

= The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five =

The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five is a 1980 science fiction novel by Doris Lessing . It is the second book in her five @-@ book Canopus in Argos series , the first being Shikasta ( 1979 ) . It was first published in the United States in January 1980 by Alfred A. Knopf , and in the United Kingdom in May 1980 by Jonathan Cape .

The novel takes place in three of six metaphysical Zones that encircle the planet Shikasta ( an allegorical Earth ) , and concerns two ordained marriages that link the patriarchal and militaristic Zone Four with the matriarchal and egalitarian Zone Three , and the tribal and barbaric Zone Five . The story is told from the point of view of the matriarchal utopian Zone Three , and is about gender conflict and the breaking down of barriers between the sexes . Lessing called the Canopus in Argos series " space fiction " , but The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five is generally referred to as feminist science fiction .

In the mid @-@ 1960s Lessing had become interested in Sufism , an Islamic belief system , and she used many Sufi concepts in the Canopus in Argos series . In The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five , the zones are said to correspond to Sufism 's different levels of consciousness , and symbolise the " Sufi ladder to enlightenment " . Lessing was criticised for abandoning her traditional fiction and switching to science fiction with spiritual and mystical themes . Notwithstanding this criticism , The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five was generally well received by critics , with some reviewers calling it one Lessing 's best works on the topic of gender conflict .

The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five was also adapted as an opera by composer Philip Glass with story @-@ libretto by Lessing , and premiered in Heidelberg , Germany in May 1997 . The US premiere was performed in Chicago in June 2001 .

= = Zones = =

First described in the opening book of the series , Shikasta , six metaphysical Zones ( akin to cosmological planes ) encircle the planet Shikasta ( an allegorical Earth ) . These " concentric shells " ( numbered One to Six ) each represent different " levels of spiritual being " . Shikasta only deals with Zone Six , the innermost and least pure of the Zones , which is " a kind of purgatory in which humans wait out the time between incarnations on earth " .

In The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five , Lessing describes some of the higher Zones in this " spiritual landscape " as self @-@ contained " countries " , each with their own " societies " that have evolved independently of the others over time . Adjacent Zones in the sequence border each other , from Zone Six ( the lowest ) up to Zone One ( the highest and purest ) , each with " increasingly mountainous topography " .

Crossing the frontiers from one Zone to another is possible , but generally avoided as straying too close to the border leaves one feeling ill @-@ at @-@ ease and sometimes even physically sick . For those who need to move into another Zone , special shields are provided for protection against the debilitating effects of the foreign atmosphere ( both physical and ideological ) .

= = Plot = =

The story opens when the Providers , the invisible and unidentified rulers of all the Zones , order Al ? Ith , queen of the peaceful paradise of Zone Three , to marry Ben Ata , king of the militarised and repressive Zone Four . Al ? Ith is repulsed by the idea of consorting with a barbarian , and Ben Ata does not want a righteous queen disturbing his military campaigns . Nevertheless , Al ? Ith descends to Zone Four and they reluctantly marry . Ben Ata is not used to the company of women he cannot control , and Al ? Ith has difficulty relating to this ill @-@ bred man , but in time they grow accustomed to each other and gain new insights into each other 's Zones . Al ? Ith is appalled that all of Zone Four 's wealth goes into its huge armies , leaving the rest of its population poor and underdeveloped ; Ben Ata is astounded that Zone Three has no army at all .

The marriage bears a son , Arusi , future heir to the two Zones . Some of the women of Zone Four , led by Dabeeb , step in to help Al ? Ith . Suppressed and downtrodden , these women relish being in the presence of the queen of Zone Three . But soon after the birth of Arusi , the Providers order Al ? Ith to return to Zone Three without her son , and Ben Ata to marry Vahshi , queen of the primitive Zone Five . Al ? Ith and Ben Ata have grown fond of each other , and are devastated by this news .

