CHAPTER FOUR: CANOPUS

This chapter focusses on Doris Lessing's space writing. Two major texts are discussed in detail, Shikasta and Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five. A completely new cosmology is created in Canopus In Argos: Archives, other worlds with different versions of Empire where there is systemic colonisation. She writes:

Shikasta was started in the belief that it would be a single self-contained book, and when it was finished I would be done with the subject. But as I wrote I was invaded by ideas for other books, other stories, and the exhilaration that comes from being set free into a larger scope, with more capacious possibilities and themes. It was clear that I had made-or found-a new world for myself, a realm where the petty world of planets, let alone individuals, are only aspects of cosmic evolution expressed in the rivalries and interactions of great galactic Empires. . . (S "Some Remarks")

She attributes the writing of space-fiction to her childhood in Africa. Sitting under the African sky with brilliant stars, she believes, "[one] automatically starts thinking in terms of millions of years . . . You have marvellous African sky, brilliant, brilliant stars-- you never see it here. And the stars close down, and all the time the meteors going across, every night, every few minutes." In an interview she recalls, that in Shikasta, the first in the Canopus in Argos series, she uses reincarnation as a metaphor or a literary idea: "It was a way of telling a story-- incorporating ideas that are in our great religions . . . if you read the Old Testament and the New Testament
and the Apocrypha and the Koran you find a continuing story. These religions have certain ideas in common, and one idea is, of course, this final war or apocalypse. So I tried to develop this idea".² There is a Warner too, as in other religious stories. She defends science fiction and its writers:

These dazzlers have mapped our world, or worlds, for us, have told us what is going on and in ways no one else has done, have described our nasty present long ago, when it was still in the future and the official scientific spokesmen were saying that all manner of things now happening were impossible- who have played the indispensable and (at least at the start) thankless role of the despised illegitimate son who can afford to tell truths the respectable siblings either do not dare, or, more likely, do not notice because of their respectability (S "Some Remarks")

Interestingly, she had begun in her early stories and novels with visible and real manifestations of oppression, racism and colonisation and in Shikasta and what follows, the thematic focus remains the same although major shifts in form have occurred. Sci-fi fascinates Lessing because it is so full of ideas. The narrator, detached and objective, retains the perspective and tone of the archivist. The sense of being set free from the pressures of confining reality hits Lessing as she discovers terrain hitherto unexplored and her feelings of sheer delight are obvious. Lorna Sage comments on this newly discovered "new world" that Lessing writes of, rightly seeing it as a "point of view that wrenches her out of the orbit of emotional commitment-the long, long view of the cosmic archivists, who record and collate
these horrors [pollution, starvation, genocide] with a cool, dispassionate eye, and for whom the end is never the end."

Language, that most elusive and shift of all tools, creates an atmosphere in Canopus in Argos: Archives, working through impressions. Nothing is said clearly either about the kind of landscape that exists here or of the people who inhabit it. There is more confusion since reality as expected in the familiar or known versions of the world does not exist here. Everything about this world is different and it becomes for this reason difficult to pinpoint "exactly" what the place is like. Words suggest a vast, desert-like scenario, arid and waste, a kind of purgatory inhabited by 'dead souls'. The story begins in medias res. There is a feeling of incompleteness and consequent dissatisfaction as the reader feels that crucial facts pertaining to this new world have been withheld from him/her leading to a kind of opaqueness in the text. Language performs here a destabilising function as it takes the bottom away from objective reality, seriously implicating the reader. The cultural and intellectual baggage that the reader carries with him/her largely defines the text, thereby colouring "reality" in varied hues. The name of the narrator, Johor, conceals rather than reveals identity. Jeannette King writes of the narrator: "Androgynous, endowed with no individualising background, habits or tastes, and using a language free from colloquialisms or other personal stylistic markers, he is in the main too disembodied, too removed from the world and assumptions of the reader, to act as an ideal reader, a focal point for his or her concerns." The responsibility then of the reader is immense in that s/he must read carefully, sensitively and also between lines to be able to pick up any clues the writer allows to drop. A full-fledged city, for instance, comes up in Shikasta where the dialectical movement between reason and
unreason, good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly suggests symbolically the 
desirable and the undesirable. She puts forth ideas, in the shape of situations and 
queries through the kind of documentary form she employs in the writing of this 
 novel. This links up with her vision of the "perfect city", an archetype of the 
mythological city, Martha's vision of the golden city signifying equality and 
harmony, developed in *The Four-Gated City*. In an interview with Minda Bikman, 
Lessing  says that the city nearly always is a metaphor for states of mind, "states of 
being."  She goes on to write of the violence and anti-social attitudes that we 
associate with  high-rise buildings in big cities, suggesting that it might have 
"something to do with the fact that the people who live in them have no 
responsibility for the building as a whole"(61).

