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## The Evolution of Doris Lessing's Art from a Mystical Moment to Space Fiction

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## The Evolution of Doris Lessing's Art from a Mystical Moment to Space Fiction

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NANCY TOPPING BAZIN

After publishing ten major novels, Doris Lessing has begun writing what she calls "space fiction" for her new series entitled *Canopus in Argos: Archives*. In a review of the first two novels published in this series, namely, *Shikasta* (1979) and the *Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* (1980),<sup>1</sup> Jean Pickering stresses that many of Doris Lessing's most avid readers were initially attracted to her because of her insights about the female experience and because of "her allegiance to nineteenth-century realism." Pickering suggests that Lessing's growing interest in space fiction and Sufism (Islamic mysticism) has made these admirers increasingly uneasy.<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, however, even these readers should recognize that the seeds of this later development were there from the beginning. To understand Doris Lessing's recent enthusiasm for space fiction, it is important to see its roots in the mystical experience she describes in her early novel, *Martha Quest* (1952).

The mystical moment in *Martha Quest*, unlike those in corresponding novels about adolescence by D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce,<sup>3</sup> contains not only the comforting experience of oneness with the environment—"of separate things interacting and finally becoming one, but greater"—but also the terrifying experience of painful disintegration. Lessing's protagonist experiences not only the ultimate sense of wholeness, but also, like Mrs. Moore in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, the "inhuman" annihilation of her self, all values, and all distinctions. As a result, *Martha Quest* "knew futility; that is, what was futile was her

own idea of herself and her place in the chaos of matter."<sup>4</sup> This mystical experience provides firsthand "knowledge," in the deepest sense, of the polarized states of mind that a human being would experience in the utopia and the dystopia.

The relationship between the vision of utopia and the momentary ecstasy derived from such experiences of oneness is explained by Marghanita Laski in her book *Ecstasy*. Laski claims that the ecstatic begins to feel that "life should be like this for ever" and out of this desire for "a continuous state of adamic ecstasy" is born the dream of a utopian community in which the individual can continually experience the sense of unity and wholeness possible only in a society in which, for instance, barriers of class, race, and sex are unknown. To be able to create a utopia is to return, in a sense, to the Garden.<sup>5</sup> By analogy, Martha Quest's terrifying experience of disintegration and loss of value that makes her realize "quite finally her smallness, the unimportance of humanity" provides mystical insight into what it would feel like to live in a dystopia. Lessing refers repeatedly in her works to an oncoming "catastrophe"—and it is the catastrophe that transforms our present world into a dystopia. The catastrophe may occur slowly as in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, with food and energy becoming scarce and pollution of earth, air, and water increasing, or rapidly as in *The Four-Gated City*, through, for example, nuclear accidents or war.

Growing awareness of the catastrophe is frequently accomplished in Lessing's novels by the dream of its opposite; in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, for example, the protagonist comforts Emily with a story of how they will escape to her friend's farm in Wales. The farm represents for them "safety, refuge, peace—utopia." There "life" would begin, life as it ought to be, as it had been promised—by whom? When? Where?—to everybody on this earth."<sup>6</sup> Lessing makes very clear, however, both in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) and in her earlier *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), that such dreams of the utopia will remain nothing more than dreams until our species have evolved further. By the late 1960s, if not earlier, Lessing had concluded that until human beings reach a higher stage in their evolutionary development they will be inadequate, incapable of the struggle, pain, and sacrifice required for the creation of the utopia. In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, the woman recounting the story tells us that, instead of resisting the conditions that lead to the catastrophe, human beings "get used to anything at all. . . . There is nothing that people won't try to accommodate into

'ordinary life'. . . . The enemy was Reality, was to allow ourselves to know what was happening."<sup>7</sup> In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, the protagonist Charles Watkins recognizes how difficult it is to remember the basic fact that "humanity, with its fellow creatures, the animals and plants, make up a whole, are a unity, have a function in the whole system as an organ or organism." Moreover, people will actually persecute anyone who reminds them of this basic knowledge that could, if used as a basis for living, save the species from destroying itself and its environment. Despite everyone's sense that "his or her potential had been left unfulfilled," people resist accepting the truth that will allow them to realize their full potential and avoid social disaster. Because people think in terms of "I" rather than "we" and do not see themselves as "part of a whole composed of other human beings,"<sup>8</sup> they regard people different from themselves as inferior; therefore, they exploit and/or go to war with them. Because they think in terms of "I" rather than "we" when they relate to other living things in the ecological system, they destroy their own environment. This egotistical attitude, namely, that "I" am free to do as I please vis-à-vis other people and nature, causes the catastrophe.

