Repudiating the false dichotomy, Lessing replaces it with ‘either...or...or’ (D&G 70). In *The Golden Notebook*, Anna comments with irony: “Anna laughed. ‘Men. Women. Bound. Free. Good. Bad. Yes. No. Capitalism. Socialism. Sex. Love...’”(50).

The question Lessing seems to ask is what explains the fascism in us. In the course of her breakdown, Anna comes to feel with a certainty which will never leave her again, that the underlying reality of her time is war. Literature, art, moments of individual happiness, rare as they are, can hardly explain her acute consciousness of living in a terrible century, for she sees

The world with nations, systems, economic blocks, hardening and consolidating: a world where it would become increasingly ludicrous even to talk about freedom, or the individual conscience.... I was experiencing the fear of war as one does in nightmares...knowing with my nerves and imagination: the fear of war...the real movement of the world towards dark, hardening power...I felt this, like a vision, in a new kind of knowing. And I knew that the cruelty and the spite and the I, I, I, I of Saul and of Anna were part of the logic of war; and I knew how strong these emotions were, in a way that would never leave me, would become part of how I saw the world. (588-89)

The Golden Notebook demonstrates that chaos can no longer remain outside the individual, in a world in which ‘destruction’ is acknowledged ‘as a force’ (589), and in which ‘war’ and ‘the immanence of war’ are ‘the truth’ (591).

The novel depicts Anna’s willful descent into madness as a means of acknowledging and accepting chaos and formlessness. Barbara Rigney suggests that in *The Golden Notebook* ‘to go mad in a positive sense is to give up all certainty’ and ‘to lose the distinction between the real and the non-real, between the self and the non-self’ (Rigney 75). On the contrary, I would say that Lessing’s novel questions the rigidity of these dichotomies and reveals that madness and sanity are not opposites, but are merely culturally constructed labels. Anna recognizes that ‘the word sane meant nothing, as the word mad meant nothing’ and that she

‘could see no reason why I should be mad or sane’ (394). The novel does not reverse the dichotomy and embrace madness. We learn by the end of the novel that Anna emerges anew from her exploration of insanity, to go on and write *Free Women* and *The Golden Notebook*. So Anna does not achieve ‘a higher sanity,’ as Rigney concludes, but rather reaches a point at which she accepts both. Anna understands that she can neither disown her own madness, nor allow it to paralyze her socially existence

In style, there is one feature that I want to isolate, namely the author’s refusal to structure her novel in an easily classified way. A stylistic symptom of the consciousness I try to approach thematically is the preponderance of coordinating or paratactic construction in the novel at the expense of extensive subordination that is a reflection of the author’s desire to avoid a highly determined, hierarchic patterning of experience. In its rejection of the hierarchic structure, the use of parataxis goes along with the open-endedness and a certain circling around an unutterable center. The silence of emptiness one senses in the text is an indication that the work is being written around a center that is not available as yet and in whose construction this surrounding structure is to participate. It points up the silence of the woman at the same time as it partakes in an attempt to find a language that would not falsify her experience.

When Anna feels that a ‘thinning of language against the density of our experience’ is happening, she connects that with a sense of fragmentation. It is only natural, then, that the language in the novel would be fragmented. Not only does it favour coordination over subordination, but it also tends to eschew conjunctions and other links which would at least point generally toward the nature of the connections between various events, thoughts and feelings. To illustrate this most effectively, I will take a sample from each of the four notebooks as well as from the golden notebook into which they converge and the conventional novel strand of ‘Free Women’.

Anna was waiting for Richard and Molly. It was rather late, getting on for eleven. The curtains in the tall white room were drawn, the notebooks pushed out of sight, a tray with drinks and sandwiches already waiting. Anna sat loose in a chair in a lethargy of moral exhaustion. She had now understood that she was not in control of what she did. Also, earlier that evening she had caught sight of Ronnie in a dressing-gown through Ivor’s halopen door. It seemed that he had simply moved back in, and now it was up to her to through them both out. She had caught herself thinking: What does it matter? And even that she and Janet should pack their things and move out and leave the flat to Ivor and Ronnie, anything to avoid fighting. That this idea was not far off lunacy did not surprise her, for she had decided she was very likely mad. Nothing she thought pleased her; for some days she had been observing ideas and images pass through her mind, unconnected with any emotion, and did not recognise them as her own. (485)

In spite of Anna’s impending surrender to her madness, the passage is not a representation of her state of mind. Instead of demonstrating it, the narrator here tells us about it. Yet, there is an air of disconnectedness, almost randomness about the paragraph. Parataxis reigns not only in the sentences that describe the scene but also in those which pretend to analyze Anna’s inner state. The fragmentation of which Lessing speaks is evident. The conjunctions when they do appear are mere connectives, without any indication of the nature of the relationship between the parts they connect. ‘And’ prevails even within clauses: ‘And even that she and Janet should pack their things and move out and leave the flat to Ivor and

Ronnie, anything to avoid fighting.’ A mere sequence, with the recurring conjunction showing the tiresomeness of these events, driven home by the final fatigued gesture of ‘anything to avoid fighting’.