The text in *Shikasta* moves onward, hardly linear, through suggestion. 
References are made to harking back to a kingly past, the present being somehow 
lesser, shadowy, "wraithlike", diminished. Past memories of giants, kingly beings 
and a kind of amnesia that suppresses recognition are hinted at. In this context there 
is a signature, a kind of contract or password that may help in revitalising memories 
of  whe.. you were yourselves"(S 24). The writer through her de..crip..ions, 
indicative of views and allegiances, conveys a powerful impression that music, 
silence, togetherness are among the qualities to be striven for. Since a new world is 
being created, with its own codes and norms, an obvious comparison with the world 
we know comes to mind. Descriptions of settlements of the two races are 
reminiscent both of Lessing's accounts in her Africa-related works as well as Frantz 
Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. In *Shikasta* too the natives live in cruder 
settlements [than the Giants] although they have moved on from hunting to
agriculture. There is emphasis on a dialectical movement, from stress and danger to
development and harmony, the focus constantly on a balance of forces. There is a
reference to "balances of powers, among the stars who were holding us, i.e.
Canopus, in a web of interacting currents with our colonised planets" (§ 37). The
simultaneous presence of good and evil, the former found in the beautiful plentiful
Rohanda and the latter in Shammat that feeds on "disequilibrium, harm, dismay" are
seen as essential components of life. Harmony, proportion, balance, all indicative of
perfection, are the keywords through many sections of the novel. During the course
of his travels Johor passes through the Round City, "the harmonies of its
mathematics" manifest in a soft chant or song that was a special music of its own
particular self (46). Animals too, both the grazing kinds and such as lions, all lured
by this irresistible music lay under trees, listening contentedly. The manner in which
the Round City is described suggests that no improvement was possible in it since it
had already arrived at a state of perfection: "the Round City showed nothing that
was not round. It was a perfect circle, and could not expand: its bounds were what
had to be . . . The roofs were not flat, but all domes and cupolas, and their colours
were delicate pastel shades, creams, light pinks and soft blues, yellows and greens,
and these glowed under the sunny sky . . . there was a road that also made a
complete circle, lined with trees and gardens" (47). The marketplace, despite its
busyness, had an amiable atmosphere and the noisy crowd "did not impinge on the
deep silence that was the ground note of this place, the music in its inner self, which
held the whole city safe in its harmonies" (48). Through a major part of Lessing's
work there is a vision of wholeness and integration at the centre, beckoning and
guiding. Just as her individuals are forever striving for the correct harmony between
themselves and their surroundings, breakdown and neuroses a mere step away whenever discord threatens, so too the atmosphere to be aimed for is one wherein the warm coloured buildings of the Round City extend a welcome and the city is evocative of a "strong, quiet purpose" (49). In all the author's forays into communism, feminism, psychoanalysis and sufism this quest is indeed the one common denominator, the desire to redress wrong, remove injustice and create a harmonious environment to live in being the primary focus. In *Shikasta*, communication of the right kind is of prime importance and it works on some higher astrological, even extra-terrestrial dimension. The following description is a case in point:

the mind shared between Rohanda and Canopus did not mean that every thought in every head instantly became the property of everyone at once. What was shared was a disposition, a ground, a necessary mesh, net or grid, a pattern that was common property, and was not itself static, since it would grow and change with the strengthenings and fallings off of emanations. If one individual wished to contact another, this was done by a careful and specific "tuning in". Nor were conditions always perfect for exchange of "thought". For instance, there was a period of more than a hundred years when no exchange of specific information was possible, because of interference from a certain configuration in a nearby solar system, temporarily out of phase with Canopus. The interchange of fuels went on, but subtler currents were interdicted until the star in question changed its disposition in the celestial dance (52).
There are references to signals, signs that hover in the air which perhaps can be transmitted to others but received only by those with sensitive antennae in an atmosphere that is "right". When Johor wants to tell the Giants about the threatening presence of "Shammat", a synonym for evil, he tries to sense whether they are ready to receive the bad news, searching for signs of change in behaviour suggestive of such a preparedness. He mentions the word "enemy" to them in the transmitting chamber, and not entirely ready for it, "it seemed . . . to find nowhere to hook on to" (60). Yet it was obvious from their behaviour that they had changed, a certain peevishness, self-assertion and vagueness already manifest in their manner. Johor's is now the only voice of reason left, his power of judgement still intact amid the "shouting babble of disagreement" all around. And so they changed, from a people whose essential nature had made them inadequate even of conceiving of the concept of evil to those for whom "dissension and enmity came naturally" (65). The clouds of hostility thicken and the harmonies become harsh. Something has obviously happened in the Round City, with the Giants having taken off in the planes sent for them. The power of the Stones takes primacy making the air "ominous and threatening" (70). It is obvious that rigidity is here aligned to closure and a sense of deadend. Alternatively, to be open and friendly is to be invested with sense, moving on to perhaps arrive somewhere. The worst tragedy of all appears to be that of the amnesiac since to negate the past is to erase it and this depletion is the fate of Shikasta: "But these poor creatures already did not know what had been lost" (71).

The account of Shikasta before the loosening of the Lock is akin to pre-lapsarian Eden where a plentiful Rohanda predominates. There is no knowledge of
pain or grief, no experience of Degeneracy or mortality and no perception of evil or wrong. Something then happens to shatter the complacency of a harmonious planet where life is carried on too rhythmically. There is an upsetting of the balance, leading to a loosening of the Lock and suddenly the pallor of the world changes. Strange vibrations causing dizziness, pain and nausea pursue the inmates while they flee to escape from the "horrid circle of radiations" (74). There is fear and anarchy and an attempt at escape. The account reads much like one of the Garden of Eden after the Fall:

The biggest change was that more children were being born than before. The safeguards had been forgotten: gone was the knowledge of who should give birth, who should mate, what type of person was a proper parent. The knowledge and uses of sex were forgotten. And whereas previously an individual who died before the natural term of a thousand years was unlucky, it was clear that life-span was about to fluctuate (76).

