

## Creativity and Writer's Block in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*

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### Abstract:

In Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), the English novelist presents what she calls "writer's block" or the blocked creativity of the artist which prevented him or her from creating. In describing, the reasons for this block, Doris Lessing sheds light on the chaos, destructive relationships, lack of coherence and order in our fragmented materialistic society.

Anna Wulf, the protagonist in the story, is a novelist of alienation and fragmentation of her consciousness in the disintegrated world. Writer's block has taken her over and choked the love for writing and searching she once had. This paper is an attempt to examine Anna writer's block, her struggle to overcome this block and to arrive at an enlightened state of consciousness that allows for "recreation".

### الإبداع وعبقرية الكاتب في قصة دوريس ليسن (الدفتري الذهبي)

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ملخص البحث :

قدمت لنا الكاتبة الإنكليزية Doris Lessing في كتابها *The Golden Notebook* المنشور في سنة ١٩٦٢ ما تسميه ظاهرة الانحباس الفكري أو توقف الإبداع عند الكاتب ، وفي وصفها لهذه الحالة ألفت الكاتبة الضوء على الفوضى ، وانعدام التماسك والنظام في مجتمعنا المادي المعاصر .

Anna Wulf بطلة رواية الكتاب الذهبي هي أيضاً روائية تعاني من الاغتراب النفسي والتشتت الذهني في عالمنا المعاصر الذي أدى إلى توقفها عن الكتابة والإبداع. إن هذه الدراسة تلقي الضوء على المشكلة التي تعاني منها بطلة القصة ومراحل التنوير التي مرت بها وصولاً إلى نوع من الاستقرار النفسي التي فسحت المجال لتبدأ الكاتبة إبداعها من جديد.

Doris Lessing, the great English novelist, is fully aware of the problems that affect the writer's creative process. In an interview with her, Mrs. Lessing says:

“About five years ago I found myself thinking about the novel which most writers now are tempted to write at some time or another, about the problems of a writer, about the artistic sensibility. I saw no point in writing this again, it has been done too often, it has been one of the major themes of the novel in our time. Yet having decided not to write it, I continued to think about it and about the reasons why artists now have to combat various kinds of narcissism. I found that if it were to be written at all, the subject should be not a practicing artist but an artist with some kind of a block which prevented him or her from creating. In describing the reasons for his block, I would be making the criticisms I wanted to make about our society”<sup>(1)</sup>.

So begins Doris Lessing's novel The Golden Notebook, published in 1962 and now considered one of the major works of twentieth century literature. It is “an experimental book exploring the destructive relationships and mirror the lack of coherence and order in our fragmented materialistic society”<sup>(2)</sup>.

Anna Wulf, the protagonist in the story, is a novelist of alienation and fragmentation of her consciousness in the disintegrated world. She is

in her thirties, divorced, living with her young daughter in a flat occasionally renting out a room; this is the way to fill some of the empty walls of her home from closing in on her.

Writer's block has taken her over and choked the love for writing and searching she once had. Her first novel, Frontiers of War, an autobiographical story about a group of communists in colonial Africa, was immensely successful. Though, as she says, "it is almost as if someone else wrote it...".

In Anna's first line of dialogue, she declares, "As far as I can see everything is cracking up" (P.9)<sup>(3)</sup>. Lessing depicts a divided woman who reflects the fragmentation of her surrounding world. She is suspicious, mistrustful and very responsive to the atmosphere of violence and self-betrays in the world. Her exasperating sensibility makes her complicated to share life with. She falls in love with Michael, who, five years later leaves her. He was also married to begin with. We know absolutely nothing about the man. The author endlessly describes her own reactions, her agony over the loss of Michael.

Because of this permanent and breath-taking anxiety, Anna's life as retold or rather faithfully recorded by herself is a gasping disconnected sequence of days, years, incidents and mainly regrets. It is apparent from the beginning of the novel that Anna has never experienced what Lidia Vianu calls "peace of mind". She has as Lidia observes:

long, torturing spells of unhappiness which from time to time drives her into wilderness, but when she could really be happy, she is unable to enjoy it ... because she is overburdened with the feeling of time, with

the pang that the moment is short and going,  
going, gone<sup>(4)</sup>.

Laboring against a writing block, following the immense success of her autobiographical novel, Anna Wulf gradually disintegrates into a nervous breakdown emerging only slowly into a rich sense of her individual self in relation to a collective psyche. Anna is unable to write another successful novel. She suffers “torments of dissatisfaction and incompleteness” because of her “inability to enter those areas of life my way of living, education, sex, politics, bar me from” (P.59). In the words of Bernard Bergonzi, Anna “is suffering from a writer’s block and can not produce an effective sequel to Frontiers of War”<sup>(5)</sup>.