Another example is taken from the black diary:

Dressing for lunch I was thinking of how Molly would enjoy this – playing some role or other. Decided I’d look like a ‘lady writer’. I had a skirt, rather too long, and a badly fitting blouse. I put them on and some arty beads. And some long coral earrings. Looked the part. But felt enormously uncomfortable – as if I were inside the wrong skin. Irritated. No use thinking of Molly. At the last moment changed into myself. Took a lot of trouble. (270)

This kind of breezy reporting does not need hypotactic ordering. It seems to be fairly typical of the prose of the black notebook, even when it is in a serious mood. Thus, the first entry has a passage that deals with terror:

Every time I sit down to write, and let my mind go easy, the words. It is so dark, or something to do with darkness. Terror. The terror of this city. Fear of being alone. Only one thing stops me from jumping up and screaming or running to the telephone to ring somebody, it is to deliberately think myself back into that hot light....white light closed eyes, the red light hot on the eyeballs. (54)

The red notebook, dealing mainly with Molly’s and Anna’s political experiences, is no different. ‘Spent last evening trying to find out as much as possible about Quemoy. Very little in my bookshelves or in Molly’s. We are both frightened, perhaps this will be the beginning of a new war’. (283)

The sentences can get much longer but basically the syntax remains just as paratactic.

The same is true of the yellow notebook which consists mainly of the manuscript of the novel about Ella and Paul, along with a discussion of that novel and other plans for writing. Thus, it is a combination of the conventional novel style of *Free Women* – simple and vivid, broken up by numerous dialogs, avoiding the introspectively essayistic and leaving the reader to divine its possible contents from the spare narrative and straightforward talk – and the tentative linear style of the diaries. There is an air of schematic simplicity about it at times, the simplicity of origin and goal which contains (or hides) within itself the complexities of the middle stage:

Ella moves into a new flat. Julia resentful. An area of their relationship obscured before is now exposed by Julia’s attitude. Julia had dominated Ella. Ella had been prepared to be dominated, or at least been prepared to look as if she was. Julia’s nature was essentially generous – kind, warm, giving. Yet now she even goes to the length of complaining to mutual friends that Ella had taken advantage of her, had made use of her. (430)

The Blue Notebook starts out as a response to Anna’s desire to turn everything into fiction. Coming away from a quarrel between Molly and her son, she finds that she immediately starts turning the experience into a story. Anna feels this propensity to be an evasion of reality: ‘Why not write down, simply, what happened between Molly and her son today?’ She goes on to do this in the diary. The various experiences recorded here are set down in sequence, simply with comment but without the kind of overriding theme or principle

that would call for syntactic or larger scale subordination. Sessions with the psychoanalyst are also recorded as straightforwardly as scenes between Molly or herself and Tommy. Total reduction characterizes the blue notebook before it ends. This section starts with an attempt by Anna to find the shape of her own life through a simple summary of facts.

I've got to accept the patterns of self-knowledge which mean unhappiness or at least a dryness. But I can twist it into victory. A man and a woman yes. Both at the end of their tether. Both cracking up because of a deliberate attempt to transcend their own limits. And out of the chaos, a new kind of strength. (616)

But this is an acknowledged failure. Yet, the notebooks, failures as they might be in their own right, make the synthesis of the golden notebook possible. Is its style significantly different, giving some indication that the new unified view includes hierarchical order and asks for hypotactic arrangements? It does not appear to do that at all.

It is so dark in this flat, so dark, it is as if darkness were the shape of cold. I went through the flat turning on light everywhere, the dark retreated to outside the window, a cold shape trying to press its way in. But when I turned on the light in my big room, I knew this was wrong, light was foreign to it, so I let the dark come back, controlled by the two paraffin heaters and the glow from the gas fire. (583)

The unity it is said to glimpse is basically incommunicable. As Lessing writes in her later Introduction, there is now even less structure: 'things have come together, the divisions have broken down, there is formlessness with the end of fragmentation.' And, significantly, this breakdown itself is seen as the triumph of unity. Even when Anna's madness finally splits her personality completely, and complex dreams and visions are communicated with comment and interpretation, the paratactic pattern remains.

Coaching the golden notebook part in hypotaxis would be false because it would imply that the vision attained in it is one of clarity and order. On the contrary, the final version of Anna's film is a 'fusion' – people, faces, movements, places are all seen together. The paratactic construction of sentences influences the larger units of the text. Thus, sentences within a paragraph tend to be lined up in an associative or cumulative pattern, without any indication of their rank of relationship. Nor is there any hierarchy of characters as they frequently are parts of each other, or of a whole which cannot act as the superior principle since that has not been fully established.

Similarly, the overall structure of the novel tends to be circular or open-ended and to consist of elements that cannot be subordinated to each other in any satisfying or stable way.

The novel, undeniably, has a form, since all writing is form in itself; but form in *The Golden Notebook* remains elusive, as it continually undermines itself through its overt circularity and metafictional structure. Greene is right when she asserts that, in Lessing's novel, 'form is accepted within full ironic recognition of the limits of form' (Greene 105). Since the various parts of the novel occupy different narrative levels and yet intersect, the novel defies a stable structure. Thus, *The Golden Notebook* becomes an arena in which the narrative levels and voices try to find their way for articulation. In this troublesome way, necessarily there are fragments, gaps, lapses, shifts and multiplicity in the narration, which are the very characteristics of postmodern literature.

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