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A Step Back:

On Genre and the Use of Alien Perspective in Doris Lessing's *Shikasta*

Master Thesis Literary Studies: English Track

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Introduction

Doris Lessing's novel *Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta* (1979) was the first book in her *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series. It is comprised of five novels in total, namely: *Shikasta*, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* (1980), *The Sirian Experiments* (1980), *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (1982) and *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire* (1983). The *Canopus in Argos* series stands out from her other work primarily due to a generic shift away from realism. As a consequence, its critical reception was mixed and confused, and scholarly writing done on the series has been scarce. This thesis is intended to bolster what writing on Lessing's science fiction exists with a new perspective on how the first novel of the series, *Shikasta*, should be understood formally and thematically. Much of the contemporary criticism of Lessing's work in the late 1970s and early 1980s focussed on Lessing's spiritual conversion to Sufism, and also insists on reading the novel *Shikasta* as an adaptation of sacred literature.

After reading the Old and New Testaments, as well as the Qur'an, Lessing was struck by how similar religious tales are across the various beliefs (Perrakis 76). In an interview with Billy Gray, Lessing said that *Shikasta* is "a very regurgitated book because it all comes out of the sacred books" (85). Here, however, she is mostly referring to the fantastic elements in her novel.[1] She was influenced to a greater degree by the idea that all religions share a common origin, that they are actually the same religion, which is a perspective she could support with her modern approach to Sufism.[2] Clearly, studying the religious aspects of the *Canopus in Argos* series and its analogues to sacred texts is a valid and useful

[1] She mentions that, for example, the Bible as well as the Qur'an tell of a time when there were giants living among humans (Gray, 85). These giants are featured in *Shikasta* as well.
[2] In an interview with Christopher Bigsby, this subject is discussed in more detail (see Ziegler and Bigsby 202).

approach. However, it is far from being the single most defining aspect of Lessing's science fiction novels, as many of the scholarly studies of her work would suggest. Rather than focussing once again on the biographical context of Lessing's spiritual awakening, this thesis will focus on another more literary aspect of *Shikasta,* namely its generic complexity, and particularly Lessing's appropriation of science fiction elements – notably the concept of an alien perspective – and their significance in shaping the text formally as well as thematically.

Later scholarship has engaged with the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series on the significance of its genre, often in combination with the Sufi influences present in the novels. A published PhD thesis by Shadia S. Fahim, titled *Doris Lessing and Sufi Equilibrium* (1989) is the most comprehensive work on this subject. In her thesis Fahim finds a "common denominator" (1) throughout Lessing's oeuvre, which she describes as "finding 'the right path for moral equilibrium' within the individual – through motifs of descent and ascent – and between the individual and society – through motifs of return" (1). Fahim argues that there is an underappreciated spiritual dimension to Lessing's earlier work, and that on the other hand the social and political issues which are central to the later novels are overlooked. This latter point is an important motivation for this thesis, which will focus on the sociological issues Lessing presents in *Shikasta*. In a sense, this thesis will be an inversion of Fahim's approach. Rather than extending the spiritual aspect of Lessing's writing across her work, *Shikasta* specifically will be detached from its religious context and studied as a work of literary science fiction.

When *Shikasta* was published, in 1979, science fiction was still a rather unfashionable word among Lessing's high-brow critics. Yet with the introduction of spaceships and aliens in Lessing's latest novel, critics could no longer deny they were reading science fiction. Nevertheless, they refused to address the significance of Lessing

breaking the chains of realism. Some critics dismissed Lessing's turn towards science fiction as an unhappy accident. In a review of *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (*New York Times* 1982), John Leonard belittled Lessing's new work, claiming that "One of the many sins for which the 20th century will be held accountable is that it has discouraged Mrs. Lessing. She will transport herself, no longer writing novels like a Balzac with brains, but, instead, Books of Revelation, charts of the elements and their valences." It is common for critics to express some prejudice towards pseudoscience and spiritual disciplines such as Sufism in reviews of the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series. Writer and critic Gore Vidal, for example, refers to Sufis as "the woolly ones" (*New York Review of Books*). He ends the review in his customary witty manner: ironically advising Lessing to join the Church of Scientology, which had developed out of one-time science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard's "dianetics" programme (Menadue).

Understandably, these negative critics blame their dislike of the novel on Lessing's spiritual conversion. This may be a consequence of the teacherly tone Lessing takes, which at times makes her novel seem condescending toward its readers. Thinking that Lessing was trying to convert them, these critics quickly got their guard up and proceeded to mock the Sufi mysticism her text contained and blamed the Sufi mystics for spiriting away their prized literary author Doris Lessing. This distracted contemporary readers from properly comprehending the novel, preventing its unique structure from having the desired effect. Reading *Shikasta* within science fiction scholar Darko Suvin's theory of the "novum" reveals that Lessing's cosmic viewpoint and detached, bureaucratic language has the effect of distancing the reader from the novel's human context, guiding them into a different "alien" perspective to better observe the social issues she is addressing.

The negative responses to Lessing's adoption of science fiction tropes and narrative

structures is somewhat surprising given her two previous novels which were already tending towards the genre. Firstly, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) describes the sudden psychotic breakdown and imaginative inner experiences of professor Charles Watkins. This novel was a response to J.G. Ballard's call for writers to explore "inner-space" in their speculative fiction. The ideas in Lessing's detailed and fantastic description of Watkins' psychosis reappear in *Shikasta* in a number of ways, which will be analysed further later in this thesis. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) is a dystopian novel set in a bleak, post-crisis, futuristic London. In this novel the bleak lives of London's citizens are shown through the eyes of a middle-aged woman, who takes in a young girl while struggling to survive. In a turn resembling the end of *Shikasta*, at the end of the novel the narrator is able to transcend her physical reality, taking her new family with her through a gateway into a better world (215-217).

This thesis will analyse *Shakista* by contextualising it within theories concerning the significance of genre as a way of understanding literary texts. It will argue that the generic structures of *Shikasta* allow the reader a level of detachment towards the human characters and to view the version of humanity in the novel from an elevated "alien" perspective. In other words, readers of *Shikasta* are encouraged take a view of a human society which they are not a part of, thinking of it like the alien overlords in the novel do. This is achieved through Lessing's shifting styles and viewpoints. Much of the novel is written in the impassive style of the Canopean archivists. Johor, the novel's Canopean protagonist, emulates this style but at times slips into a more emotional tone. Contrasting with this is the diary of young Rachel Sherban, who is guided primarily by her emotions. In an interview, Lessing said that "*Shikasta* is a mess, but at any rate it is a new mess" (Ziegler and Bigsby 205). One of the ways of ordering this "new mess" is by looking at the various generic

structures Lessing employs to guide the reader's interpretation of the varying viewpoints in the novel. The novel opens at its furthest point away from empirical reality and starts working its way towards a familiar version of Earth, which it reaches around the middle. The perspective from which the novel is narrated follows this movement towards familiarity, beginning with documents from an alien archive and finally reaching young Rachel Sherban's diary. Another way to look for order in this novel, which will not be discussed in any detail in this thesis, is to search for the underlying spiritual search for balance, which is extensively studied in Shadia S. Fahim's book on the Sufi influence in Lessing's work.

In an interview with Christopher Bigsby, Lessing denies holding any religious convictions herself, saying: "I can't be religious; I haven't got the religious temperament demanded of you." The modern Sufism Lessing discovered, taught by Idries Shah, is a very free type of spiritual teaching according to Lessing. In the same interview she says: "So what I have found is the beginning of a way of looking at things which unfolds as you go on, and if that is an annoying phrase I can't help it" (Ziegler and Bigsby 202). One point Fahim makes in her chapter on the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series is that Lessing utilized science fiction conventions in these novels to contrast science with religion. This "interaction between the rational and the transcendental" (144), according to Fahim, is used in the "deconstruction of the habitual mode of understanding" which, according to Sufism, is always the first step towards equilibrium. In this thesis it will be argued that the contrast of science and spirituality is only one of the deviations from the reader's expectation, created by generic markers, which attempt to deconstruct the reader's embedded perspectives. *Shikasta* is full of contrasts, such as the human and inhuman viewpoints, the detached and the intimate use of language, the rational and the emotional motivations and characters. Moreover, these oppositions are constantly challenged, making the reader question their judgments in

regard to the values within them.

When asked the question “Isn’t there a strong moral drive in your work, a sense of trying to stop a headlong rush towards disaster by deflecting your reader away from a dangerous path?” Lessing answered: “When you say it like that it sounds as though I believe I can do it.” However, she adds:

> I think in the past I have had some such thoughts, that if enough writers write this, which God knows we do, if enough writers say ‘For God’s sake look out at what is happening’, things might change. But I have gone back to a thought I had in the *Children of Violence* series right at the beginning. I reread *Martha Quest* recently. Do you remember, the passage when she stands at the door and watches the prisoners walk past in handcuffs and thinks that this has been described now in literature for so long and nothing has changed. Well you know this is a very terrible thought for a writer to have, and this is another of these complexes I live with because with one half of myself I think I don’t see the point of it, I don’t think we change anything. (193)

It is tempting to view *Shikasta* as Lessing’s last-ditch effort to have an impact on readers resembling the motivation to change people’s minds through her writing, warning them to what the world is coming to in her eyes. Lessing’s reasons for writing science fiction, which she gives in the same interview, have much to do with how the modern conception of society and reality is changing. Lessing considers the nineteenth-century realist novel as dead because the societies presented in them no longer exist. Lessing says that these societies, from a modern perspective, seem so small and temporary that the stories in these novels are no longer about anything (Ziegler and Bigsby 194).

