Book Reviews

CANOPUS IN ARGOS: ARCHIVES. RE: COLONISED PLANET 5, SHIKASTA. DORIS LESSING. London: Jonathan Cape, 1979. Pp. 364. THE MARRIAGES BETWEEN ZONES THREE, FOUR AND FIVE. DORIS LESSING. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980. Pp. 245.

"It is the stars, the stars above us govern our condition." Aster: star. Disaster: a fault in the stars.

In *Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta,* the first volume in the series *Canopus in Argos: Archives,* Doris Lessing tells how our planet went to the bad because of a re-alignment of the stars. Before that, in the Great Time, the world was paradisically beautiful; a race of giants lived harmoniously with the first humans (evolved from animals) and all received a steady supply of spiritual sustenance, a sense of oneness with the universe, through a silver chain of love connecting our planet, Rohanda, with Canopus, the emanation of the grand design. When Rohanda was hurt by the movement of the stars, slightly repositioned in relation to the sun and moon, its name became Shikasta and the power of evil, Shammat, gained a foothold. The source of spiritual sustenance was drastically cut and only a tiny portion of the substance-of-we-feeling (SOWF) remained for the increasing human hordes, now living pathetically shortened, disease-ridden, non-comprehending lives. Envoys are sent from Canopus, re-incarnating again and again in the attempt to save humanity from forgetfulness, but there are many Canopeans who believe Shikasta should be jettisoned, as being just not worth the trouble.

This is the stuff of science fiction certainly, though not so radical a departure from Lessing's previous work as one might think. Readers of *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *The Four-Gated City* in particular should feel quite at home and, in fact, Lynda Coldridge of the latter novel is an important character in *Shikasta.* Science fiction is a wide category, I know, but I'm not sure that *Shikasta* really belongs there; if it does, so does the Old Testament, *Paradise Lost,* the prophetic books of Blake, the voyage-allegories of Shelley and all those works that construct a mythic framework for ancient, central questions about the scheme of things.

Lessing, in fact, says in her preface that the Old Testament is the starting-point for *Shikasta.* Some of the Biblical stories such as Noah and the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the choosing of the children of Israel, are retold in the reports of envoys manifested on Shikasta as prophets or angels. Those incredible life-spans of Old Testament characters are taken literally: Lessing offers the intriguing theory that the reason children have no sense of their own mortality and see their lives stretching endlessly ahead is that their inborn race memory tells them they could expect to live for hundreds of years. Patterns of the Old Testament are seen too in the form of the novel, which is made up of reports and analyses "personal, historical and psychological," from different hands and on a variety of subjects. There is a progressive narrative but, as with the Bible, one can dip in at any point to find self-contained "books": a history of modern wars, a parable about a sick stray cat who shows more nobility and decency than men, several stories about terrorists and how they are made, a nightmare vision of a desert of shifting sands where more and more hypnotic whirlpools grow until all is one devouring vortex.

The main story concerns Johor of Canopus who has visited Shikasta in many periods and now goes on a desperate mission at the end of the Century of Destruction, our own. He is born as George Sherban to a racially mixed couple of doctors working selflessly in the Third World. Much of his story is told through his sister's diaries; here, incidentally, we have the only section of the novel where Lessing touches on specifically feminist concerns, as Rachel describes the lives of her poverty-stricken Arab neighbours. In Sherban's youth, not long from now, the West collapses, China and the Emerging

Nations join together to take vengeance on the white races and a series of mock trials is held by the Youth Armies to indict the West. Here George Sherban and John Brent-Oxford (Johor's Canopean friend Taufiq), acting as spokesmen for opposite sides, turn the debate into a searching analysis of the responsibility of all the human race for all oppression everywhere. Soon, though, war is accidentally triggered:

> A mechanism went wrong, and major cities were blasted into death-giving dusts. That something of this kind was bound to happen had been plentifully forecast by technicians of all countries . . . but the Shammat influences were too strong.
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> In a short time, nearly the whole of the northern hemisphere was in ruins. Very different, these, from the ruins of the second war, cities which were rapidly rebuilt. No, these ruins were uninhabitable, the earth around them poisoned . . . .
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> The populations of all the southern continents and islands were also affected by pestilence, by radiations, by soil and water and contamination, and were much reduced.
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> Within a couple of decades, of the billions upon billions of Shikasta perhaps 1 percent remained. The substance-of-we-feeling, previously shared among these multitudes, was now enough to sustain, and keep them all sweet, and whole, and healthy.