So far Giants and Natives had lived in harmony. With the breakdown of the Canopus-Shikasta rhythm, and this it may be seen as an allegory of the Fall, came too the colonial divide. The narrator wonders how to express to a people notions of slavery and serfdom when "they had no means of knowing, or imagining, the contempt a degenerated and effete race may use for another different from themselves" (79). Johor, with David and his daughter Sais, makes his way from the Round City through Hexagonal City to arrive at the haphazard settlements where the Giants now live. There he meets Jarsum and the white freaky lady Giant, both belonging initially to Round City. When they suggest that Johor and his friends may
be permitted to stay and work for them Johor reminds them of the first Law of Canopus- that "we may not make slaves and servants of others"(81). And the second Law too, that travellers must be fed and given shelter. Johor notices that the vibrations emanating from the stones that had earlier caused discord and pain were now being especially sought by the Giants, to be used like alcohol while they sang, danced and feasted on roast meat. The giants go back to the stones to “fetch back in themselves power of the disharmonies, which they were using to fuel this revelry”. Earlier too there is a hint that they may actually enjoy the sensation of the vibrations which cause pain, a kind of allegory is being constructed in which evil/alcohol or any kind of intoxicating addiction can be seen in simultaneously irresistible and harmful ways. Radiations may be suggestive of a kind of nuclear holocaust whereby all life has been destroyed and what is left is fast withering away. In this context the account of war, also termed WW 1 which is really that of the war of the north-west fringes, is significant. The war that lasted five years, of which there were consequences like diseases that killed even larger numbers, strengthened the position of armament industries which then dominated economy. Through this dispassionate account of the war and its ravages Lessing points out the sharp paradox between established / accepted ideas of civilisation and barbarism. While the growth of industry is a signifier of a progressive economy there is something deeply barbaric and inherently regressive in the presence of war that implies mass-slaughter: “this war laid the bases for the next" and closely follows an account of WW 2(111). Shikasta is a metaphor for the world and there are discussions of global destruction to the accompaniment of words like democracy, freedom, economic progress. The writer’s cynicism, pessimism and hopelessness as
exemplified in the text only grows as she writes of the increasingly enveloping consumerism of the west. Frenzy, mania and a kind of cannibalistic atmosphere marked by lack of SOWF (Substance Of We Feeling) prevails. People become more and more careless and cruel towards each other, and to animals too. The descriptions read painfully like those of a recognisable and familiar reality pitted against which are references to the utopia that Shikasta was in the good old days. There is colonisation too, both good and bad, Canopus the good 'imperialist’ of which Shikasta is the colony and Shammat the evil coloniser trying to influence and subjugate it.

Johor alias Taufiq, is the narrator who is also the main character. This person has other names too, and is sufficiently generalised in his/her delineation to be a kind of representative politician. The history of Johor's growth, views and beliefs, the course of career all typify the narrator in such a manner that her/his identity as an individual is jeopardised. The manner in which he embodies within his self traits both of Giants and Natives is evidence too of his “representativeness”. As already remarked, Johor can not be slotted into any specific gender category. The history of Shikasta has a little note on sexual choice among the inhabitants:

Of course developed individuals among us are androgynous...we do not have emotional or physical or psychological characteristics that are considered as appertaining to one sex rather than another, as

is normal on the more backward planets. There have been many of our envoys who have manifested as “female”, but since the time of the falling away of the Lock, before when males and females were
equal everywhere on Shikasta and neither exploited the other, the
females have been in subjection (142-3).

Johor's report gives descriptions of some Shikastan inhabitants. Individual 1
is described as follows: "Afflicted by an enormous claustrophobia, she refused all
the normal developments possible to her, and as soon as she was self-supporting left
her family and that society" (148). Confinement and a loss of freedom are
emphasised-"afflicted", "claustrophobia", "patterns of human bondage did not seem
to vary very much". Focus is on repetition and recycling and although attempts to
do new and different things are made there is kind of sameness always. "Invisible
web", "spider web" are some of the epithets used, all suggestive of a sense of
enclosure that is completely crippling. Johor believes that it is important to
confront wrong. Taufiq, she feels, would have been able to help Individual 1 "see"
what imprisoned her and thus she would have been able to move out of it.
However, the opposite takes place, she cannot cope and like a "cornered hawk",
succumbs (148-50). In the account of Individual 2 real and unreal come together.
The children play a game in which they can press a button in order to see a program
for their alternative selves to follow: "These children lived more and more inside the
world they had created, taking... to small ways of trickery, cheating, and lying ...
They took to more intricate crimes" (153). The section on Individual 3 explores
theories of "potential self", what people "ought to be, could or would be". The
gap between real and potential self was seen as being very wide and in this
particular part it is revealed through the device of a trial where the "youthful self"
was to prosecute the middle aged self, asking what had happened to the ideals, the
vision, the ability to see individuals as infinitely capable of development, the hatred
above all of lies, and double talk, the deceits of the conference tables and committees, the public announcements, the public face" (162). Individual 4, also referred to as "Terrorist type 3" is a young woman named The Brand. Hers is a legacy of a childhood spent in concentration camps and only people who had been with her then were real to her because according to her they shared a knowledge of "what the world was really like." She, along with other like-minded people, considered themselves left-wing socialists of a sort who "saw themselves as an alternative world government" (166). The reality was very different though and this was that they ended up in prison with multiple murder charges. Individual 6 is the boy whose parents lived a life of deprivation and torture in concentration camps and now that they had been able to get away from it he followed a strict regime through which it was possible to perpetuate and live through those past horrors once more. In a description that is disturbing in its immediacy the novelist writes of the manner in which he covered himself with the single, thin and dirty blanket that belonged to his parents’ camp days on a folding bed he slept on in the kitchen. "On one day a week he ate only the diet provided in the camp during the final days of the war: hot greasy water, potato peelings, scraps from rubbish bins ... He read to them passages from biographies, accounts of conditions in camps" forcing them to live over and over again the trauma from which they had managed to escape almost by a miracle (170). Here again was the crucial breach between a real present and a past no longer valid, the mind hardly able to strike balance between the two. The account of Individual 7 reads much like sections from The Good Terrorist. She is the daughter of rich parents but her inclination is to be attracted to socialist activists who fight for equal opportunities. Ultimately she is the only one in the group who
has any ideals, those whom she worships and emulates exposed as dogmatic and advantage taking. She, however, seems perfectly happy living a filthy, squalid existence as a squatter, cooking, cleaning and waiting upon a puny no-good man and his selfish friends. These character sketches display the range of difficulties that can result from a lack of articulation between thought and action showing too that an inability to distinguish between ideal and real or past and present can lead to crucial inconsistencies in ways of living.

The tone of the narrative varies, fluctuating and alternating between official reports in bureaucratic language, informal letters or formal excerpts from the History of Shikasta, the personal tenor of Rachel Sherban’s journal or simply the cool and unimpassioned narration that is Johor’s style. Other agents and envoys too hold the narrative as does Rachel Sherban and a character called Lynda Coldridge who re-emerges from The Four-Gated City. The time-span dealt with in this novel is initially disconcerting as it works through millinea rather than smaller chunks of time that the reader of the realist novel may be more accustomed to. Johor says, “It is thirty thousand years since I was in Shikasta; 31,505 to be exact”(135). Or “an ice age is nothing, it is a few thousand years- the ice comes and then it goes”(251).