With *Shikasta* Lessing was trying to outpace this move towards widening social horizons. The alien perspective on humanity can be viewed as a compounded version of the modern perspective on nineteenth-century society, or more generally past societies which can no longer exist in the modern world. This thesis will argue that Lessing succeeds, to a degree, in creating this futuristic perspective on modern man and conveying it to the reader. The psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1927-1989) had a major influence on Lessing, and his views on the workings of human societies play a large role in Lessing's presentation of social problems in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *Shikasta*, which will be compared later on. Laing's ground-breaking book on schizophrenia called *The Divided Self* argues for a fundamental change in the way we approach mental illness. For Laing, the so-called mad person is a symptom and a victim of a sick society (Vlastos 246). Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* exemplifies how madness can be a medicine for the individual living in such a sick society. In *Shikasta,* the sickness of society is a given, and it is clearly shown that madness is many people's best hope of escape from the sickness around them.

To give this thesis a theoretical framework a critical exploration of the concept of genre based on the work of John Frow will be given in chapter one, followed by an overview of science fiction theory with special attention to the seminal work of Darko Suvin, which was contemporary to Lessing's turn to science fiction, in chapter two. Before presenting the close textual analysis of *Shakista*, an overview of its style and plot is useful. This section will also demonstrate and explain some of the difficulties readers and critics experienced with the novel initially. Finally, an analysis of the novel's generic structure and alien perspective will show that its merit as a literary work of social criticism, at least initially, has been underestimated.

Chapter I: Genre as a Tool for Literary Analysis

The concept of genre as applied in this thesis will be taken mostly from John Frow's book on the subject from 2006. Bookstore classification genres like science fiction function mostly as a horizon of expectations for potential readers (Frow 69). For science fiction, these expectations are primarily concerned with themes, setting and plot. Picking up a science fiction novel, a reader expects to find within a world or a time different from ours, for example. However, reader's expectations may vary depending on their experience, and can span across a multitude of properties, from style and content to assumed social values and cultural knowledge. Though important to consider, the type of classification focused on themes is not very useful for texts that are not highly prototypical of a certain genre: texts you may call "generic" in the derogatory sense of the word. As R.B. Gill has explained in "The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction" (2013): genre should not be understood as a concept of strict classification but as tool with which to highlight "degrees of relationship" (75) between texts. Whether a text "belongs" to any genre is always "a matter of degree" and the product of how readers "recognize similarities in complex ways" (Gill 75). On closer inspection, therefore, most texts transcend the rigorous categorisation one might find in the bookstore, incorporating or mixing properties of many different genres and thus not necessarily working within the horizon of expectations signalled to the reader by a cover, a title, or a label on a bookshelf. This is particularly true for *Shikasta*, as will be shown below.

Frow is mostly interested in the way the structuring force of genres may generate meaning. Genres are to be considered historically changeable, contingent, and situational (see Frow 68-71). Every utterance or piece of text has generic properties that inform a

listener or reader on how to interpret it, which frame of reference to activate in their mind. These properties can still be thematic, but also relate to the setting of the text, its social or cultural situation and many other extra-textual aspects like the reader's own social and literary repertoire. In this sense, genres are a lot like discourses; as the central argument of his book, Frow states that

> genres create effects of reality and truth which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or philosophy or painting, or in everyday talk. … Genre, like formal structures generally, works at a level of semiosis – that is, of meaning-making – which is deeper and more forceful than that of the explicit 'content' of a text. (19)

This posits that genre is a property of form, and that form is more meaningful than content. The tactical use of the word "explicit" here renders the contest between form and content very one-sided. Frow's approach eschews discussions of generic contents such as specific *topoi* or defined building blocks which determine the contents of "complex"[3] popular genres, in favour of a focus on "simple" genres such as riddles and prayers. These generally include much shorter texts and have much more clearly defined structural properties.

Generic complexity arises from the incorporation of various simple genres into larger texts, such as novels or plays. Determining a text's genre then is not a simple labelling exercise but a form of literary analysis. The classification of *Shikasta* as a science fiction text will direct readers into a certain avenue of interpretation. Other readers may find its Biblical allusions or its similarities to the epic tradition more compelling, and thus come to very

[3] Frow, following Mikhail Bakhtin and others, distinguishes between simple and complex genres, adding that "however useful this distinction may be heuristically, all simple forms are in the long run complex"(40).

different conclusions about the text. Frow asks how the incorporation of simple genres into a complex text can change their meaning, rather than asking: “Why is *Shikasta* (not) a science fiction text?” he would want to know what is means for *Shikasta* to be a science fiction text and how it changes the meaning of the simpler forms within. However, in the field of Science fiction theory, many have asked the question of what constitutes a valid science fiction text. An outline of these theoretical delimitations and historical origins of science fiction will prove useful for this thesis.

Chapter II: Science fiction – Suvin's Ideal Form and Rose's Origins of SF

SF has resisted a clear definition, and many critics have resorted to stating such negative definitions like "SF is what is marketed as SF" or "science fiction is what we point to when we say it" (qtd in Roberts 2).[4] It seems like these critics have simply given up on defining science fiction, but they raise an important point. Genres like science fiction and thrillers, fantasy and horror have always had a commercial side which, for better or worse, in recent times has mostly shifted to the movie industry (see Folch). Marketing a novel, TV series or film as science fiction will attract a certain audience expecting a certain set of properties. These are usually thematic properties such as alien civilizations, interplanetary conflicts, futuristic technology, dystopian or apocalyptic scenarios, so on and so forth. Science fiction theory has been concerned with what general principles govern the wide array of topics one might find typical of the SF domain. One proposition by Adam Roberts is that science fiction is fantastic literature which rationalizes its fantastic elements with a scientific perspective. This seems like a constrained type of fantasy "grounded in a discourse of possibility" (7). As an example of a novel that is then clearly not science fiction, Roberts mentions Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), in which the protagonist's transformation into an insect is never explained. Roberts argues that science fiction texts require a certain proximity to the author's or reader's world, so that it never devolves into fantasy or surrealism:[5]

> It seems that one of the axes of critical enquiry has to do with the degree of proximity of the 'difference' of SF to the world we live in: too removed and the SF

[4] Roberts quotes three similar definitions of SF by the critics Edward James, Damon Knight and Norman Spinrad.

[5] Interestingly, one of the most influential and well-respected authors of science fiction, J.G. Ballard (1930-2009), turned to the formal and thematic characteristics of surrealist art in order to develop his specific subgenre of "inner space" fiction, in the pages of New Worlds, during the 1960s (see Ballard). His work in turn directly influenced Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*.

> text loses purchase, becomes impossible for the reader to identify with or care about the imaginary world portrayed; too close and it might as well be a conventional novel, it loses the force and penetration the novum can possess when it comes to providing newness of perspective. (14)

Darko Suvin, who coined the term "novum" in science fiction theory, explored this in more detail in much of his pioneering work on the science fiction genre.[6] For Suvin, "the novum is the necessary condition of SF" (*Metamorphoses* 65). A novum is essentially a point of difference between the author's or the reader's world and the imaginary world of the science fiction text. Suvin has a rigorous approach to the science fiction genre, trying to make clear distinctions between what is and what is not valid science fiction. Much of his argument relies on the concept of the novum, which requires specific properties in order to be authentic. Firstly, the introduction of a novum must be based on and validated by the scientific method. This does not mean that the novum must be actually scientifically achievable, only that it should be scientifically explainable. Suvin says that "the essential tension of SF is one between the reader, representing a certain type of Man of our times, and the Unknown introduced by the *novum*" ("State of the Art" 36; *Metamorphosis* 64). If a novum is properly introduced and sufficiently explained, the science fiction text will induce the cognitive stimulation essential to science fiction according to Suvin (*Metamorphosis* 65).

This attempt to "determine and delimit the genre" (Suvin, "State of the Art" 32) is successful mostly in the latter objective, placing science fiction between the naturalistic and the supernatural genres, and emphasising that these should never be mixed. Suvin proposes

[6] Suvin first mentions the novum in an essay titled "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre," published in *College English* in 1972, which was later included in a collection of essays titled *Science Fiction*, edited by Mark Rose in 1976, and eventually became part of Suvin's poetics of science fiction as detailed in his book-length study *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction* (1979). Suvin borrows the term from the German philosopher Ernst Bloch (see *Metamorphoses* 64).

a triangle structure of naturalistic fiction, fantastic fiction, and science fiction. The first mimetically represents the author's or readers reality, which the second completely abandons. The last then introduces a distortion into one's empirical reality in the form of a "cognitive innovation" (Suvin, "State of the Art" 36). Both in science fiction and fantasy a world different from ours is depicted, which makes estrangement an important part of experiencing these genres, yet the estrangement in science fiction is more potent for its aspect of cognition, challenging the reader and giving them the opportunity to mentally grasp the novum. Suvin warns against such hybrids as science fantasy, which he calls a "large pathological growth devaluing much of the field" ("State of the Art" 40), because as soon as a text's cognitive plausibility is revoked by some form of magic or another clear impossibility, the essential tension achieved by the sufficiently explained novum is lost.

Ultimately, Suvin submits that the subject of a precise definition of science fiction is rather irrelevant, writing that

> a pretence at *fully explanatory* definitions should be restricted to popularizing handbooks, … on the theoretical level we should focus on discussing the necessary and sufficient conditions for SF which have then in each case to be blended with historico-sociological analysis in order to educe specific realities from the *generic potentiality*. ("State of the Art" 41, emphasis in original).

