ABSTRACT

Doris Lessing's creative span traverses large chunks of time, through major social and political upheavals that take place in this century, wherein she plays important and active roles. Her singularity lies, for one, in the multi-dimensionality with which she negotiates varied eclectic spaces, crucial states of being that help to construct both the self that is located at the centre of her text as well as the text. The articulation of sources of energy that fuel her writing in significant ways is a complex task. There are diverse pulls in opposite directions while similar ideas appear through recurrent symbols. This thesis attempts to show that although no ultimate vision of unity emerges through the fiction studied (and none is perhaps aimed at) important thoughts and seminal ideas form a consistent and coherent bedrock.

This study suggests, as this researcher believes, that it is impossible, and undesirable, to suggest evaluative readings of Lessing's oeuvre that may imprison her texts within any limiting critical grids. The vast open spaces of African landscape that the early fiction derives from finds parallels in the freedom from dogmatic structures that her mind believes in. Her fictive journeyings are in the search for selfhood and integration, both elusive entities that force the novelist to map strange terrains. Just as violence and anguish,
breakdown and neurosis defined the world in the post war years, social and political activism in the form of communism and feminism preoccupied Lessing and her protagonists. The one consistent metaphor here is a denial of stasis, old engagements substituted for new ones as the evolutionary quest goes on. The process by which movement from one moment of alignment to the next is achieved, through which the validity of one is transcended and the vitality of the other established is the object of interest as far as the scope of this thesis is concerned. This study offers analytic insights into those crucial landmarks that contribute towards enlargements and enhancements in Doris Lessing's vision.

Chapter I: Introductory Remarks

The first chapter offers a context of thoughts and ideas in Lessing scholarship by enumerating important critical readings of the novels. It relocates important texts, situating the major sites of meaning within them in the interface between the individual and the collective. It seeks to strike a balance between twin themes of continuity and change while dealing with the problematics of discovering wholeness in a fragmentary world. The concept of Evolution is one that is discussed at some length here, the impact of theories of Darwin and Spencer outlined. This theory is viewed as encapsulating important ideas of change, development and progression, ideas that can be found easily mirrored
in the fiction. Besides, it is suggested that the psyche of the exile that Lessing carries within her determines, to a large extent, her creative impulses.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Perspectives

This chapter is a historical and cultural contextualisation of the sources that energise Doris Lessing's major writing. Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Sufi mysticism have been perceived as being particularly relevant in this reading and thus critical formulations provided by these theoretical paradigms have been discussed in some detail. The chapter is sub-divided into three parts on the basis of these negotiations. It is hoped that such a strategy will provide clarity and sharp focus. The following novels have been taken up for detailed, and sometimes cursory, discussion: Children of Violence, The Golden Notebook, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, A Summer before the Dark and Memoirs of a Survivor.

Chapter 3: Africa

Africa emerges as a major metaphor in Doris Lessing's fiction, the vast open and empty spaces evocative of a savage and mythical past. The Grass is Singing, her first novel, also the one rooted in the African locale, brought for the novelist immediate recognition. It introduces many thematic areas, like
racism, the colour question, politics and gender ideology, that continue to engage her in later years. *Going Home* and *African Laughter* are the other texts discussed in this chapter. Separated by a gap of almost thirty five years in terms of publishing, they are a rich sociological source. Authentic experiences are fictionalised and transformed in the telling, all three works encapsulating the novelist's valuable responses to an African reality.

**Chapter 4: Canopus**

This chapter discusses Lessing's space-fantasy, focusing particularly on *Shikasta* and *Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five*. A theoretical framework of science-fiction writing is suggested and some important perspectives with reference to this genre are offered. The journey from realist to utopian writing runs parallel to the other, the movement in the text from a rational perception of the world to an intuitive apprehension of it. The sense of being set free from the pressures of confining reality is experienced both by writer and reader as she creates a complete new cosmology in language that is destabilising and elusive. The space-odyssey series makes a visionary statement, imaginary forays into strange and fictive lands suggestive of the idea that the possibilities of evolution are endless and infinite. This chapter observes that the keynote of *Canopus in Argos: Archives* lies in an
acceptance of and reconciliation with the fact that an individual must transcend personal yearnings and limiting selfhood in the larger interest of attaining affinity with the collective.

Chapter 5: Autobiography

This chapter demonstrates that a multiplicity of discourses is contained in the all-encompassing genre of autobiography. The gaps in history, filled up by memory and restructured through a kind of story-telling are seen as aspects of the self-chronicler's role. Latent reserves of introspection that lie within it raise questions regarding selfhood and identity. The thesis examines differences between autobiographical inputs in fiction, fictionalisation of life and real autobiography, showing that in the last of them all ongoingness and progression is of utmost importance. Located somewhere between the shadow areas of reporting and fiction writing, autobiography challenges generic categories, often transgressing and transcending them. The chapter shows how Under My Skin, with its hybridity and potential for plurality blurs the distinction between memory and imagination.
Chapter 6: A Postscript

This short last chapter offers some observations regarding Doris Lessing's major fiction. However, it does not make any attempt to impose reading strategies aimed at appraisal. *Love, Again*, the new novel is discussed in some detail. The return to realism and the reliance on predominant metaphors is referred to. A sense of open-endedness in the writing is perceived as of crucial import in the narrative vision of this novelist and freedom from dogmatic structures that condition the thinking process is commented upon.

Above all, this chapter reiterates that Lessing does not believe in conclusions.