DORIS LESSING

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Sufi Equilibrium and the Form of the Novel

Shadia S. Fahim

*Lecturer in English Literature and Language
Ain-Shams University, Cairo*

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To my husband and children, Amir and Engy

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Preface

Doris Lessing was acknowledged from the very beginning as a novelist in the tradition of Classical Realism; hence the surprise of critics at her development towards mysticism and forms of science fiction which verge on myth and Oriental fables. The purpose of this study is to examine the rationale of this development and to consider the unifying motifs, which provide a coherent shape to her artistic vision in her consistent search for equilibrium. This study will follow Lessing's development from her early realistic writing to her later science fiction series – a period of over thirty years which encompass the most dramatic changes in her writing career.

The introductory section aims at examining the aesthetic theories as well as the ideological and philosophical influences that have contributed to Lessing's development, in order to establish a theoretical framework for the study and to stipulate the key motifs studied thereafter. The division into the four chapters marks the significant phases of Lessing's development. The four novels selected represent significant stages in Lessing's work, covering the period from 1950 to the year 1983, which marked the completion of her science fiction series.

Chapter 1 focuses on *The Grass is Singing*, which represents the author's early traditionally realistic writing, in order to evaluate the achievement of that first novel which proves to be more complex than is usually supposed. My analysis of this novel will show how far the preoccupations of Lessing's later novels find expression in this early work to establish a point of reference for her later development.

Chapter 2 studies *The Golden Notebook*, which marks a turning-point in formal structure in Lessing's canon and is selected as evidence of her interest in Sufism at that early stage. Critics frequently refer to *The Four-Gated City* in 1969 as the starting point of Lessing's interest in Sufi methods of thought. I contend that such interest is evident since *The Golden Notebook* in 1962 and that it is crucial in understanding the complexity of the inner action and sheds light on the statement it makes through the form.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the study of *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, which has elicited a comparatively limited amount of criticism

but which proves to be a major achievement. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* epitomizes the quest for equilibrium and raises the issue of reconciling two apparently incompatible universes – the realistic and the fantastic. This issue becomes problematic in the terms of literary criticism but reveals further significance when brought into line with Sufi methods of writing. Sources from Sufi theories of literature will serve as points of reference in my analysis of that domain to set a polemic against a widespread misunderstanding of the novel.

Chapter 4 considers Lessing's science fiction series, 'Canopus in Argos', with special reference to the first volume, *Re: Colonized Planet 5 Shikasta*. In this chapter, the relevance of the science fiction genre to the theme of equilibrium is studied in the light of the tale-within-tale technique of the oriental fables, since the series derive its title from Bidpai's fables *The Lights of Canopus*. Later on in the chapter I concentrate on *Shikasta*, in order to illustrate how the theme of equilibrium develops in relation to the narrative technique. This involves the reader's activity in reading and signifies the author's development towards more modern modes of writing.

This study charts and discusses Doris Lessing's development in the context of Eastern as well as Western modes that have influenced her work, since the interaction between the two is illuminating in understanding her œuvre and helps to explain many areas of misunderstanding in her canon.

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