Nevertheless, he puts forward the "literature of cognitive estrangement" *(Metamorphoses,* 5)[7] as an advantageous definition of science fiction. Though perhaps too subjective to be "fully explanatory," the benefits of this definition, which hinges on the concept of the

[7] "I will argue for an understanding of SF as the *literature of cognitive estrangement*. This definition seems to possess the unique advantage of rendering justice to a literary tradition which is coherent through the ages and within itself, yet distinct from nonfictional utopianism, from naturalistic literature, and from other non-naturalistic fiction. It thus makes it possible to lay the basis for a coherent poetics of SF." (Suvin, 5)

novum, should by now be clear. The generic potentiality lies in the way the novum transforms reality without abandoning it, how it builds on the circumstance, the historical and social situation of a text, to create interest and generate meaning. The cognitive aspect depends on the reader's ability to comprehend, to a degree, how the text's reality could follow from their own. Thus, the "science" in science fiction is in the method the reader should use to arrive at such an understanding, and in the way the author sufficiently rationalizes the novum to make this possible.

The pervasive association of science fiction as a popular genre with the "hard" or mathematical sciences can then seem problematic. According to Suvin, only the method, the scientific mode of thought, is central to an understanding of science fiction, which would include the "soft" behavioural sciences and the humanities. Some critics and authors have, for this reason, rebranded certain authors and works of science fiction as "speculative fiction" (See Gill). This change was encouraged by science fiction writer J.G. Ballard, in Britain, and science fiction editor and writer Judith Merril in the United States (see Hartwell 142). Ballard's science fiction was more concerned with what he called "inner space,"[8] exploring the unknown depths of the mind. Mostly lacking any futuristic technologies which can be associated with the natural sciences, science fiction can seem a misplaced term. Especially Ballard's novels[9] tend to make the human mind a victim of existing technological innovations. Merrill stressed the stylistic and structural innovations of authors like Michael Moorcock, J. G. Ballard, Samuel Delany, Roger Zelazny and Ursula Le Guin, all of whom can be said to adopt a critical perspective on the impact of modern scientific and technological developments on human well-being (Hartwell 151). However, Suvin argues that "anti-

[8] Ballard wrote an editorial for the SF periodical *New Worlds* in 1962 titled "Which Way to Inner Space".
[9] *The Drowned World* (1962), *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High Rise* (1975) are good examples of this, with the latter also being adapted into a film in 2015.

scientific SF is just as much within the scientific horizon" and that, moreover, "'soft' sciences can probably better serve as basis for SF than the 'hard' natural sciences" ("State of the Art" 38). Thus, Suvin would maintain that SF stands for science fiction, dismissing the rebranding to speculative fiction as merely an ideological inversion of SF.

Not all theorists of science fiction share Suvin's conviction regarding the essential nature of a scientific ethos pervading the innovations presented in science fiction literature. In an essay on the transcendental in presentations of the apocalypse in speculative literature, Robert Galbreath characterizes science fiction as a "developed oxymoron" (55). He argues that alien intervention in human society is actually an adaptation of the divine, and used to imagine an eschatological or "God-given" future as opposed to a utopian or "man-made" one (55). Generalising, Galbreath states that

> the overall tone of these fictions [containing a future apocalypse], moreover, is that of a lack of confidence in any future. Taken collectively, they doubt both human potential and interventionist salvation. They offer no consensus on the nature of the End, the kind of transcendence involved, or its desirability. A few even doubt the finality of any End. They constitute, in short, an ambiguous apocalypse. (56)

This uncertainty differentiates speculative fiction from sacred literature. However, the presence of the transcendental which, according to Galbreath, is basic to science fiction, clashes with Suvin's insistence that there should be no supernatural elements in science fiction. Galbreath argues that authors use what is essentially a loophole in Suvin's rulebook. He claims that "to present the transcendental as an objectively real marvel, speculative fiction relies heavily on analogues which are textually presented or inferable as existing within spacetime, yet so far exceed human understanding that they are functionally

equivalent to the transcendental" (57). Since there is so much humankind does not understand about the universe and the human mind itself, authors have a vast canvas to imagine the potential realities and futures within this great unknown.

An approach more in line with Frow's theory of genre can be found in Mark Rose's *Anatomy of Science Fiction* (1981). Rather than propose specific requirements for SF, Rose tries to think of the genre as a "tradition, a developing complex of themes, attitudes, and formal strategies that, taken together, constitute a general set of expectations" (4). Rose's approach is an inversion of Suvin's, elevating the historical perspective, or the "historico-sociological analysis" over the "necessary and sufficient conditions" of science ficton. Thus what Rose perceives as the origins of the genre takes centre stage. Rose argues that early science fiction is best regarded as developing out of romance forms, namely the gothic and the utopian romance.

H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), in particular, is seen by both Rose and Suvin as a model for early science fiction and a turning point in the development of the genre. The novum of time travel is explained through the presence of the time machine and the time traveller's dinner party, where a somewhat scientific explanation is given. Time travel does remain a fantastic concept, however. It is mostly Wells's version of the far future, which is based quite clearly on Darwinian theories of evolution, as well as Marxist social theory, that makes his novel exemplary of science fiction. In the year 802,701, humanity has split into two species, one representing the rich and one the poor. The poor went underground and regressed into strong ape-like creatures called Morlocks. The rich, by contrast, live together in large palaces. Their bodies and minds have adapted to upper-class idleness, becoming the child-like Eloi. In the age where the time traveller arrives, the Morlocks hunt the helpless Eloi at night, showing how history repeats itself even in this distant future world. Eventually

the time traveller travels even further into the future, until all that remains of life on Earth is a green slime, just as when life first began. Wells extrapolated the scientific concept of biological evolution in his novel and used it to illustrate his political views on social evolution.

Suvin concentrated on the peculiarities and the historical and social significance of the Wellsian nova, which "partake more of the flying carpet and the magic invisibility hood than of metallurgy or optics" (Suvin, *Metaphorphoses* 211), but tend to have in them some references to evolution and social Darwinism. Rose finds Wells' adaptation of the gothic and utopian traditions more significant to an understanding of SF as a genre.[10] Rose argues that genres are always in process because each generic form has a limited range of possibilities. Thus science fiction developed out of the twilight years of the romance tradition by way of "reexteriorizing" (15) romantic allegories and metaphors. According to Rose, genres typically move towards interiorization, meaning from physical action towards its spiritual or psychological correlatives (Rose 15). For romance this culminated into the gothic and utopian modes. SF initially made those romance's fantastic allegories more tangible, offering a return to physicality enriched by extrapolations of the myriad scientific developments of the time. Much later, the "New Wave" science fiction writers of the 1960s and 1970s pushed science fiction towards interiorization, focusing more on future psychology and spirituality.

Though Rose and Suvin's approaches are very different, they come to similar conclusions about the characteristics of science fiction. Thus Rose argues that "science

[10] "An analysis of, say, Wells's The Time Machine (1895) (…) might indicate how that text involves not only an inversion of the Utopian romance (…), but also a displacement of the gothic pattern of sin and retribution. In gothic novels the crime is usually an individual act. Here the crime is social, the repression and dehumanization of the working classes, an ancient sin that is gradually revealed in an epiphany of horror as the traveler discovers the true nature of the relations between the Morlocks and the Eloi." (Rose, 7)

fiction can be seen as filling a space between the opposed forms of the new realism and 'pure' fantasy." (20) Rose, however, does not ascribe the same value to the aspect of cognition in science fiction, which is repeatedly emphasised as essential to the genre's potential by Suvin. Rose states that "one might describe science fiction as a form of the fantastic that denies it is fantastic" (20), dismissing the genre's scientific ethos as a ploy to stimulate the reader's suspension of disbelief.

Ultimately, Suvin's insistence on defining specific boundaries for the genre, tackling questions of validity and authenticity, seems almost a fool's errand compared to Rose's historical overview of the genre. However, Suvin's argument is that his theoretical approach should enrich subsequent histories of the genre (including his own) as well as its criticism. Rather than defining science fiction in terms of its relations to other genres, giving science fiction its own definition would much better illuminate the genres potential. Having an ideal form to compare and contrast with is useful also from a historical perspective. The use of Suvin's theoretical delimitations then lies in regarding his definition as such, an ideal form rather than a fixed template. Rose's following statement ties in with this: "Regarded as an ideal form, science fiction's place in the generic system is clear. It is when we descend to particular texts that fruitless debates about classification occur" (21). Going forward *Shikasta's* classification as a science fiction text will be considered a given, and its deviations from Suvin's ideal form will be analysed for their implications. This will involve using Rose's historical origins of the genre, as well as Frow's theory of genre as a whole.

Chapter III: An analysis of *Shikasta's* Generic Structures

This chapter contains a critical analysis of *Shikasta*. The first section will explore the novel's structure while giving an overview of its plot. Lessing's unusual style of narration in *Shikasta* garnered many unfavourable reviews, yet it is essential in setting a tone of detachment and guiding the reader into an elevated perspective. This will be elaborated on in the second section, which will provide further explanation of why critics had difficulty appreciating *Shikasta* on the grounds of its original generic structure, as well as why these structures are instrumental in evoking the "alien" perspective on human society Lessing is trying to convey. The third section investigates *Shikasta*'s position within the SF genre, showing its origins in the Inner-space fiction of J.G. Ballard through a comparison with Lessing's previous novel *Briefing for a Descent into Hell.* In the final section, the argument is made that the genre Lessing created with *Shikasta* should be called Social-space fiction, as an evolution of Ballard's Inner-space fiction. Lessing leaps from the psychological space she explored in *Briefing* to the sociological space, observed from the exteriorized perspective of a psychiatrist analysing society as if it were an individual.