Canopus in Argos: Arcives demonstrates patterns of exploitation and domination, the aim of the series being social satire. Due to her engagement with politics Lessing had experienced a surfeit of speeches, thereby knowing fully well the meaninglessness of all rhetoric. Politicians, she believes, never speak the truth and in an interview she said, “I think that children ought to be taught how to examine rhetoric to insulate them from it . . . I hate rhetoric of all kinds, it stupefies, stops the thinking process”.

6
The Shikastan saga is a medium through which the story of colonialism is retold, inhabitants of Southern Continent 1 living in harmony till the sudden appearance of white people on their land. Theirs was a land where concepts of ownership were unknown: "land belonged to itself, was the substance of the people and the animals who lived on it, was saturated by the Great Spirit who was the source of all life" (200). Besides, descriptions of the invaders show them up as positively bizarre while they present themselves as ridiculous too:

One day appeared a long column of white people, on horses or in carts. The watching black people were amazed, because of the bizarre appearance of these invaders. . . someone laughed. First, their colour, so pallid, and unhealthy. Then their clothes...(they) were loaded with bunches and protruberances and excrescences of every sort, and they had extraordinary objects on their heads (200).

In African Laughter, Lessing writes in a similar vein, “The progress of the Pioneer Column was watched by the Africans, and it is on record they laughed at the sight of the white men sweating in their thick clothes...Then, and very soon, came the women, all wrapped about and weighed down in their clothes...Mary Kingsley, that paragon among explorers, when in hot and humid West Africa was always dressed as if off to a party” (AL3-4). In fact, the testimonies offered during the mock-trial held at the end of Shikasta to ascertain the reasons behind the degeneration of the planet lead to an indictment that reads as follows:

That it is the white races of this world that have destroyed it, corrupted it, made possible the wars that have ruined it, have laid the basis for the war that we all fear, have poisoned the seas, and the
waters, and the air, have stolen everything for themselves, have laid waste the goodness of the earth from the North to the South, and from East to West, have behaved always with arrogance, and contempt, and barbarity towards others, and have been above all guilty of the supreme crime of stupidity- and must now accept the burden of culpability, as murderers, thieves, and destroyers, for the dreadful situation we now find ourselves in (388).

This is an account of a diminished world too, marked by loss of faith. Everything is corrupt, polluted and poisoned, the end of cosmos and life seemingly near at hand. The entire section is replete with images suggestive of impending doom, loss of religion, faith, respect, safety too: "pouring away the best of themselves into nothingness", "stripped of certainties" (250), nothing is reliable, not science too. The metaphor of Noah's Ark is used to suggest not hope but destruction and a kind of hopelessness.

The narrative method of Shikasta is discontinuous, forcing the reader to adjust modes of apprehension. According to Lee Cullen Khanna, Lessing in Shikasta "shapes the modes of twentieth century thought and style to new ends. The ends are no less than the expansion of human consciousness and the means are the reordering of time and perspective by disorienting the reader." Much of the text reverberates with signs of corruption in social, political, environmental and other areas. The nature of utopia becomes a crucial issue of enquiry as the capacity to perceive afresh leads to an enlarged and transformed vision. This quality imposes added responsibility while it also raises new expectations as seeing in new ways is the essence of Lessing's utopia. Art here often takes the form of 'song' and songs
are an important link between past and future utopian visions. Although song is important in the entire Canopus series the second novel in the series, Marriages, deals more fully with art as an issue because the narrator is a singer.

Zone 3 is a lyrical feminist utopia wherein the telling gradually becomes as important as the tale, i.e. facts of the main female protagonist, Al-Ith's adventure. The setting has a magical and medieval flavour to it, sensuality and timelessness written into it as the protagonists move like tapestries through a strange landscape. All beings, humans, animals, others, in this mythic and bleakly picturesque land are caught in a continuum not of their own making, as they journey forever onward. Queen of Zone Three, a peace-loving country where belief in telepathy is predominant, Al-Ith, is ordered to marry Ben-Ata, ruler of Zone Four, a primitive and aggressive country. Al-Ith learns to love Ben-Ata and teaches him much about the nature of women and responsibility for a kingdom. She herself suffers from this love by experiencing possessiveness and jealousy she had never known in her own land. Her ultimate fate is alienation from both worlds with only the suggestion of some mysterious ascent to Zone 2 to compensate for her very real pain. The novel is paradoxical in more ways than one: the once-happy Al-Ith must lose her autonomy in order to grow; the peaceful and pleasure loving utopian world of Zone 3 must experience discontent and prepare for war in order to stay vital, and finally, the reader's attachment to Al-Ith and Ben-Ata must give way to the realisation that it is the song itself, i.e. the tale of Al-Ith that matters most. The story is narrated by Lusik, a “mind father”, as opposed to the biological or “gene father”, in an accurate, analytical and emotionally committed tone. The poetic and moving style reveals the manner of the traditional omniscient narrator, old songs
and ballads subtly structuring the text as well as ritualistically sustaining race memory. Lusik sings of Al-Ith's wedding in terms that recall other somber marriages. He paints scenes of mourning, the funereal quality of this wedding reminiscent of Persephone's marriage to the God of the underworld. Khanna draws significant parallels, suggesting that "Echoes of Persephone's myth, the descent of Inanna and, indeed, Christ's descent to Earth are evoked by the symbolic rendering of Al-Ith's tale" (Khanna 272). She dies to her former self, losing her gaiety and ease. Yet, "as her identity is painfully transformed and she becomes an exile in all the known zones, she frees her people to grow. Like Inanna, Persephone and Christ before her, Al-Ith's death and resurrection (descent and return) ensure the fertility of the land, the salvation of her people" (272).