This is by no means the first time Doris Lessing has warned of impending holocaust, but she has seldom conveyed so strong a sense of pity for everything on the doomed planet. We are certainly preached at (sometimes on rather overworked themes such as the brutalising effect of television on children, the appalling waste of consumerism, the psychological damage inflicted by high-rise apartments) but the overwhelming feeling created is not so much guilt as a tremendous sense of pity and loss, for what we might have been and what we still could be.

Still? It has become an increasingly urgent theme in Lessing's work that each person being "infinitely capable of development" must work towards evolution of a higher self. We normally use only 5% of the potential of our senses and must learn to see and hear at a higher frequency, to open the doors of perception. I do not think this is science fiction fantasy on Lessing's part but a belief endorsed at a religious level by the practices of Sufism, with which she is much concerned, and, in psychiatric terms, by the theories of R.D. Laing. Lynda Coldridge, born with a 6% receptivity, was labelled mad and, like a Laing case-history, was then brain-damaged by supposed treatments and cures; even so, she fights heroically inside and holds to what she knows to be true. She thus becomes one of the survivors of the holocaust, able to help others develop their own powers of salvation. The abbreviation SOWF, for the life-sustaining essence, slightly echoes the sound of Sufi, that elusive concept which nevertheless seems to be illuminated in *Shikasta,* with its acceptance of the unity of all religions and myths, the belief that the world is sustained by love and that everyone is capable of expansion beyond the confines of the normally perceived.

The message that each person is under necessity to explore deeper and higher levels of being lies at the heart of the romantic tale told in the second novel of the series, *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five.* In the manner of the ancient cosmologists, Lessing depicts our planet at the centre of concentric rings, like the layers of an onion, Zone Six being the miasmic wasteland where those who cannot free themselves from Shikasta linger and pine. Each successive zone is of a higher order, though in this novel we have no sense of Zone One which was mentioned in *Shikasta* as being a rarified place where some of the fairies, sylphs and daemons went after the end of the Great Time.

An old mythic pattern forms the base of this second novel, that of a land mysteriously blighted by infertility, the cure to be found only through a difficult and heroic quest. In this case, there are problems in two countries: the peace-loving, airy, matriarchal democracy of Zone

Three, its essence epitomized by Queen Al-Ith, and the rainy, warlike, regimented male Zone Four, ruled by Ben Ata. It is a shock to both realms to learn that the way towards healing the general sickness lies in the marriage of Al-Ith and Ben Ata.

For Al-Ith, sex has always been a pleasurable merging of affectionate, sympathetic friends. Such concepts as husband, lover, having, are unknown in Zone Three. After a child is conceived, the Gene-Father shares with several Mind-Fathers in the nurturing before and after birth. Similarly, a woman is mother to many children in addition to those she has borne. To Ben Ata sex means rape. If he impregnates the spitting, weeping women thrown at this feet by his looting soldiers, the children are brought up in military camps.

The union of these two unlikely but only too credible mates is powerfully presented, covering, in its range from mutual detestation to a deep and enduring love, almost, it seems, every possible aspect of male-female relationships. The marriage is not truly enacted, despite several crude assaults, until the king learns to give and receive pleasure; then, in a beautifully described night of love, a drum-beat announces the marriage of contraries and the power of well-being begins to flow through the realms. Ben Ata takes on some of Al-Ith's qualities, but the process works both ways: one of the saddest parts of the story is when Al-Ith learns what it is to be jealous and possessive.

There is a wonderful blend of magic and psychological realism in the marriage scenes. Only the king and queen can enter their marriage pavilion, built to strict specifications from above, among geometrically arranged gardens and splashing fountains. If they need food and drink, they imagine it into being. At the same time, the subtle and curious nuances of sexual response are realistically evoked, such as the unexpected withdrawal into self after long and satisfying love-making and the slightly comic hesitation about when it would be right to embark on it again. When the child is born, other people begin to enter the pavilion. Al-Ith learns to her amazement that there are societies where birth is treated as a sickness, where the father is not present at it and where the new-born child is handled more by attendants than by the mother. She learns too about post-partum depression and about a husband's jealousy of the child.