Anna has lost faith in her own power to write or think effectively. Out of “fear of chaos, formlessness - of breakdown”, she decides to keep four notebooks of different colours (black, red, yellow and blue). One for each component of her life. “Anna’s different notebooks all contain different selves through time viewed from different angles”<sup>(6)</sup> Threaded through these versions of Anna’s self is a conventional novel called Free Women which gives coherent form to Anna’s experience.

In each of Anna’s notebook, “the first page or two showed broken scribbling and half sentences. Then a title appeared, as if Anna had almost automatically, divided herself into four, and then, from the nature of what she had written, named these divisions” (P.55). The drama of each notebook “is her battle with a lying nostalgia, a yearning for the recovery of the stage illusion of moral certainty, innocence, unity and peace”<sup>(7)</sup>.

In the black notebook, Anna reviews the African experiences of her earlier years that provided the source material for her first novel Frontiers of War. “I said nothing in it that wasn’t true” says Anna Wulf but “the

emotion it came out was something frightening, the unhealthy, feverish illicit excitement of wartime ... I cannot read that novel now without feeling ashamed as if I were in a street naked" (P.61).

The black notebook reveals that Anna's writer's block comes partly from her guilt at having written this novel; what seemed to have been a representation of truth at the time it was written now appears to be dishonest. According to her, the novel distorts the facts based on true events because it is "informed by a lying nostalgia, a longing for license, for freedom, for the jungle, for formlessness" (P.61).

Anna Wulf then, is preoccupied with the process of writing, the inability of writing adequately to convey experience and the unreliability of memory. She devotes herself to depicting and criticizing the emotional atmosphere of that time and place. The predominant tone, she realizes, is the same that infects her writing now:

I am falling into the wrong tone-and yet I hate that tone, and yet we all lived inside it for months and years, and it did us all, I am sure, a great deal of damage. It was self-punishing, a locking of feeling, an inability or a refusal to fit conflicting things together to make a whole : so that one can live inside it no matter how terrible (P.63).

In a red notebook, Anna records her political life, her disillusionment with communist ideologies. In the entry to this notebook, she writes "... somewhere at the back of my mind when I joined the party was a need for wholeness, for an end to the split, divided, unsatisfactory way we all live in" (P.142).

For a while Anna believed in the validity of socialism (when she was very young in South Africa), then in the communist theories (when she came to England). Communism to her used to be like an open window but the window is slowly closed Anna withdraws as she feels “the immense gap between communist theories and communist realities”<sup>(8)</sup>. Her deep enthusiasms are being undercut by the observation of “the dry, wise, ironical, political woman within herself (141). Gradually Anna comes to constructive consciousness of her political illusion. She drifts away from her communist friends, fits more and more in her surroundings, a step in her progress towards reality.

The yellow notebook deals with Anna’s creation of fiction as ways of knowing herself and her past, of transforming facts into knowledge of reality. Anna “makes up stories” mostly drafts of a novel in which Ella relives part of Anna’s experience. Anna’s novel traces the love affair of Ella and Paul Tanner (a fictional version of Anna’s lover Michael). In Ella, she represents her romantic, idealizing self- the part of her that wishes “to put her intelligence to sleep and float in a dream world of love and trust (P.183).

In Paul she represents the disappointed idealist who feels disgust and bitterness in the face of suffering in the world. Paul commits suicide when he despairs of fulfilling “the impossible fantasies of a distant future”(P.151).

At this stage of Anna’s development, Anna moves further toward acceptance of reality by acknowledging the evidence of her own art work though her frustrated idealism still extends to her attitude towards art. Anna renounces her fiction-making because it does not as Betsy Draine remarks, “live up to her ideal of art”<sup>(9)</sup>.

The blue notebook has the structure of a diary where Anna “attempts” an account of her life. She realizes that a new point is necessary. This is emphasized at the onset with Anna’s resolution “I shall keep a diary” since fiction making has seemed to her an evasion of truth (P.197). In doing so, she opposes not only her romantic notions about art but also those of her analyst called Mother Sugar, an elderly woman who tries to make Anna write again, to cure her from her silence. As Anna listens to Mother Sugar talk about “a true artist” and “a real woman”, she feels that such absolute ideas are inconsistent with her developing view of life and art.

Anna chooses the diary notebook to record the facts of her experience only. Within the diary day, Anna faces some facts she has been skirting for a long time. She discovers as Draine observes, “that the communist ideal is being pursued in Russia and even in London by means of lies, repression, torture and murder. She realizes furthermore, that in the service of her idea of perfect love, she has repressed herself with her lover Michael just as she has repressed herself in relation to the party”<sup>(10)</sup>.

As Anna comes to recognize her disillusionment with communism and romantic love, she begins to approach the saving attitude of The Golden Notebook. As a matter of fact, Anna keeps weaving life into literature in her four notebook and the literature she offers us resorts as Lidia Vianu remarks “to the convention of chaos, carelessness, inability to conclude one particular incident before touching upon another”<sup>(11)</sup>. Disintegration ensued until Anna realizes what is happening symbolized by her decision to use one notebook. Anna tells us:

it occurs to me that what is happening is  
a breakdown of me, Anna, and this is how I  
am becoming aware of it. For words are

form, and if I am at a pitch where shape, form, expression are nothing, then I am nothing (PP.401-408).