3.1 An overview of *Shikasta*'s Style and Plot

Before analysing the text in greater detail I will offer an overview of its style and plot. *Shikasta* is narrated mostly from the perspective of the Canopean archivists. Canopus is a civilization of alien overlords presented to us as the benevolent masters of the universe. Their home planet or solar system is also called Canopus, though never described in any physical detail. Their work is to colonise planets and to promote and guide the evolution of their naturally occurring species, often by introducing superior species from other planets as

mentors. When a species has advanced sufficiently, the Canopeans will establish a "Lock" with its planet and theirs, enabling a constant flow of positive emanations going both ways, allowing the species to attain perfect harmony with the Canopean empire and to become a part of the Canopean whole. The Canopeans call this The Plan. Shikasta, translated as the stricken, used to be known as Rohanda before the disaster, meaning the fruitful. The colonisation of Rohanda was one of the Canopeans' most promising endeavours, until an unforeseen shift in the stars caused a catastrophic disturbance in the harmony being established on the planet. Johor, the novel's main Canopean narrator, is an emissary from Canopus tasked with protecting humans, known to him[11] as Shikastans, from total degeneracy. Far from being the first novel to use an alien perspective to cast a critical light on human civilization and technological development,[12] *Shikasta* goes a step further by making the humans unknowingly dependent on the constant intervention and care of the vastly more advanced Canopeans. In Lessing's alternate universe, Shikastan society is not to be held accountable for its corruption, rather it is chance, the improper alignment of the stars, and evil, the pernicious powers of Shammat, that instigate the degeneration of the Shikastan population. The Canopeans regard the disaster as follows:

> We have to look at things now rather differently. In short, it is a question, if not of apportioning blame – never a very helpful process, tending always to draw attention away from essentials, rather than focussing it – then of knowing what went wrong, so as to avoid it on other planets. But the main cause of the disaster was what that word *dis-aster* implies: a fault in the stars. … If there had not been that shift in stellar

[11] Although it is mentioned at one point that the Canopeans are sexless, Johor and Taufiq, one of the few other named Canopeans, are both grammatically referred to as male.
[12] Ursula Le Guin's novels set in the alternate universe of the Hainish (e.g. *Rocannon's World* (1966), *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Word for World is Forest* (1976)) are good examples, as well as the more psychological *Solaris* (1961) by Stanislaw Lem.

> alignments, it would not have mattered what the Shammat agents were doing, or plotting. (21)

After the disaster, Shikastans and their mentor species called the Giants become victims of the Degenerative Disease. In simple terms, all undesirable human qualities known to man can be assumed to be symptoms of the Disease. Shammat is essentially its embodiment, presented as a rogue planet from the already reprehensible Puttioran empire. Their agents are on Shikasta to spread chaos and discord, to replace the harmonious bond with Canopus with its cruel opposite to feed their planet.

This premise of reducing the part of humanity to that of a witless victim, is initially quite difficult to parse for readers. As a consequence, early critical reception was often negative. One reviewer wrote that Lessing adopted a philosophy that "dwarfs the individual" (Bazin 9), and that it was too difficult "to be interested in these manipulated lives overseen by the detached moral engineers of Canopus" (9). However, *Shikasta's* first half is not devoid of human emotions. As a translator of human experience, Johor oscillates between the grand Canopean perspective and a more relatable, almost human perspective. Despite knowing that in the grand scheme of the cosmos every bit of individual human suffering he witnesses first-hand is utterly insignificant, the Canopean nature permits him some crucial compassion. On the one hand, much of Johor's reports, along with many excerpts from the Canopean chronicles of Shikasta, are written in a bureaucratic or encyclopaedic style, impassively reporting the fate of Shikasta over millennia at a time. This style was rather disliked by critics, writing for example that "bureaucratic language is dead language" (Bazin 9). On the other hand, many parts of the text show Johor to be extraordinarily involved and emotionally affected by the fate of the natives around him. He frequently refers to them as his friends and will go out of his way to help them. Explaining

this, the Canopean archivists responsible for editing the text mention that Johor has been under the Shikastan influences for some time and that "these are influences which conduce to emotionalism" (154), suggesting that Johor's perspective is no longer entirely alien and that his character is perhaps less unrelatable than he previously appeared. These Shikastan influences seduce Johor into writing the segments referred to as "*ILLUSTRATIONS: The Shikastan Situation*" (163) and "Additional Explanatory Information" (171) which Johor submitted "in excess of his mandate" (154). These passages are some of the most memorable in the novel, because Lessing here allows for some human thoughts to make their way into Johor's report, starting by defending the inner goodness of Shikastans:

> There is something else, and stronger than anything: the well-being, the always renewing, regenerative, healing force of nature; feeling one with the other creatures of Shikasta and its soil, and its plants.
>
> The lowest, the most downtrodden, the most miserable of Shikastans, will watch the wind moving a plant, and smile; will plant a seed and watch it grow; will stand to watch the life of the clouds. Or lie pleasurably awake in the dark, hearing wind howl that cannot – not *this* time – harm him where he lies safe. This is where strength has always welled, irrepressibly, into every creature of Shikasta … (198)

Subsequently, Johor shows the inner struggle of a Shikastan couple:

> She and he, making order in their living place, tidying and cleaning their home, stand together among piles of glass, synthetics, paper, cans, containers – the rubbish of their civilization which, they know, is farmland and food and the labour of men and women, rubbish, rubbish, to be carried away and dumped in great mountains that cover more earth, foul more water. As they clear and smooth their little rooms, it is

> with a rising, hardly controllable irritability and disgust. A container that has held food is thrown away, but over vast areas of Shikasta it would be treasured and used by millions of desperate people. Yet there is nothing to be done, it seems. Yet it all happens, it goes on, nothing seems to stop it. Rage, frustration, disgust at themselves, at their society, anger – breaking out against each other, against neighbours, against the child. Nothing they can touch, or see, or handle sustains them, nowhere can they take refuge in the simple good sense of nature. He has seen once a pumpkin vine sprawling its great leaves and yellow flowers and sumptuous golden globes over a vast rubbish heap, now it is an image for his imagination to find rest in, and comfort. She watches a neighbour trying to burn bits of plastic on a bonfire, while the chemical reek poisons everything, and she shuts her eyes and thinks of a broken earthenware bowl swept out of a back door in a village, to crumble slowly back into the soil. (200)

This passage is giving an example of Shikastan mental resilience by directly relating the experience of a couple of Shikastans, a record of feeling rather than fact. The presence of this passage is a consequence of Johor's involvement with and his devotion to Shikasta. The aim of this section and others like it is to show that the planet and it's race "*is* worth so much of our time and trouble" (3, italics in original).

The novel's second half starts with Johor, together with his Shikastan protégé Ben, descending to Shikasta from Zone Six.[13] They are to be born into the Sherban family as un-

[13] The Zones around Shikasta are very sparsely described, much less explained by Lessing. The only Zone beside Shikasta itself that is featured in the novel is Zone Six, a place where the Shikastans await re-entry into Shikasta, but only if their previous life there did not achieve some unknown standard of virtue. A manual for Canopean colonial servants dispatched to Shikasta instructs as follows: "Adjust yourself to the various levels of being which lie in concentric shells around the planet, six of them in all, and none requiring much effort from you since you will be entering and leaving them so quickly – none save the last Shell, or Circle, or Zone, Zone Six. This is a hard place, full of dangers, but these can easily be dealt with, as is shown by the fact that not once

identical twin brothers, George (Johor) and Benjamin. From this moment forward the reader never returns to Johor's point of view, nor do they see George's or Benjamin's. Instead, a large part of the rest of the novel is presented as Rachel Sherban's Journal. Thus, instead of a Canopean perspective on Shikastan hardship, here is a Shikastan girl's perspective on growing up with a Canopean brother – this inverted perspective is the main reason for Rachel Sherban's journal in the novel and will be revisited later. She does not know, of course, that her brother is an alien, yet they all know George is different. Whether or not George is entirely aware of his Canopean identity is not quite clear.

Starting when George was very small, the Sherban's were approached by strangers wanting to talk to George, take him on trips and give advice concerning his education. To the reader these strangers are clearly other Canopeans tasked with guiding George's upbringing, but Rachel does not understand who these people are or where they come from. Her parents are not much help, when she approaches her father with questions about George's upbringing he says: "At the beginning, when it started, often enough your mother and I thought we were mad. Or something like that. But we went along with it. We *did* go along with it. *And it worked*" (254, italics and underlined text in original). Rachel's frustrated attempts at understanding George and his mentors yield little. The Degenerative Disease[14] shows in Rachel's obsession with her brother, her need for his affection and approval. She is jealous of Benjamin and of Suzanna, George's lover. Rachel tends to find everything very overwhelming, and struggles to keep going as the global situation keeps deteriorating.

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have we ever lost one of our by now many hundred of emissaries there, not even the most junior and inexperienced. Zone Six can present to the unprepared every sort of check, delay and exhaustion. This is because the nature of this place is a strong emotion – "nostalgia" is their word for it – which means a longing for what has never been, or at least not in the form and shape imagined. Chimera's, ghosts, phantoms, the half-created and the unfulfilled throng here, but if you are on your guard and vigilant, there will be nothing you cannot deal with" (6).

[14] These words are capitalised throughout the novel, therefore it seems natural to do so here as well.

George tells her repeatedly to toughen up, saying that if she does not she will "have to come back and do it all over again" (270), which Rachel does not understand, but tells the reader that George at least knows about Zone Six. George eventually puts two children, Kassim and Leila, in Rachel's care, making her promise never to leave. Sometime later, after being told George's life is in danger from the Chinese government, Rachel, breaking the promise she made to George, disguises herself as him and starts traveling around to distract the assassins, leaving the children in Suzanna's care. Eventually she kills herself to prevent being captured.

