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Madness and Stabilization: Inner Space Voyage in *The Golden Notebook*

Rakes Sarkar

Assistant Teacher, Medgachi High School
Formerly Guest Lecturer,
Tarakeswar Degree College.

The term 'inner-space' originated in the New Wave science fiction of the 1960s and 1970s. The writers of this trend sought to develop a modern literary fiction with advanced aesthetic techniques, dealing with 'soft' sciences like psychology and sociology rather than 'hard' sciences like physics or astronomy. In short, writers like J.G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. LeGuin, Samuel R. Delany and others wanted to combine the best aspects of both science fiction and mainstream literary fiction into a new, vibrant, and hybrid art form. Therefore, they rejected the traditional outer space stories in favor of exploring the new frontiers of inner space which signifies mind-exploration rather than space travel.

Doris Lessing's only work that has been categorized by the writer herself as inner space fiction is *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. Though not overtly connected with the New Wave practitioners of science fiction, Lessing perhaps borrows the term to designate the immediate necessity of exploring the depth of human psyche in order to widen our perceptual gaze. Lessing's heroines, starting from Anna Wulf to Martha Quest, have always been self-analytical, highly sensitive and responsive to dreams and moments of illuminating insights. Such high sensitivity on the part of the protagonists is, in fact, extremely necessary to a postmodern writer. Set against the prevailing chaos in both the mind and the world, the individual self needs a release. In the words of R.D. Laing "an intensive discipline of unlearning is necessary for anyone before one can begin to experience the world afresh, with innocence, truth, and love" (Laing 26). Clearly, Lessing discovers such 'an intensive discipline of unlearning' in her pursuit of inner space. Though her early novels show her extensive commitment to a sense of social and political responsibility, the exploration of psychic depths through the vast mystery and richness of inner space journeys has always been her ready method of managing madness and facing fragmentation. Quite early in her career Lessing realized the immense possibilities of inner space voyages in shaping an individual's self, the possibilities with which the New Wave science fiction had "begun to suggest the way to an alternative mythology, via 'inner space', which may possibly help to satisfy the yearning of the human spirit" (Ash 83). The yearning of Anna Wulf's spirit in *The Golden Notebook* is "to create order, to create a new way of looking at life" (*The Golden Notebook* 76). Therefore, she delves deep into disorder and undertakes psychic voyages through inner space which ultimately help her to unmake and remake her 'self'. Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis reasonably says that in *The Golden Notebook* "Lessing's protagonist moves deeper within, realizing that there will be no cure for the external fragmentation undermining her until she deals with the inner disunity that both mirrors and contributes to it" (Perrakis 63).

The novel consists of a series of notebooks written by Anna Wulf. The Black Notebook records various aspects of Anna Wulf, the writer. The Red Notebook records her association with the British Communist Party and her political involvement. The Yellow Notebook documents the story of the life of Ella, a story that Anna makes out of her own experience. The Blue notebook is constituted by Anna's attempt at a factual diary-account of her life. Anna declares it a number of times that she feels the necessity of keeping four notebooks out of her fear of chaos and formlessness. In the *Preface* Lessing says that the story is rooted in Anna Wulf's fear of chaos and confusion, of formlessness and fragmentation. Danziger rightly says that the novel's "form and content are resolute attempts to come to terms with multiplicity and fragmentation" (Danziger 47). Such breakdown of external reality as well as of inner solidarity is a traditional theme of postmodern literature. What is remarkable is that Lessing here shows how this theme of breakdown "is a way of self-healing, of the inner self's dismissing false dichotomies and divisions..." (*Preface to The Golden Notebook* 8). The ferment of fragmentation is voiced early in the novel as Anna points out to Molly that "everything's cracking up" (*The Golden Notebook* 25). The question that arises is has Anna Wulf enough potential to confront this overwhelming chaos? The story gives early indication of Anna's newly-gained ability to grapple with words and expressions like 'insecure' and 'unrooted': "Anna has recently been learning to use these words in a different way, not as something to be apologized for, but as flags or banners for an attitude that amounted to a different philosophy" (*The Golden Notebook* 31). That Anna has the innate ability to update herself, that she can unmake and remake her own 'self' is confirmed later by Tommy with whom Anna is engaged in many intriguing and illuminating conversations: "People like Anna or Molly and that lot, they're not just one thing, but several things. And you know they could change and be something different. I don't mean their characters would change, but they haven't set into a mould" (*The Golden Notebook* 52).

