

= Shikasta =

For Persian calligraphical style see Shikasta Nasta'liq .

Re : Colonised Planet 5 , Shikasta ( often shortened to Shikasta ) is a 1979 science fiction novel by Doris Lessing , and is the first book in her five @-@ book Canopus in Argos series . It was first published in the United States in October 1979 by Alfred A. Knopf , and in the United Kingdom in November 1979 by Jonathan Cape . Shikasta is also the name of the fictional planet featured in the novel .

Subtitled " Personal , psychological , historical documents relating to visit by Johor ( George Sherban ) Emissary ( Grade 9 ) 87th of the Period of the Last Days " , Shikasta is the history of the planet Shikasta ( Earth ) under the influence of three galactic empires , Canopus , Sirius , and their mutual enemy , Puttiora . The book is presented in the form of a series of reports by Canopean emissaries to Shikasta who document the planet 's prehistory , its degeneration leading to the " Century of Destruction " ( the 20th century ) , and the Apocalypse ( World War III ) .

Shikasta draws on the Old Testament and is influenced by spiritual and mystical themes in Sufism , an Islamic belief system in which Lessing had taken an interest in the mid @-@ 1960s . The book represented a major shift of focus in Lessing 's writing , from realism to science fiction , and this disappointed many of her readers . It received mixed reviews from critics . Some were impressed by the scope and vision of the book , with one reviewer calling it " an audacious and disturbing work from one of the world 's great living writers " . Others were critical of the novel 's bleakness , that humanity has no free will and that their fate lies in the hands of galactic empires .

The story of Shikasta is retold in the third book of the Canopus series , The Sirian Experiments ( 1980 ) , this time from the point of view of Sirius . Shikasta reappears in the fourth book in the series , The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 ( 1982 ) , and the Zones , briefly mentioned in Shikasta , are the subject of the second book in the series , The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five ( 1980 ) .

= = Plot = =

Canopus , a benevolent galactic empire centred at Canopus in the constellation Argo Navis , colonises a young and promising planet they name Rohanda ( the fruitful ) . They nurture its burgeoning humanoids and accelerate their evolution . When the Natives are ready , Canopus imposes a " Lock " on Rohanda that links it via " astral currents " to the harmony and strength of the Canopean Empire . In addition to Canopus , two other empires also establish a presence on the planet : their ally , Sirius from the star of the same name , and their mutual enemy , Puttiora . The Sirians confine their activities largely to genetic experiments on the southern continents during Rohanda 's prehistory ( described in Lessing 's third book in the Canopus series , The Sirian Experiments ) , while the Shammat of Puttiora remain dormant , waiting for opportunities to strike .

For many millennia the Natives of Rohanda prosper in a Canopean induced climate of peaceful coexistence and accelerated development . Then an unforeseen " cosmic re @-@ alignment " puts Rohanda out of phase with Canopus which causes the Lock to break . Deprived of Canopus 's resources and a steady stream of a substance called SOWF ( substance @-@ of @-@ we @-@ feeling ) , the Natives develop a " Degenerative Disease " that puts the goals of the individual ahead of those of the community . The Shammat exploit this disturbance and begin undermining Canopus 's influence by infecting the Natives with their evil ways . As Rohanda degenerates into greed and conflict , the Canopeans reluctantly change its name to Shikasta ( the stricken ) . Later in the book , Shikasta is identified as Earth , or an allegorical Earth .

In an attempt to salvage Canopus 's plans for Shikasta and correct the Natives ' decline , Canopean emissaries are sent to the planet . Johor is one such emissary , who takes on the form of a Native and begins identifying those individuals who have not degenerated too far and are amenable to his corrective instructions . Johor then sends those he has successfully " converted " to spread the word among other Natives , and soon isolated communities begin to return to the pre @-@ Shikasta days . But without the SOWF and Shammat 's influence over the Natives , Canopus is fighting a

losing battle and the planet declines further . By the Shikasta 's 20th century , the planet has degenerated into war and self @-@ destruction . Johor returns , but this time through Zone 6 from which he is born on the planet ( incarnated ) as a Shikasta , George Sherban . As Sherban grows up , he establishes contact with other Canopeans in disguise and then resumes his work trying to help the Shikastas . But famine and unemployment grow , and anarchy spreads .