Lessing spoke of real emotional and imaginary materials that went into the making of *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five*:

It was written out of this experience. When I was in my late thirties and early forties my love life was in a state of chaos and disarray and generally no good to me or anybody else and I was, in fact, and I knew it, in a pretty bad way. Unconsciously I used a certain therapeutic technique which just emerged from my unconscious. What I did was I had a kind of imaginary landscape...in which I had a male and a female figure in various relationships...I made the man a man who was very strong as a man, responsible for what he had to do and autonomous in himself and I made the woman the same because I was very broken down in various ways at that time, and this went on for some years in fact. And then I read about
it: it is a Jungian technique. They tell you that if you have some area in yourself which you can’t cope with, to do this: you take some part of you which is weak and deliberately fantasize it strong...So this book has come out of years of the closest possible work of the imagination.  

The keyword, both in Shikasta and Marriages, is `connect’. There seems to be an eternal and unchanging notion of cosmic order at the heart of things, at least an order that was there in the past which kept things moving amiably. Lost memories and rhythms from the past seem to contain the secret of healing, thus Al-lth suggests holding a festival for “songs and stories we have forgotten”(88). She discovers too that the women of Zone 4, led by Dabeeb, gather regularly in top security to remember and revive old verses and learn new ones. Later, they claim the right to visit Zone 3 as pilgrims as they were the ones instrumental in preserving “the old knowledge alive for so long”. Knapp suggests : “songmaking ability attests to the intact spirituality of women (and children): while the men are out squandering time and money on wars, the integrity of the race is kept alive through feminine rituals”. She connects this to received notions of gender roles as she concludes: “These role patterns conform to the medieval concepts of masculine and feminine—women are granted intuitive and extrasensory powers as a consolation prize for their exclusion from weightier matters such as warring and administration”.

Besides, the songs seem to emerge from a collective subconscious evocative of racial memory. The elderly woman who tries to quieten the Queen suggests that the best thing may be to preserve the thought in its complete form, only then can its full potential for growth be realised. A sense of lostness characterises the present
moment wherein both animals and humans experience a reduction, fertility viewed as a significant yardstick to measure well-being. Thus, a fall in birth rate regarding animals and humans suggests to the inmates of Zone 3 disruptions and dissonances. It is for this reason too that sexuality, and of the right kind, is the cornerstone of the Al-Ith-BenAta relationship. The drum beats only when their bodies are beating together in rhythm in a lovemaking that is equal and satisfying for both. They are sent together, to mate for a purpose—"to heal our two countries and to discover where it is that we have gone wrong, and what it is that we should be doing, really doing..." She reasons to him: "You are like a half-grown boy, Ben-Ata...If we are rich and have everything it is bad only insofar as it has made us forget our proper purposes. But if you are poor and barbaric, it is because all your wealth goes into war, needless, stupid, senseless war"(209). The contours of a unique relationship are fleshed out in this novel, one that is rich in endless possibilities. Independent and happy enough in her own realm of which she is Queen, she is ordered to go to Zone 4 and marry BenAta, the boorish king she does not recognise. Partaking of her gentleness and sensitivity, he changes, becoming respectful and appreciative of her independence and spiri. Something compels her to move towards him—a seemingly inexorable and predestined journey. Her commitment to him she realises, is total besides being out of her control: "with what a sinking heart did she acknowledge this commitment to him-she could not remember what she had felt for the men she had been with in her own realm, but she knew it had been nothing like this. It was as if she were relinquishing light and air for bonds that tightened as she breathed, growing into her flesh"(144). The baby that will be heir to Al-Ith and BenAta, their descendent and their pride, and more
importantly heir to qualities of both Zones, is loved and looked after by all the
women, receiving sustenance from the women during daytime when BenAta is away
with the armies. When still unborn, he is sustained by the "talk of women, the love
of women who longed for him to be born almost as much as for the birth of one of
their own". And this too, "was not anything that Al-Ith could remember-not this
fierce identification with the birth of a child as if it was some sort of wish-
fulfilment"(155). In this tale there are no individuals but only universals and
collectives, as the former is subsumed in the latter . . .“There she was at last for all
to see, so beautiful in her gold dress, and there was the evidence of this marriage,
the strong triumphant curve of her stomach”(146).

There are no private lives in this novel, sexuality, lovemaking, maternity and
childbirth all geared towards the healing and preservation of the collective. Thus
there are two kinds of drumbeats too, the soft signal drum of their togetherness and
solitude against the earth-shaking drumming as the king and queen go together
towards the armies. Conflicting and confused emotions flood both parents after the
arrival of the child Arusi. As she sits feeding him, she feels dissatisfied and unhappy:
“so much anger and reproach and irritation were surging through the room and
reaching Arusi through the air, and through the milk he was imbibing, and through
the body of the mother”(169). The first night home, with the baby soundly asleep
between parents, BenAta feels it is a wonderful experience-he felt that he “was
being admitted to the ways of her Zone and her thoughts, which he knew he must
aspire to- for the sake of all his people”(170). The inevitability of movement from
one emotion to the next, one manner of feeling to another, suggests a life-like
quality that one can spontaneously respond to. Al-Ith moves on, searching endlessly
through Zones that hardly have demarcated frontiers, for her "real" identity. The plurality of her inner voices, jarring while co-existing, push her onward on the evolutionary journey. Changed from the self that was unquestionably hers while she lived as Queen of Zone 3, the reality of neither Zone can now be her personal destiny. When she returns home after the first visit to Zone 4 she flings herself off her horse and dances without the shield that protected her, trying hard to:

dance herself back to her usual frame of mind. . . . Normally, after such a delight of dancing and retrieval of her self to the point where every atom sang and rejoiced, she would have expected to ride, or walk, or run through the long scented grasses of the steppe with nothing at her heels but the pleasures of the day, sunlight, crisp, aromatic winds, the lights changing, always changing, on the peaks...but no, it was not so(187).

