

Doris Lessing's Science Fiction

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Doris Lessing, the Nobel Laureate (1919-2007), a British novelist, poet, a writer of epic scope, playwright, librettist, biographer and short story writer. She was the “most fearless woman novelist in the world, unabashed ex-communist and uncompromising feminist”. Doris has earned the great reputation as a distinguished and outstanding writer. She raised local and private problems of England in post-war period with emphasis on man-woman relationship, feminist movement, welfare state, socio-economic and political ethos, population explosion, terrorism and social conflicts in her novels.

Space is mankind understands of the cosmos and the universe of which the human is only a minute part. The conception of humans has been to know all like earth's atmospheric confinements, or even the solar system, which has been put together by science and other astronomical experimentation. Lexically, the word space is an unoccupied area but the space existing between the myriads of planets, stars systems and galaxies with meteorite particles, atomic dust and radiation. The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy defines 'space' as an 'extended manifold' of several dimensions, where the number of dimensions corresponds "to the number of variable magnitudes needed to specify a location in the manifold: in particular, the three-dimensional manifold in which physical objects are situated and with respect to

Which their mutual positions and distances are defined”.

Doris Lessing tries to explore the formal strategies of outer –space fiction with problems of cosmic survival using enough. She shows this fiction in the novel from *The Grass is Singing* (1950) to *The Four Gated City* (1969). The structure of the Canopus series- ancient gods tells the descending benevolent colonization from the earth. As we know, Lessing invents an alien in which she retells human history and different possibilities of the cosmic future for this purpose. Three planets have been seen conflicting among galactic empires; Canopus, Shammat and Sirius. The Canopus stands for ‘good’, Shammat stands for ‘evil’ and Sirius stands for technology which is an advanced empire of ambitious bureaucrats who periodically invade other planets to enlarge the trilogy.

Lessing gave a surprise to the readers and critics who were fond of her realistic novels. *Shikasta* is an experimental novel. It deals with the history of the human race from its origin to its possible and from a galactic empires perspective. In the beginning, Rohanda (earth) is colonized by two galactic empires- Canopus and Sirius. Canopus helps humanity through introducing a new species of another planet. This new species (the giants) modifies Rohanda and the giants’ mental power impure to stay at Rohanda. The people in Rohanda too evolve soon and conditions that it is right for the ‘Local’ to take place.

Things get worse at Rohanda so much because some of the giants refuse to obey the advice of Canopus due to being transported to other planets but some refuse to leave; Canopus does not force them to leave. The people forget the things they have learnt and now they do not want to live in harmony no longer. They are involved in theft, loot and killing at random. But except Sirius, Canopus does not abandon Rohanda. Through history, Canopus agents are sent to help Shikastana in an increasingly difficult task.

In *Shikasta*, Lessing’s main character is Johar, a Canopean expert. She tells the book is a compilation of documents selected to offer a very general picture of *Shikasta* for the use of first year students of Canopean colonial Rule”. We have summarized the periods of earth’s

history in which explanatory information is provided on various subjects like generation gap and religions of Shiatsu. A journal gives us an accurate and a vivid pictures of the world's conditions just before the nuclear holocaust, was kept by Rachel Sherban. Therefore, Doris Lessing uses different perspective, different voices, different angles and different texture to explore her ideas,

Lessing has written on a very familiar topic and transformed her views but she does not always maintain the archivists cool when it comes to certain issues. Lessing is still as socially aware and gives us penetrating analyses of the present conditions of the world. She points out that our system of economic production depends on the economic imperative of every conceivable kind of goods for example; we see advertisements in TV programs magazines and newspapers related to a war, a game, and a fashion show which affects us more. John Berger points out in his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972:153) that through publicity, events are made 'eventless' publicity is so effective that we learn to forget the atrocities of "war. Civil war, Murder, Torture, Exploitation, Oppression and Suppression" (1979:12) and continue to believe that on the whole all is well.

Doris points out the impossibility and futility for twentieth century men to have any faith in politics. There have been so many betrayals, disappointments, lies, shifting of loyalties, torture and insanity and even fanatics of disbelief. The most recent of religion is science which is becoming distrusted. The result shows that the earth is slowly despoiled, Minerals are ripped out, fuels wasted and soil is depleted by an improvement and short sighted agriculture. The seas are filled with disgusting dirt and poison, the animals and plants are slaughtered and destroyed and the atmosphere is polluted. The people have belief in modernity and they turn to all kinds of things like drugs, alcohol, sports and all kinds of work.

