

# Novelist Doris Lessing (1919-2013) and the long retreat

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Doris Lessing, the Nobel Prize winning novelist, died at age 94 in London on November 11. She produced over 50 novels and scores of short stories in her lifetime, most set in southern Africa or England. She is best remembered for her first novel *The Grass is Singing* (1950), her most well-known work *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and the five books of her science fiction *Canopus in Argus* series (1979-83).

Lessing, at one time a member of the British Communist Party, produced significant material over the decades, but she is best remembered as a writer affected by the crimes of Stalinism and the shakeup of the official Communist parties in the period after Stalin's death in 1953. Along with many others, she eventually moved sharply and disgracefully to the right.

Her work of the 1950s and early 1960s, especially *The Golden Notebook*, reflects the confusion about and ultimate flight from politics that affected many thousands of left intellectuals. British writers in particular, a number of whom had been members of the Communist Party for longer or shorter periods of time, including Iris Murdoch, Kingsley Amis, Stephen Spender and C. Day-Lewis (father of Daniel Day-Lewis), specialized in renouncing their one-time left views and, one way or another, returning to the bourgeois fold.

Lessing was born Doris May Tayler in 1919 in Tehran, in Persia (Iran). Her father, a former army officer who had lost both his legs in the First World War, worked for a British bank, and her mother was a homemaker of middle-class origin. In 1925 the family moved to a farm in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia, the present-day Zimbabwe, in southern Africa. Lessing finished her formal education at 14 and moved permanently to the colony's capital, Salisbury (now Harare), within a few years.

Life in Salisbury was changing as European refugees and British military began arriving at the outset of the Second World War. No doubt these changes, and a new state of moral and political flux, played a role in her eventual separation from her first husband, Frank Wisdom, in 1943. Her two children remained with him.

She began attending meetings of a group around the Left Book Club, an organization influenced by the Communist Party. There she met her second husband, Gottfried Lessing, a German refugee who later played a role in founding the Communist Party of Southern Rhodesia. Gottfried eventually became a Stalinist functionary in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and GDR ambassador to Uganda, where he was killed in 1979 during rioting against the government of Idi Amin. He was the uncle of the current German Left Party leader Gregor Gysi.

Doris Lessing's activity in left-wing politics in Salisbury during the war was a critical experience in her intellectual development. In one way or another, it had an impact on her writing for the rest of her life.

Lessing left Southern Rhodesia with her son (with Gottfried) Peter and settled in London in 1949, where she published her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, about a deadly incident brought about by white settler rule over the African population in the colony.

This period saw abrupt changes in the political climate. By the early 1950s, the post-war revolutionary wave that had swept Europe and Asia had been suppressed by the official Communist parties, permitting the stabilization of global capitalism. In 1952, in spite of doubts about the totalitarian regime in the USSR, Lessing officially became a member of one of these parties, the British Communist Party. At that time, she said almost five decades later in her autobiography, "it was taken for granted that capitalism was doomed." In 1953 Stalin died, and three years later came the thunderclap of First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech about Stalin's crimes at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which led to an exodus of thousands from the Stalinist parties. "If a map were made of my opinions," she wrote. "I would have to be described more as a Trotskyist—and in any communist country I would have been shot for saying more than a hundredth of what I thought." She may have been sincere in saying this, but Lessing took a course entirely at odds with that fought for by the Trotskyists.

Lessing wrote her most significant material from 1956 to 1962. She seems at this time to be sorting out the collapse of the Communist Party, the social ills of the post-war boom and her own role as an artist. In the course of this process, however, the element of intense personal introspection, shaped by the general climate of reaction, battled with and eventually overcame a serious political reckoning with Stalinism.

In 1958, she published *A Ripple from the Storm*, the second volume of her autobiographical *Children of Violence* series, a rendering of her experience around the Stalinist group in Salisbury. *The Golden Notebook* undoubtedly remains Lessing's artistic highpoint, and represented a turning point in her literary and political evolution.

The book consists of narrative sections entitled "Free Women," that deal with writer Anna Wulf, who, like Lessing, has come to London from Southern Africa, her actor friend Molly and their husbands, lovers and children. These scenes are interspersed with several notebooks of Anna's. A black notebook deals with Anna's life in Africa, a red notebook with the Communist Party, a blue one that is personal, and a yellow one that contains scenes of a novel in progress by Anna.

The novel is an attempt to approximate, from different points of view, the objective and subjective worlds of Anna. It is both a fragmented and harmonious whole that is guided, overall, by the difficulty Anna has in making sense of the changes in the world around her and within herself.

What gives this novel its own peculiar power is that it is sincerely driven by the crisis of Stalinism between 1953 and 1956, and its long decay in the years before. It speaks for the profound confusion and disillusionment of a generation. At one point Anna expresses the contradictions that beset Anna after a party meeting of writers in which they discuss a piece of Stalin's hack work on linguistics.

Although I am quite prepared to believe that [Stalin] is mad and a murderer (though remembering always ... that this is a time when

it is impossible to know the truth about anything), I like to hear people use that tone of simple, friendly respect for him. Because if that tone were to be thrown aside, something very important would go with it, paradoxically enough, a faith in the possibilities of democracy, of decency. A dream would be dead—for our time, at least.

