Search for Whollnes in Lessing's Golden Notebook

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INTRODUCTION

Among young contemporary English writers, Doris Lessing is the most intensely committed to active persuasion to reform society. In a series of loosely connected essays, entitled Going Home (1957), published after she had returned to her early home in British colonial Africa for a visit, Miss Lessing frequently advocates direct participation in political action. She talks of the “sense of duty” that makes her join organizations, defends (on biographical rather than ultimate grounds) her own support of communism, and ends her essays by unfurling a qualified banner. Miss Lessing’s interest in the battle permeates most of her short stories and novels. Frequently the theme of the work is whether or not, despite a hostile or indifferent society, strong commitment to a particular cause or political doctrine is justifiable. Doris Lessing has consciously sought the socially rejected. When she moved to England in 1949, her sense of social responsibility and her distrust of those who sanction and are sanctioned by the reigning society led her to search for her values and for her literary material among the working classes in London. As she herself explains in a recently published documentary (In Pursuit of the English, 1960). Lessing’s visionary fiction
has some cognitive strength and considerable pathos, but the reader must fight through to them against Lessing’s own language, which is, all too frequently, a kind of drab shrug. Lessing’s one undisputable achievement remains her immensely influential novel The Golden Notebook. The oddity of this achievement is that the book is very much a traditional work, resembling neither her early social realism nor her later, rather grim ventures into speculative fiction. The Golden Notebook has mothered hordes of feminist novels, and yet it is hardly what would now be considered “feminist” writing by most critics of that persuasion. Not that Lessing is a contemporary version of George Eliot, a woman so strong as a novelist and so majestic as a moralist that her vision is not much more gender-oriented than was Shakespeare’s. Critics who compare Lessing to George Eliot or to Turgenev do her an ill service, as she simply is not of that eminence. She is a contemporary of George Gissing or Olive Schreiner, and inflating her importance, though inescapable in current literary and sexual politics, finally may sink her without trace. The Golden Notebook will survive, because its rugged experimentation with form rises out of socially realistic concerns, and is therefore undertaken against the grain, as it were. At the center of The Golden Notebook is Lessing’s assumption that her Anna Wulf is the paradigm for all contemporary women. Whether or not this is a universal experience, its equation of pain, worldly knowledge, and growth is certainly the dialectic of experience in The Golden Notebook. Novels, like poems, cannot be written with rows of asterisks, a circle perhaps, or a square. As a prophet of consciousness, Lessing increasingly is humanly impatient in regard to language, an impatience that sometimes she can render with poignancy. Ultimately, it is her refusal to sustain or be sustained by societal ideas of order that drives her on towards speculative fiction, and towards speculative doctrines. Miss Lessing maintains a consistent interest in time and place. Both the use of the social class as a significant part of the identity of the individual, and the fact that conflicts are so frequently depicted as conflicts between generations, between the products of one time and another, indicate Miss Lessing’s addiction to historical categories. Frequent parenthetical historical references fill all the fiction. An attitude stemming from the ‘twenties or from World War I is accurately pinned down and labeled. Doris Lessing’s intense feeling of political and social responsibility is carefully worked into specific historical situations. But the positive convictions can become heavy-handed, and the specific situations journalistic, while the strict allegiance to time and place can limit the range of perception about human beings. Miss Lessing’s kind of intensity is simultaneously her greatest distinction and her principal defect. She produces an enormously lucid sociological journalism, honest and committed, but in much of her work she lacks a multiple awareness, a sense of comedy, a perception that parts of human experience cannot be categorized or precisely located, a human and intellectual depth. Intense commitment can cut off a whole dimension of human experience. The Golden Notebook might be a novel about certain political and sexual attitudes, that have force now; it is an attempt to explain them, to objectivise them, to set them in relation with each other. So in a way it could be a social novel.

We must say that “The Golden Notebook” is a controversial novel ever since its publication. The novel’s plot of fiction and “clip” structure make the reader feel a bit confused in a kind of way. It is obvious that as a female writer, she maintains her concern in the female issue, and she does it very well. We could say that “The Golden Notebook” was the most considerable single work by an English author in the 1960s.

CHAPTER I

JOINING THE CENTURIES:LESSING FROM THE TWENTIETH TO THE TWENTY- FIRST CENTURY

1.1 Doris Lessing : Nation, Politic, Identity

Doris Lessing was born in Kermanshah, Persia on October 22, 1919, and she was raised in southern Africa. Later she wrote numerous novels and short stories about the effects of British colonial rule on the native populace. The central themes in Lessing’s works are feminism, the battle of the sexes, and individuals in search of wholeness. She is best known for her popular novel “The Golden Notebook, which delves into the complicated psychological makeup of English woman in the 1960s. When she was just a child Lessing’s parents moved her to the British colony of Southern Rhodesia. Growing up, she observed that the British settlers often treated the native people who worked for them as laborers and servants. They looked upon them harshly, and the memories of those observations became material for her books. Doris Lessing had
little formal education. She learn how to read by looking at cigarette packets and the Army and Navy Catalogue. When she was fifteen, she left home to work as nursemaid for another family. At the age of 18. She worked at the Rhodesian parliament, where she helped to found a non-racist wing of the party. In a 1980 interview, Lessing observed of her literary career:

“I always write about the individual and that which surrounds him”.

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