Doris Lessing again points out some dangerous results of neglecting and abusing children. The statistics show the result of the possibility of children turning out to crime, especially children of the west. She gives us a new insight of colonial brutality through her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), but in *Shikasta*, we find her most sketching indictment of colonialism. In the end, the white races are accused of destroying the world but Lessing does not condemn the white races only. Lessing shows that the other races are equally guilty of humanity to their fellow men. This happens because they have also “chosen to copy the materialism, the greed, the rapacity, of the white men’s technological society” (1979:412)

Lessing captured huge details of their hatred, anger, and contempt for the colonizers. We see it in *Shikasta* that the Chinese take joy and pleasure and despoil Europe and starve its people to death, just before the nuclear catastrophe. It is a frightening but possible picture. It is difficult, however, to push Lessing into anyone position even if this position expounds something she obviously explores. In fact, Lessing’s indictment of the world today is its tendency. “to put a label on feeling, a state of mind, a thin, to find a set of words or phrase; in short believing that to describe it is the same as understanding and experiencing it”

Lessing clearly condemns colonialism in *Shikasta* but the relationship between Canopus and *Shikasta*, which is by no means negative, is that of the colonizers and the colonized. Canopus introduces new species and gains from the Lock as much as *Shikasta* does. The natives and giants lived in cities before the lock weakened. The cities were built in the shape of mathematical symbols. Even science had developed a system capable of establishing from early childhood the environment in which a given individual needed to live.

Canopus is not omnipotent or omniscient. This fact is that critiques of Canopus are also in the process of evaluation. They are subjected to universal law and other forces and

power and they change themselves as the situation. As Johar says, “We are all creatures of the stars and their forces, they make us, we make them, and we are part of a dance from which we by no means and not ever may consider ourselves, separate.”(Shikasta 1979 page 58)

There is a possibility for fantasy or science fiction stories to have its plot or characters modeled upon an ancient myth; such a story does not automatically become myth. For example, Lessing prevents the story of the tower of Babel, the call of Abraham as some of the efforts made by Canopus to maintain harmony and balance on earth after the failure of Lock.

Doris Lessing portrays souls that wait for recently into earth in Zone Six. Their souls are the ones who realize that their earlier life was one of self indulgence and they wait for another chance to live a more meaningful human life. Such can be seen in one of the women characters who lose a chance to transcend her individual soul. She makes escapist decisions in her former life in Shikasta. There must be a delicate balancing of social responsibility and self-interest. In spite of cosmic misalignments, humanity has the ultimate choice for good or evil.

Marsha Rowe observes: “Lessing explores the idea of an overall pattern being possible to life. The characters are shown to have a destiny but not a fate. They are free to choose to listen to and to fulfill and inner purpose which will serve society or to fall. Therefore, whom they meet, where they are reborn, such incidents are not accidental but opportunities. (1982:193)

It is important that human beings of Shikasta are actively involved in building the cities. It is the work of human hands which do not descend from heaven. Lessing’s work shows the images of loomed large cities. She shows the Shikastean city in three stages. Before the lock weakens, the city presents a new variation to Lessing. It is the prelapsarian state enjoyed before the lock weakened. But these cities are abandoned when the lock fails away and the cities which are built later are not in harmony with the inhabitants. In fact, these

cities affect the mental attitude and prejudices of the people who live in them. After the nuclear holocaust, the lock strategies again because of stellar alignment. Doris Lessing once again renowned the concept of the apocalypse to emphasize strongly man's ability to cope and shape his future, subject to universal levels and not to the benevolence of any being.

Doris Lessing has distanced reality for us by using fantasy and prompts us to view it objectively. She shows Shikasta's space-age trappings, its beguiling story of friendly giants, and stone build geometric cities attuned to galactic harmony is a device to present the frighteningly believable account of the catastrophic events that might befall us. The fact that these events are set only a few years in the future in no way detracts from the essential realism with which the world as we currently experience it is rendered.

Lessing's *Marriages between Zones Three, Four, Five* is different from its predecessor. The setting in marriages is the Zones that surround Shikasta. Zone Three is a sensuous, sophisticated and matriarchy. The queen, Al. Ith is summoned by unseen providers on a task she hates. Thus, she has to marry Ben Ata, one of the warrior kings of Zone Four which is martial, hierarchical and misogynistic. Ben Ata needs Al. but it is not immediately clear why she needs him. They love each other; however and gradually see what the provider had in mind.