On the eve of World War III , Sherban and other emissaries relocate a small number of promising Shikastas to remote locations to escape the coming nuclear holocaust . The war reduces Shikasta 's population by 99 % and sweeps the planet clean of the " barbarians " . The Shammat , who set the Shikastas on a course of self @-@ destruction , self @-@ destruct themselves and withdraw from the planet . The Canopeans help the survivors rebuild their lives and re @-@ align themselves with Canopus . With a strengthened Lock and the SOWF flowing freely again , harmony and prosperity return to Shikasta .

= = Background and genre = =

Doris Lessing was born to British parents in Persia ( now Iran ) in 1919 . Her family moved to Southern Rhodesia ( now Zimbabwe ) in 1925 where she later dropped out of school at the age of 14 . Over the next decade she pursued various careers , including journalism , and published several short stories . In the early 1940s Lessing was attracted to a group of " quasi @-@ Communist [ s ] " and joined their Left Book Club in Salisbury ( now Harare ) . Her interest in " the race issue " , prominent in Rhodesia at the time , prompted her to join the Southern Rhodesian Labour Party . Lessing moved to London in 1949 where she began her writing career . She also joined the British Communist Party and became an active campaigner against the use of nuclear weapons .

In 1950 Lessing 's first novel , *The Grass Is Singing* , was published , a story of racial conflict based on her experiences in Rhodesia . It was followed by several others , including her semi @-@ autobiographical *Children of Violence* series , and her 1962 " breakthrough " novel , *The Golden Notebook* in which she broached the subject of feminism . In 1964 , disillusioned with Communism , Lessing turned her attention to Sufism , an Islamic belief system , after reading *The Sufis* by Idries Shah . She described *The Sufis* as " the most surprising book [ she ] had read " , and said it " changed [ her ] life " . Lessing later met Shah , who became " a good friend [ and ] teacher " . In the early 1970s Lessing began writing " inner space " fiction , which included the novels *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* ( 1971 ) and *Memoirs of a Survivor* ( 1974 ) . In the late 1970s she wrote *Shikasta* in which she used many Sufi concepts .

*Shikasta* was intended to be a " single self @-@ contained book " , but as Lessing 's fictional universe developed , she found she had ideas for more than just one book , and ended up writing a series of five . *Shikasta* , and the *Canopus in Argos* series as a whole , fall into the category of soft science fiction ( " space fiction " in Lessing 's own words ) due to their focus on characterization and social and cultural issues , and the de@-@ emphasis of science and technology . Robert Alter of *The New York Times* suggested that this kind of writing belongs to a genre literary critic Northrop Frye called the " anatomy " , which is " a combination of fantasy and morality " . Gore Vidal placed Lessing 's " science fiction " " somewhere between John Milton and L. Ron Hubbard " .

*Shikasta* represented a major shift of focus for Lessing , influenced by spiritual and mystical themes in Sufism . This switch to " science fiction " was not well received by all . By the late 1970s , Lessing was considered " one of the most honest , intelligent and engaged writers of the day " , and Western readers unfamiliar with Sufism were dismayed that Lessing had abandoned her " rational worldview " . George Stade of *The New York Times* complained that " our Grand Mistress of lumpen realism has gone religious on us " . The reaction of reviewers and readers to the first two books in the series , *Shikasta* and *The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five* ( 1980 ) , prompted Lessing to write in the Preface to the third book in the series , *The Sirian Experiments* ( 1980 ) :

I would so like it if reviewers and readers could see this series , *Canopus in Argos : Archive* , as a framework that enables me to tell ( I hope ) a beguiling tale or two ; to put questions , both to myself and to others ; to explore ideas and sociological possibilities .