In Zone Three , Al ? Ith finds that her people have forgotten her , and her sister , Murti ? has taken over as queen . Disturbed by the changes she sees in Al ? Ith , Murti ? exiles her to the frontier of Zone Two . Al ? Ith , drawn by its allure , tries to enter Zone Two , but finds an unworlly and inhospitable place and is told by invisible people that it is not her time yet . At the frontier of Zone Five , Ben Ata reluctantly marries Vahshi , a tribal leader of a band of nomads who terrorise the inhabitants of her zone . But Ben Ata 's marriage to Al ? Ith has changed him , and he disbands most of his armies in Zone Four , sending the soldiers home to rebuild their towns and villages and uplift their communities . He also slowly wins over Vahshi 's confidence and persuades her to stop plundering Zone Five .

When Arusi is old enough to travel , Dabeeb and her band of women decide to take him to Zone Three to see Al ? Ith . This cross @-@ border excursion is not ordered by the Providers , and Ben Ata has grave misgivings about their decision . In Zone Three the women are shocked to find the deposed Al ? Ith working in a stable near Zone Two . While Al ? Ith is pleased to see her son , she too has misgivings about Dabeeb 's action . The bumptious women 's travels through Zone Three evoke feelings of xenophobia in the locals .

After five years of silence , the Providers instruct Ben Ata to go and see Al ? Ith in Zone Three . At the border , he is surprised to find a band of youths armed with crude makeshift weapons blocking his way . Clearly they want no more incursions from Zone Four . Ben Ata returns with a large army and enters Zone Three unchallenged . He is not well received , but finds Al ? Ith with a small band of followers who have moved to the frontier of Zone Two to be close to her . Ben Ata and Al ? Ith reunite ; he tells her of the reforms he has introduced in Zone Four and his taming of the " wild one " from Zone Five .

One day Al ? Ith enters Zone Two and does not return . But the changes set in motion by the two marriages are now evident everywhere . The frontiers between Zones Three , Four and Five are open , and people and knowledge are flowing between them . Previously stagnant , the three Zones are now filled with enquiry , inspiration and renewal .

= = Background = =

When Lessing published *Shikasta* in 1979 , the first book in her Canopus in Argos series , it represented a major shift of focus for the author . In her earlier books , Lessing had established a name for herself as a writer of realistic fiction ; in *Shikasta* she introduced her readers to the spiritual and mystical themes in Sufism . In the mid @-@ 1960s Lessing had become interested in 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 ) , and in the late 1970s she turned to science fiction when 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 .

Lessing 's 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* , 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 " .

In an interview published in 1996 , Lessing spoke passionately of The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five : " Something happened when I wrote the book . I hit some other level . And is it a legend or a myth or a fairy tale or a fantasy ? That isn 't the word for what I ? ve written , I think . You see , only I could have written The Golden Notebook , but I think Anon wrote this other book . " Lessing considered Marriages one of her better books , and said , " this book goes down into me pretty deep ... it will never happen again " .

= = Genre and themes = =

The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five is told largely from the point of view of the matriarchal utopian Zone Three , which places the novel in the category of feminist utopias or feminist science fiction . The Canopus in Argos series in general falls under the banner of soft science fiction , or " space fiction " as Lessing called it , due to its focus on characterisation and social and cultural issues , and the de @-@ emphasis of science and technology . Comparative literature professor Robert Alter suggested that this kind of writing belongs to a genre that literary critic Northrop Frye called the " anatomy " , which is " a combination of fantasy and morality " . Author Gore Vidal placed Lessing 's " science fiction " " somewhere between John Milton and L. Ron Hubbard " .

The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five differs from the other books in the Canopus in Argos series in that it reads like a fable and is set in a metaphysical , or " psychic " space , outside the rest of the series ' " normal " space / time universe . The story concerns two ordained marriages that link the patriarchal and militaristic Zone Four with the matriarchal and egalitarian Zone Three , and the tribal and barbaric Zone Five . It focuses on , what Time magazine reviewer Paul Gray calls , the " struggles between men and women and the dimensions of sex and love " . Literary critic Diana Sheets says that the book is about overcoming gender differences and opening up new possibilities . She argues that the premise of the story is that " cosmic order is ideally realized when men and women cross the gender divide and attempt genuine communication ? sexually , emotionally , [ ... ] thereby setting the preconditions for the attainment of enlightened consciousness " .