Later things get worse. When she is finally ordered to return to her own people, she finds rejection instead of acceptance as she is no longer the Al-Ith they knew and loved. Besides, in her absence life has moved on and the right chord refuses to strike. She stumbles towards Zone 2, longing to belong so that her 'self' can find rest and peace, being "itself". As always dreams help towards rescue and in her sleep she is taught what she ought to know. Voices speak to her "Al-Ith, Al-Ith, this is not how, this is not the way, go back, Al-Ith, you cannot come in here to us like this...go back, go down, go. . . ."(194). And she returns, stumbling back the road just travelled, back off the "crystal airs of that plain with its swirling pink skies, and into the thick blue mists that surrounded"(194). BenAta too is no longer what he has been, the man who never doubted what he should do. Confronted with self-
doubt and suspicions regarding his identity, he is terribly uncertain about the nature of his real self. His soldiers bring to him a woman to rape and the king of this barbaric realm is supposed to fulfill the notions of soldierly honour by doing his duty. Instead, he makes a mockery of himself before his army as he sits there thinking of Al-Ith “who had taken his old heart out of his body, and had not given him anything in its place. How was he going to live, a half-man, not a soldier, not a man of peace, not a husband since he was bereft of her, not properly even a father since it seemed there was at least a possibility of his losing his son to Zone3 for half of every year” (211). Vahshi, the new queen who replaces Al-Ith belongs to a realm that is more barbaric than BenAta’s and it is now the turn of the king to civilize her. Vahshi too changes as a consequence of being with him, as did Al-Ith and while they long for their earlier sense of selfhood there is something in the present relationship that is precious too.

The emphasis is on change, evolution and moving on through an arena that is open and allows freedom, both male and female principles supplying assimilative energies to construct a complete whole. For the first time free abandon characterises the women’s ceremonies. They became wild and victorious and the men joined them. BenAta sits with his son in the garden among the fountains, lifting the child’s face up so that the mountains of Zone3 could be visible. Earlier, a punishment went with this act of looking up but now the circumstances had changed with the king teaching his son to look upwards. The atmosphere in this military Zone becomes open and free, punishments for people who watched the snows removed and everywhere they openly gazed up at the once forbidden realm. Hostilities between zones cease and communication takes their place, inmates of
one realm learning positive values from those of the other. The chronicler’s words at the end are an apt summation:

There was a continuous movement now, from Zone Five to Zone Four. And from Zone Four to Zone Three—and from us, up the pass. There was a lightness, a freshness, and an enquiry and a remarking and an inspiration where there had been only stagnation. And closed frontiers... The movement is not all one way—not by any means.

...our songs and tales are told and sung in the sandy camps and the desert fires of Zone Five (299).

The point, ultimately, of this fantasy is not whether it is true or false but that it is potentially capable of provoking changes in the way in which people “see themselves.” Also, in allowing itself to be open to a vast range of interpretative approaches it reiterates the notion that reality can be nothing if not multidimensional.

Marriages rests on the generation of oppositional energies. There are conflicting emotions as there are many-faceted realities within psyches. When Al-Ith returns to Zone 4 in response to the summons she receives as she rides alone in her own realm, tender emotions assail her. She and Ben Ata sit together speaking of enemies and armies as well as their personal need for each other. The dialectics of contrary impulses gives momentum to their relationship, the independent and self-reliant Al-Ith as valid a person as the other who lay on BenAta’s strong breast “all cradled and comforted, sobbing away”, just as she had wanted to do on so many occasions recently. The duality is summed up in the following words: “That she didn’t believe in the efficacy of it, did not prevent her from enjoying it, while it
When BenAta is sad that Al-Ith will go back to her Zone she responds as follows:

Of course she knew that this sojourn in his Zone could only be temporary, and of course she longed for it to end, but neither had said this for a long time: that she would have to leave him. She wept. She was drenched with sorrow and with loss. That this was the truth was more than she could understand or accept. It seemed that long ago she had floated away from anything she could understand: buffeted back and forth between such oppositions in herself (150).

The narrator goes on to add, “And so she clung to him, feeling that without him she couldn’t be anything. And he held her, thinking that without her he would be only half of himself . . . There was a really dreadful restlessness in her, a grief rooted in conflict” (153). The gentleness that is now BenAta’s manner is both delicious and amazing when contrasted with his earlier savage behaviour: “wrapped together on their couch, it was in friendliness and for mutual comfort. He liked to lie with his strong lean hand on her stomach, feeling the movements of the baby, until the weight of it grew too much, and then he turned her so that her back was towards him, and he laid his arm just under the curve of her stomach. They made love gently” (154).

Seen as a visionary with psychical powers Lessing’s transitions through time and genre-zones need to be perceived wholistically. Her space writing is allegory more than science-fiction, her imaginary forays into strange lands more meaningful than sheer inventiveness. Her fantasy works are closely connected to her real life, her spiritual growth mirrored in her viewpoint. Above all, her apocalyptic vision
perceives our planet as moving towards destruction. Fortunately, she feels, the
danger can be averted and she suggests ways and means in this regard. Since ideas
are crucial to an understanding of life it would be fruitful to examine why they
change, says she. This would help individuals to retain control over them rather than
be manipulated by them. As discussed earlier, telepathy and extra-sensory powers
are seen by Lessing as important tools that can help exploit hidden potential.
Individuals can eventually use these as forces to combat disaster. For those readers
and critics who seek but do not find in Lessing's space-forays evidence of rationale
and logic in the vision of a better future but only an unconvincing faith and
unwarranted hope in the talent of the human race to somehow survive inspite of
itself the writer says: "the world is full of babies. Well, I like to think some of them
will survive, perhaps even better". According to one view this transcendental
optimism in the picture of a Brave New World evoked through Lessing's word
pictures has been perceived as sentimental and frustrating in that it is unpersuasive
but seen in the larger gamut of her writing it speaks yet again of her belief in the
survival of the species.