Marriages depart from certain particulars of science fiction set up in Shikasta. It neither includes the galactic empires of Canopus, Sirius, and Shammat nor does it roam over possible time. The narrative constructs not only a narrator but also an audience in *Marriages*. He observes: 'Our chroniclers and artists have made a great thing of this exchange between Al. Ith and soldiers. Some of the tales begin at this point... often these pictures are titled "Al Ith animals."'

In *Marriages*, blue is the colour of morning in Zone Three so it has linked with death. The narrator's role is similar he tells all in along how key events are shown by the picture

makers of the various Zones, how they are fixed for moment in a particular version and then conceived repainted as the social reality of the Zone changes. Al.Ith and Ben Ata function as real people. They are main characters in the novel. Their relationship is related in an intimate, personal, even serious way. As the two enter upon their marriage, however, and are driven through the emotions of fear, patience, lust, rage, liking, jealousy, rebellion, dependence, friendship, they become smaller, more complicated. Ben Ata is learnt many intimate details about sex by Al. Ith. for which he is grateful but also fearful. Later, after love has developed, Al. Ith. notes in herself;” the sharp. As if with an ambiguous wound, Pleasures she felt in being ground and pounded into these ecstasies of submission...”

Lessing describes marriages with great sensitivity. The problems of men and women encounter when both are locked into their perceptions. As Al. Ith and Ben Ata first meet each other, they say to each other is misinterpreted and misunderstood and both secretly wonder how the marriage will work out. The novel shows how men and women inevitably meet as foreigners. The relationship between the Zones shifts according to where we locate ourselves. As Al. Ith finds the nature of Zones Four to be conflict and battle and warring, undoubtedly we are shown that this is not an easy thing. In Zone Four, brutality warfare, hierarchical social stratification and organization, and enforced obedience. There is no agricultural activity of Zones. Fields lie unused due to lack of labor because males are drafted into the army at the age of seven. Most of the women practice secret rites. If we compare both Zones Three to Zone Four, then Zone Three is a pastoral Utopia and Zone Four might become. There was no exploitation and hierarchy based force and privilege. There is no sexual ownership but monogamy is only temporary. Women will conjoin with another man during pregnancy, men when the vibration she feels is right for her and the child to be. Sex is not lustful. Every individual has sensitivity and understanding to each other.

“The fact that there is no polarization between existence and essence shows itself in the result of all this unalienated activity-- the buildings have an indescribable beauty, harmony is everywhere apparent.”(Marsha Rowe, 1982:197)

People take much pride in making beautiful things and work is a pleasure for them. No doubt, it is a ‘feminist’ utopia because women are independent and men are busy in women’s work. Throughout the utopia as the novel begins, stasis setting in. The animals are sorrowful and unable to mate and so are the people. But by the end of the novel the immobilization is ended, transformal. We find that Zone Three has been revitalized, rejuvenated by Zone four.

Zone Five is a matriarchy but is very different from Zone Three. It is Ben Atta who appears civilized and Zone five who appears primitive. Within his Zone, Ben Atta had sought refuge from women and had not recognized them as persons in their own right. When he marries Vashi, he becomes in part also a teacher to her and her Zone. After her marriage with Ben Ata, Vashi learns to think and consider bothering with but later she feels that Ben Atta is beyond her in some ways. She also realizes that Ben Atta might be stolid and slow but he was not stupid.

Throughout her novel, Lessing does not give their story a conventional ending but she pushes them to greater and new heights. Murti was made queen of Zone Three in absence of Al Ith. But her suffering has stemmed the rot which has started to set in Zone Three. There were the same sufferings in Zone Four because their sufferings were prepared by Al Ith. After her return from Zone four, Al Ith realizes that she moves to the borders of Zone Two, and slowly, after a lot of preparation moves into Zone Two. At the end of the book there is a continuous movement between the Zones.” There was lightness, freshness, and an enquiry and a remaking and an inspiration where there had been only stagnation and closed frontiers.” (1980:299)

Marsha Rowe says that each Zone represents the four traditional psychic qualities. Zone Two is intuition, Zone Three is feeling, Zone four is thinking and Zone five is sensation. But astrology does not match these qualities. It has different meaning. As the symbol of thought (Zone four) is air (Zone Two), the symbol of feeling (Zone Three) is water (Zone four). Doris Lessing represents these as Zone two represents air, Zone three fire Zone Four, water and Zone Five, earth. Doris, through these Zones, creates a sensuous world. It at first glance seems to have nothing but after a close examination, however, reveals affinities. The behavior and beliefs of Zone Four are similar to ours. She heightens the consequences of such beliefs and behavior by using fantasy.

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