Further criticism of the Canopus series followed , which included this comment by New York Times critic John Leonard : " One of the many sins for which the 20th century will be held accountable is that it has discouraged Mrs. Lessing . [ ... ] She now propagandizes on behalf of our insignificance in the cosmic razzmatazz . " Lessing replied by saying : " What they didn 't realize was that in science fiction is some of the best social fiction of our time . I also admire the classic sort of science fiction , like Blood Music , by Greg Bear . He 's a great writer . " Lessing said in 1983 that she would like to write stories about red and white dwarves , space rockets powered by anti @-@ gravity , and charmed and coloured quarks , " [ b ] ut we can 't all be physicists " .

Lessing later wrote several essays on Sufism which were published in her essay collection , Time Bites ( 2004 ) . She was awarded the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature , and was described by the Swedish Academy as " that epicist of the female experience , who with scepticism , fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny " .

Lessing dedicated Shikasta to her father . While she was still a child in Southern Rhodesia he often used to gaze up at the night sky and say , " Makes you think ? there are so many worlds up there , wouldn 't really matter if we did blow ourselves up ? plenty more where we came from . " Shikasta gave rise to a religious cult in America . Lessing said in an interview that its followers had written to her and asked , " When are we going to be visited by the gods ? " , and she told them that the book is " not a cosmology . It 's an invention " , and they replied , " Ah , you 're just testing us " .

= = Analysis = =

The name " Shikasta " comes from the Persian word ????? ( shekasteh ) meaning " broken " , and is often seen used as the name of the Iranian national style of Persian calligraphy , Shekasteh Nasta'liq . In the book , Lessing does not state explicitly that the planet Shikasta is Earth , but many critics believe that its similarities to Earth 's history make it clear that Shikasta is Earth as seen by the Canopeans . Some of the documents in the book written by Shikastans refer to geographical locations and countries on Earth . Other critics , however , interpret Shikasta as an allegorical Earth with parallel histories that deviate from time to time .

Shikasta has been called an " anti @-@ novel " , and an " architectonic novel " . It is the story of the planet Shikasta from the perspective of Canopus and is presented as a case study for " first @-@ year students of Canopean Colonial Rule " . It contains a series of reports by Canopean emissaries to the planet , extracts from the Canopean reference , History of Shikasta , and copies of letters and journals written by selected Shikastans . The history of Shikasta is monitored by the virtually immortal Canopeans , from Rohanda 's prehistory , through to Shikasta 's " Century of Destruction " ( Earth 's 20th century ) , and into Earth 's future when the Chinese occupy Europe and World War III breaks out . The book purports to be the " true " history of our planet .

Shikasta alludes to the Old Testament , Gnosticism and Sufism , and draws on several Judeo @-@ Christian themes . Lessing wrote in the book 's preface that it has its roots in the Old Testament . Her SOWF ( Substance @-@ Of @-@ We @-@ Feeling ) , the " spiritual nourishment " that flows from Canopus to Shikasta , is also a word she invented with a pronunciation similar to " Sufi " . A reviewer of the book in the Los Angeles Times said that Shikasta is a " reworking of the Bible " , and the Infinity Plus website draws parallels between the Canopeans and their emissaries , and God and his angels from the Old Testament . A New York Times reviewer wrote that the " outer space " where the Canopeans come from is a metaphor for " religious or inner space " . Thelma J. Shinn , in her book Worlds Within Women : Myth and Mythmaking in Fantastic Literature by Women , described the struggle between Canopus and Shammat , played out on Shikasta , as the " eternal struggle between good and evil " , and the " Degenerative Disease " that strikes Shikasta as a metaphor for the original sin . Lessing said in an interview that the final war ( World War III ) at the end of the novel is the Apocalypse . Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis wrote in The Journal of Bahá'í Studies that Shikasta is the " symbolic rendering of the coming of a new prophet to an earthlike planet " , and relates it to Bahá'í principles .