The inner space journey and the journey of the notebooks begin with Anna's confrontation with 'terror', 'darkness' and 'fear of being alone':

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, the light, closed eyes, the red light hot on the eyeballs.

(*The Golden Notebook* 71)

The expression 'think myself back into that hot light' indicates the inner space flight of her consciousness, that keeps her sanity intact. In fact, the inner space journeys that Anna Wulf

undertakes are mostly alive in her dreams about various persons and experiences. Just before her final appointment with Mrs. Marks, she has a dream of a magic box containing “a mass of fragments and pieces...bits and pieces from everywhere, all over the world” (*The Golden Notebook* 230). These ugly fragments are very soon transmuted in her dream into a beautiful and meaningful small green crocodile: “I thought it was the image of a crocodile, made of jade, or emeralds, then I saw it was alive, for large frozen tears rolled down its cheeks and turned into diamonds” (*The Golden Notebook* 230). The madness that keeps on haunting her existence is thus transcribed in her inner space voyage into a beautiful image of solidarity, firmness and unity. It provides her with renewed vigor to come face to face with the reality she fears to encounter. The desperate search for solidarity in inner space journey always results in an image of unity in dreams. In *The Summer before the Dark* Kate Brown’s sanity is kept alive through the recurring image of the seal in her dreams.

The inner space introspection opens up a powerful possibility of understanding others, of living through others’ experiences; a possibility that shows a marked transition from the personal to the archetypal. In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, the narrator’s inner space journeys make her live through Emily’s past and present experiences and work as a balm to her restlessness. Lessing explains this possibility in the *Preface* in the following words:

Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions – and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas – can’t be yours alone. 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 him as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general, as indeed life always does...

(*Preface to The Golden Notebook* 13)

During one of their conversations on the lives of mothers and the lives of others, Anna finds in Tommy’s face a “patient, earnest, inward-looking stare of his introspection” and immediately she feels a “wave of hysteria rise in herself” (*The Golden Notebook* 239) and she realizes that it actually reflects Tommy’s agony.

Anna’s fear of fragmentation is again explicit after her visit to Richard’s office to discuss about Marion. She is in a “state of near-collapse...struggling for control” (*The Golden Notebook* 343). She desperately tries to recover but all her efforts are in vain for the terror and tremor of cracking up overpowers her completely. She loses all her abilities to remain immune to the chaotic ways of the external world. Anna believes that “even the softest-willed people have

escape routes” (*The Golden Notebook* 341), and inner space journey provides her the escape routes whenever she needs it:

She lay, frightened, and again the words came into her head: the spring has gone dry. And with the words, came the image: she saw the dry well, a cracked opening into the earth that was all dust. Laying about her for something to hold on to, she clutched to the memory of Mother Sugar. Yes. I have to dream of water, she told herself...I must dream of water. I must dream of how to get back to the spring

(The Golden Notebook 359)

Quite expectedly, the dream of a desert devoid of water brings about a significant change in her knowledge of herself as she wakes up with the conviction that if she is “to cross the desert she must shed burdens” (*The Golden Notebook* 359). This brief inner space journey dissects her decision and clarifies her confusion: “She had gone to sleep confused about what to do about Ronnie and Ivor, but woke knowing what she would do” (*The Golden Notebook* 359).