The Sherbans move around a lot, which is one of the reasons they were chosen to bring up George. It is never quite clear what exactly constitutes Johor's mission as George, or if perhaps he is mostly improvising a scenario to save as many young Shikastans as he can. George is described as having a magnetic and rather enigmatic personality and appearance. It is very often mentioned that he is always talking, yet the reader, through the accounts of Rachel and sometimes Benjamin, rarely can tell what he is saying. Mostly incomprehensibly George attains significant influence with all the major youth movements and armies which proliferate throughout Shikasta during what are called The Last Days. Somehow he manages to organize talks between the movements, commencing first steps towards reconciliation. This culminates in the Trial of the White Races, a massive event attracting young people from all over Shikasta where the white races are put on mock trial to answer for their crimes against the dark races, which George is chosen to represesent. After the representative of the white races, another Canopean soul in a Shikastan body, pleads guilty to the very many accusations, no sanctions are needed, for how could they start to systematically punish a whole race. Besides, in Lessing's dystopian future, China has wrested control of most of Europe and Asia and its totalitarian government is slowly

eradicating the European population in labour camps. Nevertheless the impact of the Trial is felt, presented in reports from a Chinese military officer, in sudden decreases in violence and threats thereof among the youth movements.

After the trial what follows is presented mostly in letters and some journal entries. Mostly nondescript events – probably wars or massive pollution – make large swathes of the world barely inhabitable. At the same time some people are regaining the capacity to communicate telepathically, which was common before the disaster, meaning the malalignment in the stars is correcting itself and before long everything will return to the way it was before the disaster. The final parts of the novel are presented as journal entries by Kassim, the child adopted by George and Suzanna. He reports how everywhere he goes people are building new cities, without any organization or discussion, in intricate patterns and geometric shapes. How people have gone gentle and calm and animals tame and helpful. He ends by remembering the suffering of so many previous generations, saying "We were all stumbling about in a thick dark, a thick ugly hot darkness, full of enemies and dangers, we were blind in a heavy hot weight of suspicion and doubt and fear," and contrasting this with the novel's final words "And here we all are together, here we are" (364).

3.2 Genre and Shikasta

One of the reasons readers and critics have had such difficulty understanding *Shikasta* is its lack of a human perspective. The first half of the novel is narrated mostly through a Canopean perspective, which seems largely impassive compared to a human one. This is due mostly to the bureaucratic language and structure reminiscent of documents from a

filing cabinet, which are generic structures Lessing uses to create distance between the reader and the human point of view in the novel. Judging from the criticism on Lessing's unemotional and detached style, critics had difficulty adjusting their expectations which, with Lessing's previous work in mind, were prepared for a novel centred on human experience and a human perspective.[15]

Attempting to apply the following definition of genre by Ann Imbrie, taken from John Frow's book, may help explain some of the criticisms of Lessing's novel mentioned earlier. Imbrie claims: "Genre is defined by the way it expresses *human experience* through an *identifiable form* that clarifies or discovers the values in or attitude toward that experience" (qtd in Frow 73). This definition works under the supposition that "human experience" is the subject matter of any given novel. This works well if the "identifiable form" or formal character is human. Novels where the main characters are not human complicate this definition, though often animal or other non-human protagonists are anthropomorphised enough to allow the reader to relate to them. For *Shikasta,* this is much more difficult. It is a novel wherein human agency and experience are obscured, only coming to the reader second-hand, described in Canopean terms. In *Shikasta,* the kind of experiences described are not which sets the novel apart. On the contrary, *Shikasta* is a collage of experiences commonly found in (science) fiction, such as estrangement and alienation, powerlessness in the face of degeneration and even the loss of control of a subject in the form of an entire planet. It is the fact that most of these experiences are not expressed through an identifiable form, but described by an alien entity, which makes the novel more original and more difficult to read. Importantly, this is mostly true only for the novel's first half, which

[15] For instance, Hyam Maccoby writing for *The Listener* expressed his hope that Lessing would return to her "proper work as the chronicler of human lives in a human setting" (qtd in *British Reviews of Shikasta,* 9).

consists of Johor's missions on *Shikasta* and various descriptions of Shikastan lives important to the Canopean's Plan. Johor's reports are filled with human experiences translated into a Canopean frame of reference, and the reader must learn to adjust to this, finding the unique perspective behind its cold and detached appearance.

Besides a collage of experiences, *Shikasta* is also a collage of various simple genres, such as memoirs and diaries, psychological and social case studies, encyclopaedia entries and mission reports. The first half of the novel can feel like reading a series of somewhat related short-stories, some of which are completely surreal while others starkly realistic. What remains almost constant throughout this first half is the alien voice and its Canopean perspective, with a detached attitude towards human individuals. In this sense, Imbrie's definition of genre turns out to be very applicable to the novel. However identifiable or unidentifiable the protagonist is, the reader has to discover the novel's attitude toward human and inhuman experiences through its expression of them. That is the crux of the definition, the way a genre's expression of human experience "clarifies or discovers the values in or attitude toward that experience" (73). Lessing can give the impression in *Shikasta* that she is preaching her prophetic vision of the potential of human society. The Eden-like "First Time" is described in some detail, with everything and everyone being in harmony with each other, and people that hardly need to speak to communicate, living for thousands of years.

The specificity with which Lessing describes this version of paradise has as its consequence that it becomes her personalised version of paradise, where the constraints of reality she experiences most keenly are stripped away, namely old-age and the limits of language as a means of communication. Lessing's personal touch pointing towards her ideals and most important values continues to be present throughout the novel. For

instance, she condemns the tendency of human architecture to awe-inspiring grandness in a description of a city in the First Time: “Not in this city could it be possible for a child being brought by its parents to be introduced to the halls, towers, centres of its heritage, to feel awed and alienated, to know itself a nothing, a little frightened creature who must obey, and watch for Authority” (32). One of the most difficult aspects of imagining the Canopean perspective is their effacement of individuality. When the reader the discerns Lessing’s personal opinions towards certain phenomena, such as architecture or fancy restaurants, it compounds this difficulty. It can seem as though Lessing is not as critical of herself as she is of others. Readers may at times have to turn a blind eye to what Lessing is saying if her values stand opposed to theirs. On the other hand, conceiving of an entirely impartial race of alien overlords would make it difficult for Lessing to express her worldview. Ultimately the Canopeans can be seen as a direction for any civilization’s evolution. Similarly to how Wells shaped his Morlocks and Eloi, Lessing imagined the Canopeans and the Shikastans of The First Days according to her views on society and how it could, or should, develop.

Lessing was a very politically involved and outspoken writer, addressing colonial and post-colonial politics, issues of gender and sexuality, as well as race and class in her wide-ranging oeuvre (see Raschke et al.). *Shikasta* is no exception. The stern, self-effacing Canopeans carry the novel’s attitude within them, they tell us early on: “To identify with ourselves as individuals – this is the very essence of the Degenerative Disease, and every one of us in the Canopean Empire is taught to value ourselves only insofar as we are in harmony with the plan, the phases of our evolution” (38). Gayle Greene states in her book on Lessing’s work that the novel’s “central doctrine” is “the coexistence of ‘freedom’ with ‘necessity’ and obedience to the whole” (193). The novel’s detached attitude toward its human characters which garnered some unfavourable criticism reinforces this, pushing the

reader into the mindset of reduced individuality through the use of its sparse and bureaucratic language.

The novel's fragmented first half brings the reader into this mindset by showing many aspects of the planet's degeneration. Lessing tries to make the reader see the bigger picture by creating a distance between them and the human point of view in the novel. The detached language she uses is instrumental in this regard, like impassive reports over a number of failed trial studies. Subsequently, the reader is presented with a young girl's diary and given the book's only sustained human voice, but the reader's perspective by then has almost become Canopean. As Gayle Greene states: "To read this novel attentively is to learn to hear and see as Canopeans" (207). Rachel Sherban is a remarkably critical and intelligent young girl by human standards, yet knowing Shikasta's situation, she seems impatient and overemotional.

Thus, the novel's initial style and structure, working to convey the Canopean perspective, prepares the reader to interpret the more human parts of the novel with a different generic framework in mind. Remembering Frow's approach to genres as a tool for creating meaning, *Shikasta* demonstrates that through creating a different perspective and drawing a new horizon of expectations for the reader. The genre of a young girl's diary is read differently in its larger context. The semiotic force of the mental schema the reader brings to a text is used to allow them to properly interpret the diary. The meaning of Rachel's journal as well as what follows emerges only through the readers knowledge of her character's and the planet's situation, which were conveyed to the reader in Canopean terms. Frow claims that genre is a result of the subconscious organisation of knowledge which allows readers to arrive at interpretations fitting the context of what they are reading (84). For these contexts to be comprehensible they need to imply a coherent whole, which

Frow calls a "projected world," which he explains as "a relatively bounded and schematic domain of meanings, values, and affects, accompanied by a set of instructions for handling them" (85, 86). Different genres inevitably project different worlds. The world projected by Rachel's diary is different from the world projected by Johor's reports, yet they stand in a relation to each other by being parts of the same novel. The domain of the Canopean world forces itself into the reader's interpretation of Rachel's diary, rendering its intimacy and individuality as symbols of degeneracy. Yet the reader's presumable familiarity with the generic structure of a young girl's diary challenges the Canopean attitude which the reader has recently come to know. Rachel's talkative and relatable narration are bound to come as a breath of fresh air to readers arriving at her journal, sharply contrasting with the distant and timeless Canopean world they have come to expect.