= = Reception = =

Paul Gray wrote in a review in *Time* that the documents that make up *Shikasta* allow Lessing to stretch the novel out over vast periods of time and shift perspective " dramatically from the near infinite to the minute " . He said that the book 's cohesiveness is its variety , and noted how Lessing interspaces her " grand designs " and " configurations of enormous powers " with " passages of aching poignancy " . Gray said that *Shikasta* is closer to *Gulliver 's Travels* and the Old Testament than it is to *Buck Rogers* , and may disappoint readers interpreting her " space fiction " as " science fiction " . He found Lessing 's bleak vision of Earth 's history in which she suggests that humans " could not [ ... ] help making the messes they have , that their blunders were all ordained by a small tic in the cosmos " , a little " unsatisfying " , but added that even if you do not subscribe to her theories , the book can still be enjoyable , " even furiously engaging on every page " . Gray called *Shikasta* " an audacious and disturbing work from one of the world 's great living writers " .

Author Gore Vidal wrote in *The New York Review of Books* that *Shikasta* is a " work of a formidable imagination " . He said that Lessing is " a master " of eschatological writing , but added that while her depictions of a terminal London are " very real " , as a whole the book is " never quite real enough " . Vidal also felt that Zone 6 , Lessing 's alternate plane for the dead , is not as convincing as *The Dry Lands* in Ursula K. Le Guin 's *Earthsea* trilogy . He compared the Canopeans and Shammat to Milton 's God and Satan in *Paradise Lost* , but said that while Lucifer 's " overthrow [ ... ] of his writerly creator is an awesome thing " , in *Shikasta* Lessing 's human race with no free will is too passive and of no interest . Vidal attributed this to Lessing 's " surrender " to the Sufis and the SOWF ( Substance @-@ Of @-@ We @-@ Feeling ) , and not her inability to create good characters .

New York Times reviewer George Stade said that *Shikasta* " forces us to think about [ ... ] what we are , how we got that way and where we are going " , but complained that the book is filled with " false hopes " , and that the fate of humankind relies on " theosophical emanations , cosmic influences , occult powers , spiritual visitations and stellar vibrations " . When the SOWF is cut off and the Shikastans degenerate , Lessing " both indicts and exculpates " them , implying that humanity is bad , but it is not their fault . While Stade complemented Lessing on the book 's satire , and her depictions of Zone 6 , which he said " have the eerie beauty of ancient Gnostic texts " , he " disapprove [ d ] " of the novel as a whole , but added , " that doesn 't mean I didn 't enjoy reading it " .

The Los Angeles Times called *Shikasta* an " epic " and suspected that it may have influenced the Nobel committee when they referred to Lessing as an " epicist of the female experience " . Thelma J. Shinn wrote in her book , *Worlds Within Women : Myth and Mythmaking in Fantastic Literature by Women* , that Lessing 's history of humanity in *Shikasta* is " pessimistic " but " convincing " . Infinity Plus described *Shikasta* as a " mainstream novel that uses SF ideas " , and said that while Lessing was not able to predict the fall of the Soviet Union and the impact of computers , the novel " barely seems dated " because of her " cunningly non @-@ specific " approach .

James Schellenberg writing in *Challenging Destiny* , a Canadian science fiction and fantasy magazine , was impressed by *Shikasta* 's " grand sense of perspective " and the context of humanity set in a " vaster scale of civilization and right @-@ thinking " . He liked the concept of SOWF as a " metaphor of community connectedness " , but felt it was an unusual way to build a utopia . The book 's fractured storytelling leads to Lessing breaking the " famous dictum of writing ? show , don 't tell " , and while that may work in certain circumstances , Schellenberg felt that that approach does not work very well in *Shikasta* . The online magazine *Journey to the Sea* found Lessing 's inclusion of stories from the Hebrew Bible " entertaining and intriguing " , and said she challenges the logical thinker 's rejection of these sacred texts , suggesting that it is " imaginatively possible " that they could be true .

Following Lessing 's death in 2013 , *The Guardian* put *Shikasta* in their list of the top five Lessing books .