If this looks a little like propaganda, the more so does the contrast between women's worlds. Zone Three is a dream of what a world might be like if it were a reflection of women's best qualities (not a world "dominated" by women, since the concept of dominance does not exist there). In this community of gentleness, laughter, caring and sharing, all the energies that elsewhere might be channeled into competitiveness and aggression go into the making of beautiful things: clothes with just the right cut, household objects that are decorative as well as functional, songs and games with meaning and power. Instinct and intuition are highly developed and there is communication with the animals, who of course are not used for food. Not everyone would agree that a women's world might be like this, but it does bear a striking similarity in many details to the Utopian community in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Even within the novel, characters begin to suspect that Zone Three is not paradise, that it lacks drama perhaps, or verges on complacency and self-indulgence.

In the more familiar male-dominated world of Zone Four, the women are patient, subservient chattels. They raise children and grow food while the men go off to train endlessly for battles they will probably never fight. But the subservience is only superficial. Al-Ith can see in the women's eyes that they know more than they will say, that they keep amongst themselves the belief in better things. At one of the meetings of their secret society, Al-Ith finds that they are fully aware of how they could be different and where their salvation lies. Their rituals enact this knowledge as they look up towards the mountains of Zone Three they have been forced not to see. Some of them will eventually act on their knowledge but

for the time being they willingly put back the helmets that hold their eyes to the prescribed horizontal. The analogy to our own society is only too clear.

The marriage of Al-Ith and Ben Ata comes to a surprising end when it is discovered that Ben Ata, much changed by life with Al-Ith, must now in turn marry into a lower zone, whose wild Amazonian queen is in all her ways exactly the opposite of Al-Ith. There is only a brief and amusing description of Vahshi, arms heavy with plundered gold, fingers probing the carcasses of two chickens she has devoured for a snack. But we learn that her attitude to sex is much what Ben Ata's used to be and that she appears willing to learn some subtleties from him.

Meanwhile, Al-Ith returns to her realm, but, "no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation," she is unrecognized by her people and gradually moves beyond them up to the borders of Zone Two. In a life of increasing asceticism, she is occasionally able to travel into the higher zone and perceive the shadowy angelic forms who live in that fiery blue atmosphere. Gradually she becomes acclimatized to it, develops the essential organs of perception and is not seen in Zone Three again.

In the story of Al-Ith we may read a Jungian allegory of the individual's progress towards integration. Her journey into Zone Four is spoken of as her "descent into the dark,"and it is clear that in her union with Ben Ata she accepts the shadowy part of her nature, "possibilities of herself she had not believed open to her." So, in reverse, Ben Ata is awakened to his spiritual possibilities before he too must descend to darker depths. Opposites, contraries, must be acknowledged and integrated.

Like all potent allegories, the story can be explored on many levels. If we consider the relationship of the four zones to the elements, from earthy Zone Five, Watery Four, Airy Three to Fiery Two, we have a further image of the spiral of the mystic way, as it used to be depicted in visual terms. The necessary progress for the evolving spirit is upwards, but as Blake says, "Without Contraries is no progression," and the downward path, however terrifying, must also be taken. The zones may also be seen as aspects of the individual human entity, another version of the metaphor Lynda offered in *Shikasta:* "We are several people fitted inside each other. Chinese boxes. Our bodies are the outside box. Or the inside one if you like."

Chinese boxes. Onion layers. These have become almost clichés of psychiatric jargon. But clichés may well embody truths and it is one of the points reiterated in this novel that truths are to be found in the most unlikely and most familiar places, in songs and children's games, in jokes, in romantic stories, in intergalactic fantasies. *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* is a more cheerful, humorous and feminist novel than *Shikasta* but they are of the same kind, call it what you will: Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Soul Fiction. The genre may not be to everyone's taste and there are times, perhaps, when Lessing hammers a point too insistently, overworks a metaphor, or makes the allegory too explicit. But the imaginative sweep and intellectual range of both novels are staggering, as always in Lessing's major work, and they draw one back again and again to ponder their implications. The third volume of the series, called *The Sirian Experiments,* will soon be out, making another zone, circle, or layer in the fabric of what will surely be a grand and unified design.

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ANAIS NIN: AN INTRODUCTION.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN V AND DUANE SCHNEIDER. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1979. Pp. 309.

Anais Nin is a cult figure today; a role model for many