The structure of Rachel's diary within the context of the larger novel becomes a question of generic framing. Frow states that genre guides interpretation through generic cues, which are often paratextual. These cues tend to intentionally signal to the reader what kind of text they are reading. However, the intention behind these cues cannot be cause for a "correct" interpretation, according to Frow, because ultimately the reader must guess or construe the genre of any text for themselves. A good example of a paratextual generic cue is the full title of the novel: *"Canopus in Argos: Archives 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."* Multiple critics cite this title as an example of what is wrong with the novel – foreshadowing the bureaucratic language and the detached attitude. Addressing the relevance of metatextual aspects like titles, Frow states that these cues around a text constitute its frame. He writes that "[f]rames work to define the text against those things which it is not, cutting it off from the adjacent world;

and to convey information from that adjacent world to the framed text. The frame belongs to both domains – both 'inside' and 'outside' – and to neither" (106). Frow here suggests a negative definition emerging through these paratextual cues, probably because a positive definition would be too specific and thus too subjective. Confining ourselves to the novel's full title, we may ask how it functions in this way.

As the critics Gore Vidal and Allan Massie noted,[16] it forebodes the type of texts found in the novel, both in style and in content. The three adjectives "*Personal, Psychological, Historical"* could neatly divide the novel's various text-types by subject matter. The mention of a "*Colonised Planet"* along with the exotic sounding names also signals that the text probably belongs to the domain of science fiction. More abstractly, the length and specificity of the title puts one in mind of the vastness of the archive where the text supposedly belongs to. This already evokes the idea of being part of a much greater whole, which is a major theme in the novel. These inferences one could make still seem to be leading toward a positive definition, rather than a negative one as suggested by Frow. To that end, rather than suggesting the text probably belongs to science fiction, it is possible to confirm that it will not be very realistic. The business-like appearance of the title evokes an emotional distancing – suggesting the text will not have great emotional depth, which importantly turns out to be untrue. The advantage of negative definitions is firstly that they leave a lot of room for the text to define itself in more detail, and secondly that their being debunked tends not to matter so much in the grand scheme of things.

Frow argues that "[t]he cues that [one] encounter[s] are **metacommunications,** then, specifying how to use the text, what one can expect to happen at different stages, and

[16] Gore Vidal cites the title adding "There is not much music in Lessing spheres", Allan Massie writing for *The Scotsman* writes that "the novel's central weakness is obvious in its full title" (*British Reviews of Shikasta*, 9).

what to do if these expectations are not confirmed (for example, how to switch to a different generic framework)" (104, bold in original). Thus the title already prepares the reader for the novel's structure, a compilation of various documents relating to Johor's visits, written largely in the sparse manner of bureaucratic reports. This provokes an observant approach to reading the text, the expectation that this compilation of documents will yield an interesting story.

The reader encounters little to no deviations from these expectations set up by the title until the appearance of Rachel Sherban's journal, which is when the reader, suddenly confronted with a chatty young girl's inner monologue, has to modify the generic framework they were using. Rachel's journal constitutes a move towards the reader's empirical reality, thus becoming situated between the Canopean world and a realistic world. There are no real indications of cosmic forces and intergalactic civilizations in Rachel's journal. However, Rachel's journal is framed by the Canopean world, which furnishes the reader with a set of instructions on how to interpret the diary. Rachel's human perspective set against and excluding the Canopean reality, engages the reader in applying the learned context of the Canopean world to a more familiar situation. Gayle Greene writes that

> The protagonist is finally the human race, about whom we learn to think and feel differently. Lessing is teaching another kind of 'identification with ourselves' that is regenerative rather than degenerative, collective rather than individual; she is teaching 'kindness'— … As always it is the life of society that Lessing cares about. (205)

Thinking about the human race as a protagonist, a single entity in itself, is the kind of thinking the Canopeans are promoting. Learning to think and feel differently about

humanity is not easy, and Lessing can seem an inflexible teacher, condemning many of our comfortable lifestyles and hobbies as symptoms of degeneracy. Yet the way this novel stimulates new ways of thinking about human societies is remarkable. Creating such a seemingly inhuman perspective and teaching the reader how to share it is done through the use of genres. It is a question of the language and style constantly being adapted so that the right perspective fitting Lessing's aims is evoked.

3.3 Science Fiction and *Shikasta*

As mentioned before, genre classification carries a set of expectations going both ways. An invitation to form for the author as well as a horizon of expectations for the reader. Lessing's earlier forays into science fiction were relatively realistic, one belonging to the inner-space movement mentioned earlier and the other set in a near dystopian future. *Shikasta* is her first intergalactic space novel, containing aliens, spaceships and interplanetary conflicts. Therefore, readers and critics alike may have been somewhat confused by the new direction in Lessing's work. Lessing had established herself as a critical and insightful writer of so called "high literature," while science fiction was often regarded as mostly perishable and commercial stuff, particularly in the circles of critics who had praised Lessing's previous work, including her earlier SF titles. This is one of the reasons why critics were initially less than charmed by *Shikasta*, they regretted Lessing's departure from the familiar realism that had made her a respected author.[17]

[17] For instance, Hyam Maccoby writing for *The Listener* wrote that he hopes her "proper work as the chronicler of human lives in a human setting" will return. Rachel Billington for *The Financial Times* wrote that "this sort of book" struggles to keep the readers attention when one's "taste buds are prepared for a novel" (*British Reviews of Shikasta*).

For Lessing herself, writing science fiction was a liberating experience, as she writes in a short preface to the novel: "I feel as if I have been set free to be as experimental as I like, and as traditional." She praises the science fiction writers before her as "dazzlers" who "have mapped our world, or worlds, for us" and who play the role of "the despised illegitimate son who can afford to tell truths." Moreover, she disapproves of the attitude of disregarding SF as unserious. The concepts of *Shikasta*, Lessing tells her reader, were originally meant to be worked out in a single volume, but ended up becoming a five part series, for she "was invaded with 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."[18]

Another reason that some critics were apprehensive of *Shikasta* was Lessing's conversion to Sufism, which is a religious discipline related to Islam. What this entails exactly is far too complicated and contentious to fit in this thesis, which relates to why some critics were troubled by it. Keeping things purposely vague, becoming a Sufi is mostly about trying to attain some kind of spiritual awareness.[19] Nevertheless, critics were quick to assume that her first novel after her religious conversion would attempt to preach the teachings of her newfound faith. Thus one critic states that he "prefers Lessing the novelist to Lessing the prophet" (Bazin 7) and another wrote "I'm surprised we didn't notice the cranky religious vision she was developing." (Bazin 7) For Gore Vidal, writing for *The New York Review of Books*, Lessing's faith was a particular sore spot.[20] He ridicules the Sufi's in

[18] Previous three quotes all from the preface to *Shikasta* titled "Some Remarks".
[19] In *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* William C. Chittick states that Sufism centres around the third of three basic dimensions of Islam, these being submission, faith and "doing the beautiful", while most Islamic disciplines focus on the first two (4-5). He also mentions that Sufism for some resembles spiritual traditions such as Zen and Yoga (2).
[20] Vidal expresses his personal distaste for Sufism, saying "She (Lessing) is filled with the spirit of the Sufis, and if there is one thing that makes me more nervous than a Jungian it is a Sufi." (*The New York Review of Books,* 12/1979)

his review, calling them the "woolly ones," since "Sufi" comes from the word "suf" meaning wool.[21] Vidal posits as the theme of *Shikasta* a quote by M. Gauquelin, a controversial French psychologist and mathematician,[22] which was quoted by contemporary Sufi Idries Shah, who was subsequently quoted by Lessing (emphasis mine): "An astonishing parallel to the Sufi insistence on the relatively greater power of subtle communication to affect man, is found in scientific work which shows that all living things, including man, are '*incredibly sensitive to waves of extraordinarily weak energy—when more robust influences are excluded*'." This latter quote within a quote can be found in *Shikasta* in the form of SOWF (Substance of We Feeling), a term Johor comes up with so that he can explain the concept of the Canopean Lock to Shikastans, as well as the Degenerative Disease caused by the Shammatan emanations.

This, returning to Darko Suvin's theory of science fiction, could also be regarded as part of the text's novum, which would add a religious element to the cognitive tension it produces. Perhaps this means that, for the reader of *Shikasta* to appreciate its novum, and for it to attain something resembling that essential cognitive tension which Suvin's ideal form requires, a somewhat open mind is necessary. It is not hard to imagine that zealous sceptics would view these religious elements as anti-cognitive, and thus the domain of fantasy rather than science fiction. This is the main difference between Suvin's ideal form and *Shikasta*. The innovations in *Shikasta* are spiritual rather than technological, the question remains whether or not this prevents them from also being *cognitive innovations* –

[21] The Oxford English Dictionary confirms the etymological origin, the Arabic "çūfī" literally translated even means "man of wool". There is no mention of it however in *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide*, which states that the term only acquired its broader meaning due to its use by British Orientalists.

[22] For instance, Gauquelin argued for a significant increase in the athletic proficiency of children born when the planet Mars was at a certain position relative to the horizon. Various studies trying to reproduce his findings found no such correlation.

the essential aspect of science fiction according to Suvin. The novel offers little in the way of explanations of its many fantastic phenomena grounded in a scientific method or ethos. Moreover, in the novel science is explicitly criticized for its closemindedness by having the Canopeans view it as a new religion "as bigoted and inflexible as any" (197).