The writer is being honest no doubt, but this simply gives an indication of how far removed such people were from genuine Marxism and its orientation to the fight for principle in the working class. They conceived of the Soviet Union and Stalin as something comforting and solid they could rely on as they went about their rather commonplace political and artistic business in Britain and elsewhere.

Lessing offered insight not only into the anxiety and disillusionment of the intellectuals, but also into the conformism of the post-war boom, that puts her work on a par with other important English-language novels of the day, including Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964), Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1962) and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). These works all convey a sense of pessimism and despair, and each in its way points toward the disappointments of the post-war artistic milieu.

The fact that *The Golden Notebook* has been almost universally hailed in recent obituaries of Lessing as the "first feminist novel" says a good deal more about cultural and social life in the early 21st Century than it does about the novel itself.

Lessing describes the relationships between men and women acutely, with male piggishness and pretenses exposed. The novelist, to her credit, denied she was a feminist. Nonetheless, when one looks for the source of this particular concern for male-female relations in the *Golden Notebook* and elsewhere in her work, it must be found in the context of the times: the loss of confidence by many intellectuals in the socialist perspective, insofar as they had ever had such confidence, and a turn in another direction, toward the politics of personal relations and private lives.

Lessing also published some of her finest short stories during this period. "The Day Stalin Died" (1957), "The Habit of Loving" (1957), "Homage for Isaac Babel" (1961) and "To Room Nineteen" (1963) all express, in one way or another, resignation in regard to the status quo and a retreat from the idea that a serious concern for the world beyond the self and family is something necessary in art and life.

By the late 1960s, a dystopian element appeared in her fiction, the final volume of *Children of Violence*, *The Four-Gated City* (1969), takes place in a near future where humanity is decimated by nerve gas, nuclear war and bubonic plague. Another dystopian novel, *Memoir of a Survivor*, would follow in 1974.

In the late 1960s she came under the influence of psychologist R.D. Laing and the Sufi mystic Idries Shah. The five volumes of *Canopus in Argus*, are somewhat tame as science fiction, or "space fiction," as Lessing called these works, and exhibit less of the socially critical element, in fact, than other works of the genre. They embodied many of Shah's mystical ideas.

To many, the series left a relatively weak impression. Gore Vidal, who thought highly of Lessing's abilities as a writer, called the first volume of the series, *Shikasta* (1979), "a fairy tale about good and bad extraterrestrial forces who take some obscure pleasure in manipulating a passive ant-like human race."

Lessing returned to political themes in 1985 at the height of Thatcherism in Britain in the *Good Terrorist*. The novel, about a group of radicals who squat in an abandoned house and attempt to join the IRA has several vivid scenes and identifies certain social types with some accuracy: the lazy, radical braggart who reads the *Morning Star* (the Communist Party newspaper) and the *Socialist Worker*; the energetic and self-sacrificing do-

gooder, etc. Unsurprisingly, the book holds out little confidence that society can be changed.

In *The Wind Blows Away our Words* (1987) she wrote an account of a trip she took to Peshawar in Pakistan to visit the mujahedin fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The book was poorly received, not least because of its apologetics for Pakistani dictator Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq.

After the demise of the Soviet Union, Lessing added her voice to the bourgeois triumphalism and her support to the post-Soviet school of falsification. She participated, for example, in a reactionary conference held at Rutgers University, "Intellectuals and Social Change in Central and Eastern Europe," in April 1992, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, then headed by Lynne Cheney, a ferocious anti-communist and wife of future vice president and war criminal Dick Cheney.

In her presentation, Lessing made no distinction between Marxism and Stalinism, arguing that "It is not a new thought that Communism debased language and with language, thought." She made the historically false claim, "We saw what happened when this formula, that writers must write about social injustice, took power in 1917. It became socialist realism." Stalinist "socialist realism," the official cultural policy in the USSR from 1934, was not the product of the October Revolution of 1917, but of its betrayal. "Socialist realism" was introduced as part of the attack, ultimately genocidal, on the traditions, program and human representatives of Bolshevism.

Underlying the disastrous interest in Communism, Lessing asserted in the same talk, was "excitement, pleasure in strong sensations, a search for ever-stronger stimuli. What could be more pleasurable when in one's twenties—the age when millions of young people have tortured or murdered others in the name of the forward march of mankind—than the excitement of being the only possessors of truth?" The writer claimed, furthermore, that "the left-wing, the social, even liberal movements of Europe have been terminally damaged because the progressive imagination was captured by the Soviet experience."

The French left-wing poet André Breton once scathingly suggested in an interview that a "truly clinical study" be made of the "specifically modern malady" which makes repentant intellectuals "radically change their opinions and renounce in a masochistic and exhibitionist manner their own testimony, becoming champions of a cause quite contrary to that which they began serving with great fanfare."

In 2007 Lessing became the oldest person, at 88, to have won the Nobel Prize. Her final book, *Alfred and Emily* (2008), is about her parents. The first half is a musing on what their lives might have been like if World War I had never happened and the second half an examination of what their lives actually were like.



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