Anna is aware that a certain type of intelligence keeps her sanity intact and she feels frightened when she finds this intelligence dissolving, resulting in breakdown. This finds expression in her recurrent dreams. Whenever she gets tired or stressed, or whenever she feels that the ‘walls’ of her self are “thin or in danger” (*The Golden Notebook* 419) the dream comes back to her. During her relationship with Saul Green Anna continues dreaming as usual, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes naturally. The dream emotionally tortures as well as nurtures her so that she slowly attains an intuitive insight where “the word sane meant nothing, as the word mad meant nothing” (*The Golden Notebook* 518). Coming out of the “cocoon of madness” (*The Golden Notebook* 508) that she was in, Anna has now an epiphanic vision in an updated version of her recurring dream:

I slept and I dreamed the dream. This time there was no disguise anywhere. I was the malicious male-female dwarf figure, the principle of joy-in-destruction; and Saul was my counter-part, male-female, my brother and my sister, and we were dancing in some open place, under enormous white buildings, which were filled with hideous, menacing, black machinery which held destruction...now it was the caress of two half-human creatures, celebrating destruction

(The Golden Notebook 518)

Rigney has rightly observed that in *The Golden Notebook* madness is used in a positive sense as a means of giving up all certainties and forgetting the “distinction between the real and the non-real, between the self and the non-self” (Rigney 75). With the taste of this terrible joy Anna makes a long journey into inner space in the final section of *The Golden Notebook*. Several threads of her self communicate with each other and several voices merge and play. In this schizophrenic scenario, however, a part of her mind always helps her to control her sleep and to regulate her survival and revival from disintegration. Anna here looks back into herself and relives her past experiences one by one: “Scene after scene flicked on, then off; I knew this brief ‘visiting’ of the past was so that I should be reminded I had still to work on it” (*The Golden Notebook* 537). The journey breaks down abruptly and she cries out, addressing Saul, “Can’t you see that this is a cycle, we go around and around?” (*The Golden Notebook* 539). Truly, the making and unmaking of the self or the destruction and construction of the sense of being is a continuous, never-ending cyclical process. Playing with the small cuttings from newspapers Anna finally realizes that she is going mad. The malady being acute, the remedy now becomes exact. The continuous recurrence of hallucination now brings about complete illumination:

This understanding was altogether terrible; a really different from anything she had known before as reality, and it came from a country of feeling she had never visited. It was not being ‘depressed’; or being ‘unhappy’; or feeling ‘discouraged’; the essence of the experience was that such words, like joy or happiness, were meaningless. Coming around from this illumination—which was timeless; so that Anna did not know how long it had lasted, she knew she had had an experience for which there were no words—it was beyond the region where words could be made to have sense

(*The Golden Notebook* 565)

The ending of Lessing’s novel shows that Anna has completely recovered from her psychological breakdown, as she is going to be “integrated with British life at its roots” (*The Golden Notebook* 576). Joseph Campbell correctly observes that the experience of an acute schizophrenic crisis is “the universal formulae also of the mythological hero-journey...interpreted from this point of view, a schizophrenic breakdown is an inward and backward journey to recover something missed or lost, and to restore thereby a vital balance” (Campbell 202-3). It is certainly true that as an independent individual Anna regains her vital balance, but we must not forget that inner space voyages seek to discover the ways of

transcendence from the personal to the archetypal, from the subjective to the objective. Lessing herself acknowledges this in the *Preface*. The source of the progress of our conscience lies in the constant deformation and reformation of the self. Anna once explains to Tommy that the whole world moves forward through the continuous drying up and filling up of the ‘well of faith’ (*The Golden Notebook* 248) and that the future lies in “keeping the dream alive” by “new people” who will not suffer from “paralysis of the will” (*The Golden Notebook* 248). Anna does not suffer from paralysis of will anymore. But her inner space voyages and her delirious descent into nightmare fail to bring out the key to transcendence. In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, which Lessing declares to be her explicitly inner space fiction, the protagonist Charles Watkins eventually recovers his former identity, but fails to remember and communicate what he has learned in his inner space voyages. *Memoirs of a Survivor*, another of Lessing’s inner space stories, ends with the failure of the survivor to completely execute the discovery of her inner space voyage in her real life. *The Golden Notebook*, written much earlier than these inner space stories, indicates this same limitation. Anna is cured of her terrifying madness and of her fear of fragmentation as the unity of her being is substantially stabilized and vigorously vitalized by the inner space journeys; but she is unable to successfully translate the essence of her personal recovery and inner space discovery into any palpable message for the larger interest of humankind.

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