Doris Lessing's ideas have been nourished and clarified through her interest in Sufism, the name in Western languages for Islamic mysticism. Sufi thinker Idries Shah, who lives in England, personally and through his writings has had considerable influence on Lessing. In his book *The Sufis*, Shah says that Sufis "believe themselves to be taking part in the higher evolution of humanity."<sup>9</sup> A Sufi is someone who "knows" how important the "we" attitude is if people are to realize their potential for personal and social wholeness. The Sufi functions as a kind of emissary of the gods to remind individuals that they must humble themselves and accept the higher truth that all is One. Lessing has fictionalized two such emissaries of the gods in Charles Watkins (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell*) and Johor/George Sherban (*Shikasta*). Undoubtedly, she also sees herself as such an emissary, and, as the influence of Sufism upon her grows stronger, her fiction functions increasingly as the medium through which she reminds us that we must submit ourselves to the will of the gods and thereby discover our true place in the universe.<sup>10</sup>

Sufism has also provided Lessing with the belief that human beings are evolving toward higher consciousness through the development of extrasensory perception, intuition, dreams, and journeys into "inner

space." In *The Sufis*, Idries Shah writes: "The human being's organism is producing a new complex of organs. . . . What ordinary people regard as sporadic and occasional bursts of telepathic or prophetic power are seen by the Sufi as nothing less than the first stirrings of these same organs."<sup>11</sup> Certain people like Lessing herself already claim to possess some of the higher powers. Indeed, Lessing turned away from her former belief in rationalism to Sufism precisely because it provided an explanation for many nonrational experiences she has had. Lessing believes that "we all have extra-ordinary, non-rational capacities that we use to communicate in a very subtle way."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, she believes that without further development of these nonrational capacities, the world will be destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

The knowledge of our potential for either mass self-destruction or oneness—for the creation of either the dystopia or the utopia—can be gained through the most intense of mystical experiences, the moment; and Lessing suggests that, for our survival, the mystical is just as essential as the scientific. Lessing finds hope in the fact that "the best scientists, those on the highest levels, always come closer and closer to the mystical." She claims that "much of what Einstein said could have been said by a Christian mystic, St. Augustine, for example." In an interview with Nissa Torrents, she says, "Science, which is the religion for today, looks for the metaphysical, as with Catholics of old. Hence the boom in science fiction, which reflects this preoccupation [with the metaphysical] and which moves in the world of the non-rational."<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the scientist who moves from an interest in science to an interest in mysticism,<sup>15</sup> Lessing's growing preoccupation with mysticism and the metaphysical has increased her interest in scientific theories and science fiction.<sup>16</sup> Just as the mystical moment is usually born out of melancholy (as in *Martha Quest*), Lessing's movement toward both mysticism and space fiction (a subgenre of science fiction) is rooted in her despair at solving problems within the time-space of her own lifetime. She observes that the catastrophe has already begun and that the cataclysm will, in fact, happen.<sup>17</sup> Any hope for the future, therefore, will depend on evolutionary development of a higher consciousness after the dystopian nightmare has come about. Allowed more time and space, the species might survive. By using some form of science fiction, she could expand her vision to include as much time and space as she wished. In adopting the space fiction genre for her new series *Canopus*

in *Argos: Archives*, she experienced "the exhilaration that comes from being set free into a larger scope." Because, in her words, "what we all see around us becomes daily wilder, more fantastic, incredible," she had felt forced to break "the bonds of the realistic novel."<sup>18</sup>

In Lessing's first space fiction work, *Shikasta*, the quest for wholeness becomes that of the species rather than the individual. But it is important to see the roots of this quest in Lessing's earlier novels and, in particular, in *The Golden Notebook* (1962). It was because of experiences that Lessing had while writing *The Golden Notebook* that her faith in rationalism shifted to a faith in Sufism, which values the mystical and the nonrational.<sup>19</sup> In 1971, nine years after the publication of *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing wrote a preface stressing that "the essence of the book, the organization of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalise." The protagonist Anna Wulf and her lover Saul Green discover this truth through mental breakdowns. Lessing says: "They are crazy, lunatic, mad. . . . They 'break down' into each other, into other people, break through the false patterns they have made of their pasts, the patterns and formulas they have made to shore up themselves and each other, dissolve." The breakdown is a healing process achieved through "the inner self's dismissing false dichotomies and divisions."<sup>20</sup>