Being critical of science and technological development, however, is very much the domain of science fiction, particularly for the "New Wave" of the 60s and 70s (Hartwell 141-156). Lessing was very involved with this new, more psychological direction for science fiction, then often meant to denote speculative fiction. Inner Space fiction, with the influence of writers J.G. Ballard and Judith Merril, in the 60s became a dominant form among serious science fiction writers, with Lessing among them. On the title page of Lessing's 1971 novel *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* she wrote: *"Category:* Inner-space fiction. For there is never anywhere to go but in." However, *Shikasta* cannot easily be categorized as Inner Space fiction. Its scope is rather too vast, its characters too numerous and undetailed. Nevertheless there are clear thematic parallels between *Shikasta* and Inner-space fiction, such as madness, societies and individuals victimised by technology, and spirituality.

Compared to *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, *Shikasta* deals much more with the life of societies rather than individuals, by way of imagining the detached and distant perspective of the Canopeans. A major influence for Lessing, both in the personal psychology of *Briefing* as well as its sociological expansion in *Shikasta,* was psychiatrist R.D. Laing and his revolutionary views on the behavioural sciences. Marion Vlastos described the connection between Laing and Lessing as follows:

> Lessing and Laing believe not in hearts but in psyches; (…) above all, not in a saving discrepancy between the evils of society and the possibility for perfection in the

> individual but, precisely, in the connection between what human beings are in their innermost selves and how they behave collectively. Because of this commitment to look as deeply as possible into everything and because of this capacity to see *connections* Lessing and Laing may be seen not only as social analysts but also as social visionaries, prophets of contemporary culture. (246)

Laing focused on society's approach to mental illness, trying to change our understanding of and the way we deal with madness; "Laing believes it is essential to understand the mad person as symptom and as victim of a sick society and finally as prophet of a possible new world, a world governed by forces of unity rather than of separation" (Vlastos 246). Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* is really a fictionalisation of this concept (see Rubenstein). In this novel, Charles Watkins, a callous and aloof classics professor, suddenly goes mad. The reader is taken along a detailed description of his psychosis, which seems to be making him a demonstrably better person. In his delusion he is shown allegorical representations of the ills of human society, such as xenophobia, exploitation, and cruelty – cycles of violence polluting the world. Then he sees a celestial council, presented for his benefit as ancient Roman deities, endeavouring to save earth from corruption.

In many ways, *Shikasta* expands on this novel. In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, professor Charles Watkins is eventually "cured" so he can go on being his anti-social and unkind self, fitting seamlessly into the cold-hearted society he had tried to escape. There is a similar character in *Shikasta* by the name of Lynda Coldridge. Lynda has accepted her insanity and voluntarily placed herself in an asylum, not to be cured but because she understands that Shikastan society has no place for her. Lynda is one of the few voiced human characters in the novel, we get to read her thoughts which she was asked to write down for her psychiatrist. Dr. Herbert appears to be based on R.D. Laing himself, studying

Lynda's perspective on her condition to find new ways to help others suffering from similar illnesses. Unlike Professor Watkins, Lynda Coldridge eventually turns out to be one of the few Shikastans that still maintained some the capacities for communication which were used before the disaster. This allows George to contact her in the Last Days, giving her an instrumental role in the rescue of young Shikastans. This is an inversion of the fate of Charles Watkins, whose medically induced return to sanity is unequivocally unfortunate – a symptom of an ill society. In *Shikasta,* society is cured instead.

This inversion is central to what could be argued to be the cognitive innovation driving *Shikasta*. The novum is the Canopean perspective, the existence of which is explained through the use of SF-tropes such as spaceships and intergalactic conflicts. Yet the way for the reader to accept this novum lies in the way characters are described in the many case studies of Shikastan individuals. They are rarely presented as good people, yet always framed in a way that makes it seem they had no choice but to do wrong. Their individual perspectives are shown to be incompatible with their society, so they act out, or they go mad. All blame is shifted away from the individual, which, considering Laing's theory, can be viewed as a sociological thought-experiment. The scientific ethos one may look for in SF here is more related to the social sciences, and it is found in Lessing's approach to describing characters in relation to their society. *Shikasta*, building on Inner-space fiction, should then be considered a work of Social-space fiction.

3.4 Social-space fiction

Shikasta contains a historical or cosmic eschatology of the Shikastan race, which does not necessarily imply a final end to history, but can also mean merely the end of an age as it does in *Shikasta* (Galbreath 57). Lessing's novel has two apocalypses, one is a disaster, and

one is a new beginning, which is presented as a return to nature and a reversion of the first. The degeneration and regeneration of humanity in *Shikasta* are both transcendental, moving from the supernatural to the natural, meaning the closest representation of our empirical reality in the novel, and *vice versa*. Lessing inverts this relationship, rendering the supernatural as natural, and the existing harsh realities as consequences of a cosmic aberration. Galbreath claims that "Speculative fiction cannot avoid ambiguity in dealing with transcendence, for its message is simultaneously that humanity can and must rise above its own limitations and that humanity deeply wishes for salvation by something greater than itself" (55). In *Shikasta,* the natural state of being is transcendental relative to the reader's. The salvation of the Shikastans is no more than a return to order, the lifting of a cosmic disaster imposing limitations which Shikastans will naturally rise above.

As long as these limitations are in effect, Canopeans can only intervene incarnated as Shikastans, and do so sparingly. These Canopean incarnations importantly remain human in their actions and capabilities. For example, even George Sherban is unable to see his lover Suzanna's desire to marry him, and is embarrassed when his sister Rachel reproaches him for his casual attitude towards her (258-261). Thus the Canopeans can only intervene within the bounds of the limitations imposed on humanity through a fault in the stars, which they as well as the Shikastans have to simply wait out. The situation Shikastans return to after they have weathered the storm also returns them to more far-reaching intervention by the Canopeans. Lessing's version of transcendence precludes individuality and independence, it entails becoming a part of the Canopean whole. On the last page, following the words "And here we all are together, here we are. . . ." (364), the reader is reminded of this by a list of documents pertaining to Shikasta with the header "Students are directed to:" (364), evoking the way Shikasta will disappear into the Canopean Plan, existing only in the history books.

The transcendence in *Shikasta* is thus both liberating and confining. Since the novel is presented as a Canopean document, there is no reliable objective view on this race of intergalactic overlords. However, there is some evidence that they may not be as benevolent and benign as they present themselves. For example, mentioning the presence of the Sirian empire on Shikasta, a mission report states that "they did not behave worse than expected, considering the much lower level of their empire" (21). This seems somewhat incongruous with a previous statement: "Since the Great War between Sirius and Canopus that had ended all war between us, there had been regular conferences to avoid overlapping, or interfering with each other's experiments" (14), suggesting that Canopus was unable to decisively best Sirius in their conflict. Further on, when Johor had to tell the Giants watching over Shikasta that they have to leave to save themselves, he told them that "those who decided to stay would be committing Disobedience. For the first time in their history they would not be in conformity with Canopean Law. … [D]isobedience to the Master Plan was always, everywhere, the first sign of the Degenerative Disease" (46-47). These passages make the Canopeans seem supremacist and authoritarian, which is the opposite of the type of society Lessing is idealising throughout the novel. When Johor, incarnated as a Shikastan native, first approaches the Giants he does not tell them he is from Canopus until, as he reports, satisfies himself "that there was no condescension in their manner towards a Native" (33). This is a part of Lessing's ideal society, where although the Giants and Natives are by no means equal, there is no need for authority or obedience. Though presented in the Canopean document as being for the good of the Shikastan Natives and the Giants, the intervention of the Canopeans exercising their authority mars the image of Lessing's perfect society.

Lessing's criticism of colonialism is most clearly shown in one of the Canopean

documents on an African community confronted with greed and cruelty for the first time as they become almost unwittingly enslaved by western colonists (156-162). Lessing shows that the invaders need to keep telling themselves that the Africans are primitive and backwards people so that they can keep taking their land and forcing them to work. With some irony she writes: "Thus it is that seldom in Shikastan history has any race or people conquered a pleasant civilised and amiable race of people quite competent to manage their own lives" (159). As the colonists treat the natives with increasing cruelty, the Africans learn to harbour contempt for their oppressors. Naturally, this is all a consequence of the Degenerative Disease, any authority besides Canopean authority being one of the major symptoms. To the vigilant reader, however, the resemblance to the Canopean colonisation of Shikasta is hard to miss.

The critical perspective on Canopus is purposely obscured through presenting the novel as a Canopean document, reflecting the difficulty of criticizing one's own society from within. This led David Lodge to write in *The New Statesman* that "if Canopus 'colonised' our Earth, it cannot be immune from Doris Lessing's own critique of Western imperialism; and it must bear some responsibility for our woes since it started our history off. This responsibility is never acknowledged" (Bazin 7) This reviewer fell for Lessing's trap, he missed the point, which is that the Canopean society will not be critical of itself in its own documentation of events. When asked about the way Lessing thinks our sense of reality is changing in the modern era, she answered that the new sociological ideas are most important to this. "And they should be taught to children" she says, "I think the child should be taught that you may easily find yourself in your life in a situation where you can behave as Eichmann did. … Eighty-five per cent of all people, it has been proved, can be expected to behave like this" (Ziegler and Bigsby 199). It would be a mistake to accept the Canopeans as

the impeccable God-like race which they present themselves as. However, the novel is structured to drive the reader into this mindset, like a piece of Canopean propaganda.

This reading of *Shikasta* with a critical view on the Canopeans emerges through the novel's own classification as a document from a Canopean archive, it requires the reader to stay mindful of what they are reading. This is another way Lessing's framing of the novel negotiates some ambivalences one may encounter within. The elevated perspective of the Canopeans on Shikasta is complicated by their own imperialist motivations. Lessing challenges her reader to remain critical even of this race of near-divine overlords. Her message is one of understanding and tolerance as well as vigilance against mindless obedience and indoctrination, the dangers of group psychology which she was concerned about, discussed in the interview with Christopher Bigsby.