Anna's final relationship with Saul Green the ex-communist contributes to her "Crackup" and "Self-healing". Anna is directly involved in a serious love-affair with Saul whose personality is more divided than her own. She shares with him in a way she has not with anyone else, a sense of the increasing loss of identity. Her deep need for happiness with a man renders her helpless upon being rejected; she converts her pain and resentment.

Anna's sense of identity merges with Saul. She is "frank about her sexual needs and satisfaction, yet clearly unhappy with them"<sup>(12)</sup>. Saul lectures Anna and she does learn from him to feel deeply and slowly even when feelings conflict with one another. By releasing her long repressed emotions as the woman betrayed and through participating in Saul's many shifts of identity and mood, she recognizes the full potential of her being.

Ultimately, Anna's effort to hold out against disintegration strengthen her; she manages to overcome her writer's block when she follows Saul's gift of a first line in two novels – Free Women and The Golden Notebook. Anna then, is released from the tight grip of the present.

In ending their relationship, Anna and Saul promise each other to be part of "a team" not simply with each other but with the other individuals who genuinely understand what is wrong with the world "we rely on each other all the time, we're a team, we're the ones who haven't given in who'll go on fighting" (P.549).

Anna is released from the tight grip of the present. By viewing her life from different angles, going over her experiences, her responses to life, she eventually comes to terms with her growing disillusionment, her feelings of social and emotional rejection.

When Anna becomes aware that those four books fail to capture her whole self, she decided to convey the totality of her experience in one notebook, The Golden Notebook. As Anna moves away from the fragmentation of her notebooks, she is more mature, and more creative. Anna realizes that the experience of “knowing” as an “illumination” will be a part of her for the rest of her life:

Knowing was an illumination. During the last weeks of craziness and timelessness, I've had, these moments of 'knowing' one after the other. Yet there is no way of putting this sort of knowledge into words. Yet, these moments have been so powerful like the rapid illumination of a dream that remain with one waking, that what I have learned will be part of how I experience life until I die (PP.541-542).

Lines like these give substance and meaning to life-driven chaos felt by all people at some time in their lives.

Ultimately, Anna comes to a greater understanding of herself that will allow her to rebuild meaningful paradigms. In the words of Herbert Marder, “the Golden Notebook not only tells the story of Anna Wulf's pursuit of an enlightened state of consciousness, but is in itself a demonstration of the ways, in which that consciousness works”<sup>(13)</sup>. The ultimate expression of her balanced perspective is the novel as whole. She

declares herself ready to put “all myself in one book” (P.519). Freedom for Anna becomes possible at the moment when she is no longer bound up by external factors.

To conclude, The Golden Notebook exemplifies the fragmentation of Anna’s mind and personality, her blocked creativity and the final psychic integration that allows for “recreation”. This paper shows how Anna’s realization of her complete freedom to write produces Anna’s sense of responsibility to create Free women. Therefore through her “unremitting self consciousness”, Anna reveals her “complete freedom” and finds the ability to generate writing.

The Golden Notebook ends with Anna and Saul giving each other words, notes, sentences and a starting point for their intended future novels.

**Notes:**

1. Doris Lessing (2004). "The Golden Notebook An interview". Available: <http://www.lessing.redmood.com.the.notebook.html>.
2. Roopa Malavally Belur (2004). "The Golden Notebook by Doris Lessing". Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/books99/01/10/specials/Lessing.html>.
3. Doris Lessing (1962). The Golden Notebook (London: Michael Joseph Ltd.). Further references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.
4. Lidia Vianu (1999). "The Uncomfortable Novelist". Available: <http://www.acm.org/pubs/citations/Journals/cacm/44-5.html>
5. Bernard Bergouzi (1970). The Situation of the Novel (London: Redwood press limited), P. 202.
6. Lynda Scott (1996). "Writing the Self: Selected Works of Doris Lessing". Deep South V.2 R.2. (Newzealand : University of Otago). Available: <http://www.Doris-Lessing.co.uk/works.html>.
7. Betsy Draine (1980). "Nostalgia and Irony: The post Modern Order of The Golden Notebook", Modern Fiction Studies, No. I, Vol. 26. P. 33.
8. Lidia Vianu.
9. Draine, P. 40.
10. Ibid, P. 41.
11. Lidia Vianu.
12. Robert Taubman (1983). "Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer". The New Pelicam Guide to English Literature, Boris Ford (ed.) Vol. 8. The Present (Middlesex : Penguin books).
13. Herbert Marder (1980). "The Paradox of Form in The Golden Notebook" Modern Fiction Studies, No. I. Vol. 26. P.49.

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