Such a healing process parallels the experience of annihilation of "self" to achieve unity during the mystical moment. It is not surprising, then, that Lessing moved into a mystical religion through writing a book about an experience of moving closer to psychic unity through the dissolution of "self." The dissolution process is necessary for getting oneself closer to reality, further from what was "glossy with untruth, false and stupid"; the process is described as "a whirl, an orderless dance, like the dance of the white butterflies in a shimmer of heat over the damp sandy vlei."<sup>21</sup> Throughout this period of "craziness and timelessness," the protagonist Anna Wulf had "moments of 'knowing' one after the other," thereby deepening her awareness that "the real experience can't be described"; words are inadequate. Anna thinks, "The people who have been there, in the place in themselves where words, patterns, order, dissolve, will know what I mean and others won't."<sup>22</sup>

In three subsequent novels, the quest for wholeness always involves an exploration of the nonrational, inner world: Watkin's quest in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), Kate's in *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), and the older woman's in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974).<sup>23</sup>

In these books, there is the sense of a message waiting for the individual to decipher it and the individual's painful attempts to grasp what always seems extremely coded and unclear. The message of the potential for oneness is sent by way of mental breakdowns, dreams, and psychic experiences.

This message concerning the potential for oneness, which came from the "gods" in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and from the presence of the One in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, comes from the Providers in Lessing's first space fiction novel *Shikasta* (1979). *Shikasta* is the name given to the planet Earth, and the novel documents its past and future history. A battle between good and evil galactic empires affects its fate. A utopian way of life is disrupted and ultimately destroyed when Put-tiora's evil planet Shammat interferes with the Substance-Of-We-Feeling (SOWF) sent from the good Providers on Canopus to the planet *Shikasta*. The SOWF is not received in adequate quantities until after the catastrophe. By that time, because only one percent of the population remains, there is a sufficient amount of SOWF for each person. Only then can the utopia be restored. Only then does everyone receive the message of how to live in harmonious unity.

During the dystopian period on *Shikasta*, the wealth of the planet is "spent on war, the nonproductive" and the masses, when idle, "begin to burn, loot, destroy, rape."<sup>24</sup> Because of pollution, *Shikastans* find it increasingly dangerous to eat, drink, breathe, or reproduce. Male-female relationships deteriorate, and the old become invisible to the young. Language loses its power and energy, and ideologies become stagnant and bankrupt.<sup>25</sup> People on *Shikasta* come to understand religion only in terms of personal gain or loss; duty is forgotten. There is no longer a sense "that something was due. . . . They were set only for taking. Or for being given. They were all open mouths and hands held out for gifts—Shammat! All grab and grasp—Shammat! Shammat!" The *Shikastans* await a savior. In fact, however, they must save themselves, and this becomes increasingly difficult.<sup>26</sup> The utopia in Lessing's space fiction work *Shikasta* lies in the past, and because people in the present are not sufficiently evolved to be able to struggle toward a renewal of this state, it will be re-created only in the far-distant future.

The promise of the utopia is always there, however, "a promise that in other places, other times, good can develop again." Moreover, each person is born with "all the potentiality. . . yet so few can be reached, to make the leap." Even though those who are sent to remind the

*Shikastans* of the truth frequently fail, like Taufig, to recall their duty to spread the message, the truth and the potential are still there waiting to be discovered: "Look, look, quick!—behind the seethe and scramble and eating that is one truth, and behind the ordinary tree-in-autumn that is the other," is a third truth. This finer truth is symbolized by "a tree of a fine, high, shimmering light, like shaped sunlight. A world, a world, another world, another truth."<sup>27</sup>

To dramatize the battle of good and evil forces for the soul of each *Shikastan*—for each person on earth—Doris Lessing has gone beyond social realism; yet the fantastic world she creates is symbolic of what is indeed real to her—that is, a sense of a struggle between good and evil forces in which the evil forces succeed in hindering the message of Oneness from reaching and having an impact upon a sufficient number of people. Having lost faith in human beings' ability to imagine and respond to the dangers she sees so clearly, Lessing has concluded that their blindness and inadequacy are not their fault but are caused, instead, by powerful external forces. Yet the key to reestablishing a utopia also lies in a sense of humility. In the lost utopia, for instance, individuals "accepted that their very existence depended on voluntary submission to the great Whole"—a submission that was not slavery "but the source of their future and their progress."<sup>28</sup> In Lessing's worldview, the Sufi practices this kind of submission and rejects the possessive, materialistic desires of the egoist that cause the dystopia. The mystic opens up to become the instrument through whom god's will—the utopia—can be realized. But, since the forces of evil are currently so strong, all that even the Sufis can achieve in the present is a holding action—simply keeping the promise or dream alive.