The marriages were ordained by the Providers because the zones had stagnated and the birth rate of both humans and animals had fallen . Lessing does not identify the Providers , but some reviewers and critics have assumed that they are the Canopeans from the benevolent galactic empire Canopus , introduced in the first book of the series , Shikasta . Author Thelma J. Shinn says that , as in Shikasta , Lessing 's " pessimistic view of human capabilities still keeps control in a benevolent power rather than in the hands of the individual " . But after a push in the right direction , the individual triumphs : Al ? lth and Ben Ata initiate changes in both their own and their neighbouring zones .

Literature academic Jayne Ashleigh Glover says that while Zone Three on the surface appears to be a feminist utopia , Lessing shows that it is far from idyllic . The story narrators , the Chroniclers of Zone Three , question their zone 's behaviour and attitudes , and warn of the dangers of stagnation . Al ? lth , upon returning to Zone Three , is shunned by its inhabitants for failing to attend to their zone 's needs , and Zone Three 's stasis manifests itself in xenophobia when Al ? lth brings back

new perspectives , followed by visitors from Zone Four .

Glover sees Al ? Ith , Ben Ata and Vahshi as allegories for their respective zones , and the marriages between them as marriages between the zones , as stated by the title of the book . Author Müge Galin says that Al ? Ith functions according to the nature of Zone Three rather than as an individual . Galin also argues that the six zones correspond to Sufism 's different levels of consciousness . Both Al ? Ith and Ben Ata are able to experience other levels of consciousness when they travel to each other 's zones , but Al ? Ith can perceive and experience the neighbouring zone far deeper than Ben Ata because she is from a higher zone / level of consciousness . Galin says that on the " Sufi ladder to enlightenment " , those on higher rungs must pull up those on lower rungs . Thus Al ? Ith can only move to Zone Two after she has pulled Ben Ata up to Zone Three .

= = Reception = =

In a review of *The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five* in *Time* magazine , Paul Gray described the novel as " part fertility myth , part comedy of manners " . Gray said that Lessing often wrote about gender conflict , but " never with more sweetness , compassion and wisdom " as she has in this novel . Writing in *HuffPost Culture* , University of Bristol academic Tom Sperlinger called the book " a legend " and listed it amongst his " Five Doris Lessing Books to Read " . Critic John Leonard in a review in *The New York Times* called *The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five* " an act of magic " , and " a remarkable recovery " from *Shikasta* , which Leonard called a " disaster " .

British writer Graham Sleight in a review of the Canopus in Argos series in *Locus* magazine said *The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five* comes closest to Ursula K. Le Guin 's works in the way that both Lessing and Le Guin scrutinise societies . Sleight compared *The Marriages* to Le Guin 's *The Dispossessed* , saying that each revolves around conflicts between differing worldviews , namely the Zones in *The Marriages* , and Anarres and Urras in *The Dispossessed* .

Kirkus Reviews said that Lessing often tackled the subject of sexual politics , but *The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five* is her " most humane and loving variation on the theme " . While the review was critical of Lessing 's prose style , saying its " gracelessness [ ... ] has never been more conspicuous " , and called her descriptions of the Zone Four war economy " a silly cartoon sketch " , it said that " there is a sweetness and generosity about this work not quite like anything she has done " .

= = Adaptations = =

*The Marriages Between Zones Three , Four and Five* was adapted for the opera in 1997 by composer Philip Glass with story @-@ libretto by Doris Lessing . The two @-@ act opera for orchestra , chorus and soloists first premiered in Heidelberg , Germany in May 1997 under the direction of Thomas Kalb ( music ) and Birgitta Trommler ( stage ) . Lessing said that for the opera she expanded her allegory about gender relations : " There was room for two festivals : a woman 's festival and a marriage festival . There are a lot of lyrics not in the novel . " The libretto was translated by Saskia M. Wesnigk into German . The first US premiere was in June 2001 at the Merle Reskin Theatre in Chicago , Illinois , and was directed by Harry Silverstein .

The German premiere was not well received by the press , and *Chicago Tribune* music critic John von Rhein found faults in the US production . He said that the novel " falls flat as music theater " , there is " no compelling dramatic narrative " , and the music " drifts along innocuously " . Von Rhein also complained that " score breaks no new stylistic ground , nor does it define the characters dramatically " .

In 1986 , Glass adapted another book from the Canopus in Argos series , *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* , into a three @-@ act opera with story @-@ libretto by Lessing . It premiered in Houston , Texas in July 1988 .