The multi-perspectival range of Lessing's *Canopus in Argos: Archives*
becomes obvious once more when the reader seeks to examine other works in this
series. Above all, the series "reiterates the necessity of the individual to realise that
he or she is part of the collective spirit." In the preface to *Shikasta*, Lessing
writes, "Yes, I do believe that it is possible, and not only for novelists, to 'plug in'
to an overmind, or Ur-mind, or unconscious, or what you will' and that this
accounts for a great many improbabilities and 'coincidences' (S, "Some Remarks")
Johor asks Doeg, narrator of *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*: "Do
you believe that when you come to yourself from a world of dreams you think no
one else shares that feeling"(83)? The sense of loss that accompanies the feeling
that one individual is just like another rather than a unique artifact is initially
difficult to cope with. As Doeg looks at the snow creatures that are gradually
moving towards extinction he says, "this charm, this delightfulness, will vanish here
and reappear elsewhere . . . It does not matter that they are going, the individual
does not matter, the species does not matter"(109). This novel ends with an account
of the processes that went into the writing of this book:

"I finished writing it the day after the death of someone I had known
a long time; though it did not occur to me to make the connection
until then. It took her a long cold time to die, and she was hungry
too, for she was refusing to eat and drink, so as to hurry things
along. She was ninety-two, and it seemed to her sensible . . .It seems
to me that we do not know nearly enough about ourselves; that we
do not often enough wonder if our lives, or some events and times in
our lives, may not be analogues or metaphors or echoes of
evolvements and happenings going on in other people?-or animals?-or
even forests or oceans or rocks?- in this world of ours or, even, in
worlds or dimensions elsewhere(184).

A passage that is central to the mystical and visionary aspect of this novel is
one which suggests that there are infinite possibilities in an individual although they
may remain forever latent. It is of some length but is worth quoting in entirety:

possibilities, what could have been, but had not been, in our space
and time. But had been elsewhere? Yes, that was it, we were
observing how, behind or beside or beyond—at any rate, some *where* or *when*—the various stages of development of our planet, had been so many others, the possibilities that had not been given actuality in the level of experience we had known, had experienced: but hovered just behind the veil, potentials, what might have been or could have been . . . Myriads there were, the unachieved possibilities: but each real and functioning on its own level—*where* and *when* and *how*?—each world every bit as valid and valuable as what we had known as real (160).

An acceptance of and reconciliation with the fact that an individual must transcend personal yearnings and selfhood in order to attain the larger goal of affinity with the collective is the keynote of the series. Extended further, this may logically lead to the next stage wherein people may be mutually interchangeable. An interviewer once asked Lessing that in this scheme of things since an individual can be detached from a personal destiny can roles simply then be passed on and are people interchangeable. In her reply she said, "The idea is that we have functions, and when we do something it's a function that we share with other people who do that. For a long time I've seen "the writer" as a function of humanity; I feel connected with other writers because I feel that in a sense we are one, doing perhaps slightly different things." 14 In the same interview she speaks of reader responses to her space fiction. According to her, younger people connect more positively and meaningfully to the latter phase of her writing as they "have been brought up on a larger perspective about the earth. They don't identify themselves with a town or even a continent; they identify themselves with Planet Earth. The
moment you have a shot of the earth from space - a beautifully coloured bubble floating in space - then there's a new sensibility; there has to be" (18). Increasing preoccupations with global disasters like pollution and its damaging influences on the environment, fear of nuclear holocausts that may scar the world we live in permanently and realisation that such forces will leave behind repercussions that are not individual-directed at all have gone towards the structuring of a psyche capable of seeing commonalities. The manner in which Lessing describes herself and her evolution is also the the way in which her career as a creative artist/writer has progressed. She views herself as a writer who begins her creative journey with herself (and her experiences) at the centre alongwith the need to define herself through this special niche. The journey towards self-hood is punctuated with struggle as well as discovery till a time comes when this is inadequate. Then the writer is ready to move on to other modes, as in the case of Lessing, stranger realities, which award a fresh perspective with which to view the commonplace.

Lessing explains that "she went off into metaphor" because of the difficulty of finding words in the English language for "mystical" areas of experience. Toril Moi says of feminist utopian writing: "signalling the repressive effects of the social structures that give rise to the utopia in the first place, its gaps and inconsistencies indicate the pervasive nature of the authoritarian ideology the utopian thinker is trying to undermine." Ursula Le Guin perceives fantasy as "a vehicle of truth", "precise and profound metaphors" of the human condition. Fantasy plays a significant social role for her as it articulates and helps to resolve repressions and denied impulses. "We like to think we live in daylight but half the world is always dark, fantasy speaks the language of the night". Lessing and Le Guin speak a
common language though the paths they travel to arrive at that point are diverse. Both have faith in and attain access to the collective unconscious through the way of the personal. Le Guin sees science fiction as: “the mythology of the modern world”. In that sense her theories in this regard sound reverberations in areas of psychology, culture and history. Lessing’s fiction does too though it is also more focussed in political and social arenas. The differences lie in that although the American writer’s fantasies are incomplete without dragons, magical effects and other extra-natural inputs the British novelist’s science fiction is devoid of such inventive ingredients. Le Guin in her review of *Shikasta*, refers to it as: “badly constructed”: “Sometimes it is a little more than the a pulp galactic empire with the goodies fighting the baddies. Then again it goes off into allegory like C.S.Lewis for a while; and there are moments -the bad moments … when it all seems to have been inspired by the Velikovsky-Van Daniken School of, as it were, thought.”

Compared to *Shikasta* Ursula Le Guin’s responses to *Marriages* are more encouraging. She terms it a “lively and lovable novel-a novel in the folk mode bordering on the mythic”. However, she condemns the entire Canopean gamut of writing as “a purely European explanation of human destiny.”

Darko Suvin’s theory of fantasy comes close to Lessing’s. That science fiction needs to be analysed in the light of its economic, political and social underpinnings is a point of view that both subscribe to. The repressions of classes in search of a more meaningful environment contributed some of the impetus to science fiction. Besides, revolutionary political activity too led to further developments in this genre. Suvin traces links between socialism and science fiction thus: “The socialist vision of a classless millenium on earth became the solution to
the ideational formal problem of science fiction." In his book he reads sci-fi as "the literature of cognitive estrangement", the term estrangement as defined by the Russian formalists and later used by Bertolt Brecht. Cognitive estrangement implies a creative approach which results in "an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment." Suvin inverts earlier notions of SF that placed it in the category of the marvellous, likening it rather to a kind of socialist writing. Although it struggles against the limits of its social context it is produced and determined by this same context and can hardly be read without reference to it, he suggests. Lessing too believes that science/space fiction ‘maps’ our world for us, raising new questions, probing old ideas and inspiring re-conjecture.