Lessing's critical perspective on the blind spot societies have for themselves is given most clearly in The Trial of the White Races at the end of the novel. The trial is presented to the reader as a letter from a representative of the Chinese government with spies present at the trial, writing to a friend. The Chinese government has all the familiar properties of a totalitarian regime, including close scrutiny of its ranks, labour camps, genocide and propaganda promoting their "Benevolent Rule" and "Beneficent Tutelage." The trial, the point of which is to indict the white races for subjecting other societies to their rule, is thus presented from the perspective of a ruling society. One of the major indictments of the white races is that they always viewed themselves as superior, justifying their subjection and mistreatment of the non-white races. The Chinese spy cites one of the witnesses: "For it goes without saying that the whites saw their rule as educational and benevolent," adding in parenthesis: "I inscribe this second word with some reluctance, with the reliance on your understanding, and the reflection that one word may have to stand for a variety of shades

of circumstance" (328). In this context this seems almost humorous, to this Chinese government, a critical perspective on one's own society is an impossibility. It seems risible to the reader because they have already established an exterior and negatively skewed perspective on this totalitarian government, to them this Chinese spy is clearly brainwashed and incapable of individual critical thought.

One of the witness statements against the white races is given special attention, presented by the Chinese agent as "the most reasoned of all the indictments" (330). This young African woman does not spend too much time reiterating the by then familiar indictments of arrogance, barbarity and stupidity that have come before her. Instead she tells the story of a British colony in Africa which, after being conquered, was simply forgotten. Lessing is writing here of Southern Rhodesia, the place where she was born. She writes: "Serious undertakings, promises, obligations [by the British government], were not reneged on so much as *overlooked.* To the extent that the Rhodesian crisis when it finally matured could be discussed for years and years, and the key fact never mentioned" (330-331, emphasis in original). The inability of societies to look inward and be critical of themselves is a key point for Lessing, and this is something the Canopeans are clearly guilty of as well.

At the end of the trial, when everyone has had their turn accusing the white races, the representative of the accused, another Canopean incarnation by the name of John-Brent Oxford, is allowed to speak, and makes a counteraccusation:

> Why is it that you, the accusers, have adopted with such energy and efficiency the ways you have been criticising? Of course some of you have been given no alternative: I refer to the North American and the South American Indians, for example. But others have had a choice. Why is it that so many of you who have not

> been forced into it, have chosen to copy the materialism, the greed, the rapacity of the white man's technological society? (334)

This is met with indignation from the audience. The true reason for their gathering becomes clear when George Sherban takes the stage for a closing statement, which he introduces as a self-criticism:

> "I want to make a single observation. It is that for three thousand years India has persecuted and ill-treated a part of its own population. I refer of course to the Untouchables. The unspeakable treatment meted out to these unfortunate people, *barbaric, cruel, senseless –"* these words were thrown up, one after another, with pauses between, like challenges, up into the tiers as he turned slowly around to face every part of the audience – "this unspeakably cruel treatment is matched for baseness by nothing the white races have ever done. At this time millions of people in the subcontinent of India are treated worse than the white South Africans ever treated any black – as badly as any white oppressor ever treated a black man or woman. This is not a question of a year's oppression, a decade's persecution, a century's ill-treatment, not the results of a short-lived and unsuccessful regime like the British Empire, not a ten-year outburst of savagery like Hitler's regime in Europe, not fifty years of savagery like Russian communism, but something built into a religion and a way of life, a culture, so deeply embedded that the frightfulness and ugliness of it apparently cannot even be observed by the people who practise it." (337, emphasis in original)

Johor's mission, incarnated as George Sherban, was to unite everyone against a common adversary only to show them that they are just as bad, just as blind to their own failings.

After his statement, everyone in the audience wants to come down to the stage to plead guilty to all the crimes of their people, all following George's lead.

The trial culminates, as a member of the audience puts it, into a "seminar on man's inhumanity to man" at which point a girl stands up and shouts: "I've had enough of man's inhumanity to man. What is the point of all this anyway?" (338). Clearly, she got the point, which is the futility of trying to apportion blame and meting out punishments for past wrongs of past societies. This becomes clear to the audience through George Sherban's manipulation of their perspective, turning their critical perspective on the white man back on themselves. Though the white man's counteraccusation and George's self-criticism amount to a similar message, their respective responses from the audience, through the nature of group psychology, are opposite. This is because George's prophet-like charisma has allowed everyone to feel represented by him. The following George has acquired is essentially a first step to the Canopean vision of a harmonious society without conflict.

The trial's objective to end the cycle of violence, threatening to start again on Shikasta with the genocide of the European races by the youth armies, is successful. The Chinese overlord reporting this consequence finds it inexplicable. The trial being presented to the reader from the perspective of the Chinese ruling government gives the report a detached tone, somewhat reminiscent of the Canopean descriptions of Shikastan affairs the reader has become used to. The mental inflexibility of the Chinese overlord, shown in his inability to grasp the implications of the trial's conclusion, is a part of his vocabulary, similar to the way the Canopean vocabulary lacks a mode of self-critical reflection. Ultimately the Canopean factionless society is an illusion, they still have their adversaries in Sirius and Puttiora over which they claim superiority.

There is an ambiguousness in the novel, however, when it comes to Canopus.

Viewed critically, they are clearly not as perfect as they seem, but their society may still represent the lesser evil when compared to the alternatives. There are no objective descriptions of the other civilizations, but clearly there are a lot of advantages to belonging with the Canopeans, such as long life spans and telepathic communication. Their lack of a self-critical perspective may just be born of a lack of need for such reflection.

Shikasta is a Social-space novel because Shikastan society is the story's protagonist. It goes through a familiar arc, starting out content and care-free until struck by misfortune, going through a period of struggle, and eventually making it out the other side stronger for the experience. Canopus is essentially this basic fable's narrator, which, with their near-eternal lifespans, enabled Lessing to compress the arc of Shikastan society, always keeping sight of the bigger picture.

Conclusion

This thesis has presented a critical reading of *Shikasta* that focuses on the way Lessing adapted conventions of the genre of science fiction to convey her critical perspective on sociological issues such as the generation-gap, western medicine's approach to mental illness, the grudges held for atrocities of the past and the inability of societies to criticize themselves. Lessing's use of an alien perspective, creating an *ad hoc* genre of documents from an alien archive, is most important in this regard. Explained through Frow's theory of generic structures, Lessing's novel shows how simple and familiar genres can take on a different meaning when combined and positioned in an unfamiliar context.

A critical exploration of science fiction theory showed that Lessing deviated from what Suvin would call valid science fiction. Lessing purposely keeps her race of unfathomably advanced alien overlords somewhat mysterious. She did not attempt to give a scientific explanation of any of the strange and otherworldly phenomena the reader encounters in the novel. Rather than extrapolating on specific worldly scientific developments, Lessing is more interested in the contemporary advances in the social sciences. Her novel *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* was an Inner-Space novel, exploring her character's psychology through a detailed description of his psychosis. Professor Charles Watkins' delirious visions are a precursor to the universe Lessing created in *Shikasta,* in which she moves away from the psychology of the individual to investigate group psychology and social dynamics. R.D. Laing's ideas on the problematic tendency of people to view others as backward, which inspired *Briefing*, is scaled up in *Shikasta* to operate on the level of societies viewing each other as primitive, uncultured, or brainwashed. Lessing's message to her readers is to look inward and explore the self and the known society before pointing outward to the faults of others. History knows no blameless societies, so why look

to blame others instead of one's own?

The point of the alien perspective Lessing created in the novel is to exteriorize the reader's perspective from their social context. Lessing creates a distance between the reader and the Shikastan natives, viewed from which their quarrels seem futile. In the various files describing Shikastan individuals, Lessing foregrounds how their social situations led to their radicalization. Lessing cautions against dismissiveness and wilful ignorance, arguing that these terrorists, often based on real world examples such as the German radical left-wing Baader Meinhof gang (1970-1998), result from a refusal to understand or address the social issues which brought them about. This is made clear through Lessing's use of the alien perspective, creating an illusion of objectivity.

It is ultimately up to the reader to turn a critical eye on Doris Lessing's aliens themselves. Lessing makes clear her point that societies tend not to take a critical view of themselves as quickly as they do so regarding other societies. She stresses that dissension has to come from individuals or marginal groups within the hegemonic social fabric. *Shikasta* is meant to caution readers against the adoption of uncritically embedded beliefs and convictions about the "normality" of their own society and feelings of "superiority" with regards to other, unknown societies. In her novel, the subjectivity of the aliens is exterior to the novel's content, and has to emerge from the reader exteriorizing their perspective, viewing the novel as a document from an alien society with its own prejudices and blind spots.

Hopefully, this thesis has shown that *Shikasta* is worth more of the readers' and critics' time and trouble than it has been afforded so far within both literary and science fiction scholarship. Plenty of ambivalences remain in Lessing's self-admittedly messy novel, some of which I suspect might emerge in to sharper critical focus from marrying the

formalist perspective of this thesis with the relatively well-documented religious influences which inspired the novel. Additionally, one might explore the implications of my genre analysis in the subsequent novels of the *Canopus is Argos: Archive* series. Lessing will remain a critically challenging and thought provoking author; her 1979 novel *Shikasta* is only becoming more relevant with the ever-growing globalization of human society. Within this context, it will only become more important to try and look at oneself and each other from afar, to discover the freedom in reserving one's judgment of others in order to develop greater understanding of each other.

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