Through these ideas and through the genre of space fiction, Lessing gives her readers a cosmic view of themselves. Lessing says that an increasing number of *Shikastans* make "strength from the possibilities of a creative destruction. They are weaned from everything but the knowledge that the universe is a roaring engine of creativity, and they are only temporary manifestations of it."<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately and ironically, by depicting our powerless position as creatures manipulated by gods and cosmic forces, she may diminish whatever impetus and energy might still have existed to save ourselves. Furthermore, she suggests that rebirth of wholeness on a cosmic scale, as on the scale of the individual, may happen only through a process of annihilation. The annihilation on the larger scale will involve not just mental destruction,

but also physical destruction; and, although the species may survive the cataclysm, most individuals will not. One wonders, too, if Lessing's faith in isolated survivors of a holocaust or in some positive effects from radiation is not unduly optimistic.<sup>30</sup>

In *Science Fiction as Existentialism* (1978), Colin Wilson claims that Dostoyevsky simultaneously understood "two extremes—the sense of total meaninglessness in the face of the universe, and that sense of total security and certainty that comes in moments of mystical insight."<sup>31</sup> An admirer of Dostoyevsky, Doris Lessing also understands both the fear of chaos and the certainty of order; ultimately, she seems to reject anything more than a fleeting vision of meaningless chaos, clinging, instead, to the certainty of her mystical insight, which predicts an ultimate integration into wholeness—an integration earned, however, through pain and sacrifice.

In *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* (1980), her second space fiction novel, Lessing again places her hope in an evolution toward psychic powers and, eventually, total recall and realization of human potential. Although Lessing places her utopian vision much further into the future than most contemporary feminists, she evidently shares the radical feminists' faith that it is women, if anyone, who will "save" humankind through their psychic powers. In *Zone Four*, it is the women who defy the rule that they must not look up. And women are the ones who attempt, however unsuccessfully, to expand their awareness of the higher zone. Women also preserve the songs that record the promise of oneness. In *Zone Three*, however egalitarian the male-female relationships, it is women who rule, and it is a female, Al-Ith, who must lead the way to the still purer zone—*Zone Two*. As leader, she responds to an intuition that "there is something we should have been doing. But we have not done it." Furthermore, Dabeeb of *Zone Four* notes that "Al-Ith's strengths had stemmed from something—somewhere—else."<sup>32</sup>

Al-Ith goes far beyond any of Doris Lessing's previous characters in her commitment to mysticism. Like the true mystic, she abandons all the rewards of the material world, lives simply, and devotes herself to her quest: "she is already living, at least with part of herself, somewhere else." The beings in *Zone Two*, with whom she seeks union, are "like flames, like fire, like light." Al-Ith herself becomes "a worn thin woman who seemed as if she was being burnt through and through by invisible flames." Going further and further each day into *Zone Two*,

she nourishes her son when he visits her "with what she had brought from there."<sup>33</sup>

By describing the process of becoming a mystic in terms of *Zone Two*, Doris Lessing probably renders the experience more real and acceptable for her nonmystic readers. Like all well-wrought science fiction, Lessing's space fiction enables us to experience psychic events vicariously through our senses in terms of particular times, places, and movements. Describing the same events in traditional fiction as the mental experience of a particular character would require, for many readers, a greater leap of faith.

Lessing's space fiction is basically religious and moral in its intent; it is scientific only to the extent that scientific theory (concerning, for example, evolution or psychic phenomena) can enhance her moral vision. Throughout her works, the "lodestone," against which all is tested, is the polarized experience of painful self-annihilation and ecstatic oneness that occurs in the mystical moment.<sup>34</sup> Her knowledge of the price that must be paid for wholeness and the priceless quality of that wholeness informs her aesthetic vision today just as it did in the 1950s. Disillusioned by the attitudes and behavior of human beings today, however, Doris Lessing has developed her space fiction series, *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, in order to avoid complete despair. By enlarging her time scale to span many generations of an evolving species, she can maintain her hope. Someday human beings may be morally strong enough to confront the threat of the dystopia and make the sacrifices required for the realization of her utopian vision.