Ann Swinfen too in her book In Defense of Fantasy reads fantasy not as escape but a way to apprehend and re-evaluate the real world. Its scope is larger than that of the realistic novel in that its range goes beyond mere empirical world reality, thereby re-structuring and re-creating social and political utopias. Indeed, according to Swinfen, the fundamental purpose of serious fantasy is to comment upon the real world and to explore moral, philosophical and other dilemmas posed by it, a kind of creative questioning. Lessing too is rooted in reality, using sci-fi to go beyond and explore the limits of this world and to examine the consequences of our actions. The problems do not go away, instead, they are highlighted as a result of fresh perspectives provided by a new vantage-point. Old themes, like racism, colonialism and the colour-quetion, paradoxes of gender relations, politics of power, madness, rhetoric, environmental hazards and other global disasters are examined in fresh ways.
Patrick Parrinder discusses links and likenesses between SF and science on the one hand and SF and contemporary fiction on the other. A gradual decline in traditional religious beliefs as a result of the impact of the Industrial Revolution as well as an ascendency of technological progress resulted in a predominantly scientific temper. In such an atmosphere SF developed and gained more meaning. Futuristic space fantasy grew in such a climate that suggested that earth would gradually become uninhabitable. In Parrinder’s words: “Space travel is an age-old dream of mankind, which appealed to the Victorian rationalist as representing the final goal of human progress.” Besides, through science-fiction, technological advancement could be scrutinised and assessed objectively, i.e. without any sociological or political contexts that may define or influence it.

A communal and global outlook characterises Doris Lessing’s writing, the individual less significant than the community. In her schema, the movement from realistic to fantastic appears almost logical, conforming as it does both to how she perceives and what she believes. Mona Knapp offers that since SF shares common characteristics with detective and fairy stories, scientific and historical genres, it also cuts across tight compartmentalisations which separate fact from fiction. Besides, she observes that, for Lessing realism alone became increasingly inadequate, “its boundaries too confining . . . it being too political to accommodate her increasingly apolitical viewpoint” (131). Utopian fiction has distinct advantages which Lessing utilised quite fully. Freedom and the licence that goes with it allows the writer to express her views without constraint while dreams of alternate societies lead her towards wish-fulfilling fantasies.
The space-odyssey format is one that lends itself to other interpretative techniques too, especially in the context of Lessing's primary intellectual engagements at this time of her career. The move from rational logic towards an intuitive apprehension of the world, based to some extent on placing value on the collective rather than on the individual, perceiving links between people that may be more than tenuous so that the individual entity becomes somewhat redundant were some thematic preoccupations that had been part of her work in the seventies. Due to an increasing interest in Sufism and mysticism, some of these ideas crystallised to take the shape of deeply held beliefs. The wandering mystic Sufis too aimed for a consciousness free of the rigidities of time and space, so that whatever culture they travelled in was for them a new and virgin space, unburdened by the weight of preconceived notions. They propagated too the practice of clear and detached ways of perception. With the move away from sentimental subjectivity, normally the crux of realistic narrative, Lessing moved towards the clarity of more objective thought in uncluttered outer spaces, following in the footsteps of her Sufi teachers. Besides, in Marriages, people, and life around them is continuously evolving. For the Sufis too stasis was akin to deadend, and dialectics ensured a continuity of process. Al-Ith's influence transforms BenAta who in turn is instrumental in bringing about a change in the primitive Queen of Zone Five, Vahshi. New heights are forever being scaled by the protagonists, fresh knowledge being continually imbibed. According to Sufi principles too, this knowledge can only be imbibed gradually. Enlightenment can only be received by one who is ready for it, when one's experiences have led to a refinement that has prepared the recipient sufficiently. In Shikasta too there was a need for sensitised antennae that would make it possible to accept knowledge.
Freeplay between people and realms is suggested to be of crucial significance as obvious from the conclusion of *Marriages* and thus the dangers of insularity and self-satisfaction are pointed out.

Correspondences and affinities between Lessing’s fantasy works and the world as we know it are easy enough to perceive. Her portrayal of the Sirian colonisers is close to that of the white man, both sharing attitudes and character traits. Technologically advanced western countries are mirrored in the Sirian Empire. In both cases achievements were coupled with grave dangers: “plenty of leisure, freedom from want, from fear, from effort, showed every symptom of mass psychosis, ranging from random and purposeless violence to apparently causeless epidemics and widespread neurosis” (Sirian 27). Like other real colonisers the Sirians too saw themselves as doing the natives a rare favour by colonising them, an act for which they ought forever be grateful to them: “To be part of the Sirian whole is to be part of progress, development... It is the duty of the more evolved planets, like the great daughter of Sirius, to guide and control” (Sirian 272). Such was what was professed. In reality, however, the natives were really made to perform menial tasks that the Sirians felt were beneath their dignity. Besides, they were not taught anything and hardly allowed to evolve to a higher level. Evidence of affliction alone persisted. Dissatisfactions prevailed on both sides as the natives were accused of ingratitude while they in turn felt exploited. Similar claims made by British colonists come to mind: “the advance of the Union Jack means protection for the weaker races, justice for the oppressed, liberty for the down trodden.”

Through an evocation of these fictive worlds devoid of specific history and a sense of rootedness in time, wherein crucial questions are raised, Lessing handles
with epic scope multi-dimensional issues that it would have been impossible to cope
with in the realistic narrative genre.
NOTES


2 Interview with Thomas Frick. Conversations 160.


4 Jeannette King, Doris Lessing (London: Edward Arnold, 1989) 73.

5 Interview with Minda Bikman. Conversations 61.

6 Conversations 170.


10 Interview with Bigsby. Conversations 73

11 Conversations 85.

12 Knapp 64.


14 Conversations 17-8.

15 King 91.


20 Suvin 8.