## NOTES

1. Doris Lessing, *Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta: Personal, Psychological, Historical Documents Relating to Visit by JOHOR (George Sherban) Emissary (Grade 9) 87th of the Period of the Last Days* (New York: Knopf, 1979); *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five (As Narrated by the Chroniclers of Zone Three)* (New York: Knopf, 1980).

2. Jean Pickering, "Review of *Shikasta* and *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five*," *Doris Lessing Newsletter* 4 (Winter 1980): 7.

3. See Nancy Topping Bazin, "The Moment of Revelation in *Martha Quest* and Comparable Moments by Two Modernists," *Modern Fiction Studies* XXVI (Spring 1980): 87–98.

4. Doris Lessing, *Martha Quest* (New York: Plume-New American Library, 1970), pp. 200, 52, and 53, respectively.

5. Marghanita Laski, *Ecstasy: A Study of Some Secular and Religious Experiences* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), p. 296.
6. Doris Lessing, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (New York: Bantam-Knopf, 1976), pp. 3, 34.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.
8. Quotations are from Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (New York: Bantam, 1971), pp. 128, 163, and 109, respectively.
9. Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (Garden City, New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1971), p. 19.
10. The influence of Sufism upon Lessing's fiction has been discussed in Nancy Shields Hardin, "Doris Lessing and the Sufi Way," *Contemporary Literature* 14 (Autumn 1973): 565–81; and Dee Seligman, "The Sufi Quest," *World Literature Written in English* (November 1973): 190–206.
11. Shah, *The Sufis*, p. 61.
12. "Doris Lessing: Testimony to Mysticism," interview by Nissa Torrents, trans. Paul Schlueter, *Doris Lessing Newsletter* 4 (Winter 1980): 12. This interview was originally published in Spanish in *La Calle*, no. 106 (April 1–7, 1980): 42–44.
13. Based on a talk given by Lessing at Rutgers University, November 1972.
14. Quotations from "Doris Lessing: Testimony to Mysticism," p. 12.
15. Fritjof Capra, who does theoretical high-energy physics, is an example of such a scientist. In *The Tao of Physics* (New York: Bantam, 1977), he explains how a holistic, organic worldview emerges from both modern physics (based upon quantum theory and general relativity) and Eastern mysticism.
16. Lessing expressed keen interest in both science and science fiction in a conversation I had with her in London, July 1980. In 1969, she told Jonah Raskin in an interview first published in *New American Review*, no. 8: "I've been reading a lot of science fiction, and I think that science fiction writers have captured our culture's sense of the future" (Reprinted in *A Small Personal Voice: Essays, Reviews, and Interviews*, ed. Paul Schlueter [New York: Vintage-Random House, 1975], p. 70).
17. Her belief in the inevitability of the cataclysm was evident in my July 1980 conversation with her.
18. These statements by Lessing are made in "Some Remarks" (n. p.), which serves as a preface to *Shikasta*.
19. "Doris Lessing: Testimony to Mysticism," p. 12.
20. "Preface to *The Golden Notebook*," reprinted in *A Small Personal Voice*, pp. 27–28.
21. Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962), pp. 619–20.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 633–34.
23. For a discussion of the urgency of this quest for wholeness as it is depicted

- in these three novels, see Nancy Topping Bazin, "Androgyny or Catastrophe: The Vision of Doris Lessing's Later Novels," *Frontiers* 5 (Fall 1980): 10–15.
24. Lessing, *Shikasta*, p. 233.
  25. *Ibid.*, pp. 199–201, 234–35, 248.
  26. *Ibid.*, pp. 112, and 9–10, respectively.
  27. Quotations are from Lessing, *Shikasta*, pp. 24, 105, and 202–3, respectively.
  28. Lessing, *Shikasta*, p. 26.
  29. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
  30. In *The Four-Gated City* (New York: Bantam, 1970, p. 644), Lessing suggests the surviving children were changed in a variety of ways by "a dose of sudden radiation."
  31. Colin Wilson, *Science Fiction as Existentialism* (Middlesex: Bran's Head Books, Ltd., 1978), p. 12.
  32. Lessing, *Marriages*, pp. 119, 223.
  33. Quotations are from Lessing, *Marriages*, pp. 226, 230, 228, and 229, respectively.
  34. Lessing speaks of the mystical moment as her "lodestone" and "conscience" in *Martha Quest*, p. 200.