



**CANOPUS IN ARGOS: ARCHIVES : “OUTER” SPACE SCIENCE
FICTION EXPLORING THE “INNER” SPACE TRAVEL THROUGH
EASTERN CONCEPT OF “PLANES OF EXISTENCE”**

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ABSTRACT

*Doris Lessing, a self-proclaimed space science fiction author through a dry, archival format of her five-novel science fiction series, *Canopus in Argos: Archives* interrogates metaphorical “inner” spiritual space into the cosmic “outer” space. The paper attempts at delineation of this attainment of spiritual advancement of soul through drawing parallels between author’s Cosmological planes with the “Planes of Existence” in Eastern philosophy. Lessing’s Cosmological planes are the real Zones with their physical boundaries, their own government, their weather, and rules. The paper represents that each Zone in Lessing’s world is at certain spiritual level that corresponds to a plane of existence in Esoteric philosophy, and Hindu occultism. The age-old insularities of the Zones are finally broken into achievement of spiritual growth of their inhabitant’s inner soul, and final communion with the “One” or “Brahman”.*

Key Words – Planes of Existence, Lokas in Hinduism, Cosmological Zones

Introduction

Science fiction authors have been delving into the areas of “outer” space from times immemorial, but the 2007 Nobel Prize winner, Doris Lessing has been attempting to fathom the “inner” space metaphor too. *Canopus in Argos: Archives* is truly a remarkable series of the science fiction genre, with its narrative style too matching the dry, archival and report format of a physicist. Lessing is an unbiased teacher, and thus mentions in the Preface to her opening novel of the series, *Shikasta*: “The sacred literatures of all races and nations have many things in common. Almost as if they can be regarded as the products of a single mind . . . there are even those who have come to believe that there has never been more than one Book in the Middle East” (*Shikasta* x-xi). This is the British author’s commitment to the goal of spiritual upliftment of Western minds not through particular religion, but through any that



suggests this noble path. Hence, many Sufi studies have been conducted on her novels, as they point towards Lessing's inclination towards the precepts and philosophy of Sufism. The present study although, focuses on a fresh perspective by studying the same concerns in Esoteric and Hindu Philosophies.

Although all five novels of *Canopus* series are concerned with Lessing's "Oriental inner vision" for progression of man's "Soul" from mere "earthly" to "spiritual", but the first novel, *Shikasta* introduces the concept, and the second novel, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* primarily talks about the theme in detail. The "Zones" mentioned throughout the series are the Cosmological Zones of existence, but the author interestingly gives every Zone a form of a country with its definite contours, government, weather, people, and rules. The *Marriages* plot describes the events which force Zones Three, Four and Five out of their age-old insularity into revitalizing acquaintanceships. Since each area represents an ascending level of social and philosophic development, the opening of boundaries provides a means for spiritual advancement by its inhabitants. Each zone becomes a new stage for the soul's "possibilities," a word frequently invoked by the rulers as they attempt to puzzle out the purpose of their marriages. The 'possibilities' that they are offered correspond to spiritual stages in Esoteric and Hindu philosophical development; and each successive zone is another upward step in the path toward the mysterious harmony which the inhabitants recognize as the central factor directing their lives.

The study of these cosmological zones makes their comparison and analysis quite obvious to the "Planes of Existence" mentioned in the varied scriptures of different religions, especially the Eastern. The Earth is metaphorically named as *Shikasta* in Lessing's SF series, which is shown with all strengths and weaknesses that our own planet has. The Zones Six to One are encircling this *Shikasta* planet from Six being the nearest to the One being the farthest, and most difficult to achieve. All Zones except the Zone One is mentioned in clear details, as no human achieves it in her *Argos* galaxy. The study begins with analysis of each Zone with an attempt to draw parallels between the "real" and "liveable" Zones of Lessing's *Canopus* series to the metaphorical "Planes of Existence." Lessing becomes a saint from a scientist at intervals, suggesting that these stages of development of man's consciousness can untimely lead to his union with the "One."

In Esoteric cosmology, a plane other than a physical plane is conceived as a subtle state of consciousness that transcends the known physical universe. The concept is also found in the religious and esoteric teachings such as, Advaita Vedanta, Shamanism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Sufism, Kabbalah, Theosophy, etc. These planes of existence from other philosophies find a direct equivalence in Indian concept of "Lokas" and "Bhuvanas." In Hindu cosmology, there are many lokas or worlds that are identified with both traditional cosmology and states of meditation. In the late 19th century, the metaphysical term "planes" was popularised by the theosophy of H.P. Blavatsky, who in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) and



other writings propounded a complex cosmology containing of seven planes and subplanes, based on a synthesis of Eastern and Western ideas. The planes in Theosophy were further systematized in the writings of C.W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant.

The people of Zones Three, Four, and Five in the third book of Canopus series follow the 'Ascending path' i.e., the path of vertical transcendence, the path of spiritual awakening that culminates in union with God—the mystical experience of unity. Lessing describes her Zones from Six to one in both physical and metaphysical terms. The movement is a literal one from lower to the higher zone after attainment of spiritual wisdom. The reader's focus is mostly on the journey of Queen Al.Ith of Zone Three, and the King of Zone Four, especially after they are "ordered" to marry by the "Providers." Both are already at different spiritual level as they belong to different Zones, but the child out of their marriage represents the new generation with a level up than their parents. The King and Queen are trapped in the insularities of their respective Zones, their own ego, their "I," and thus are resentful of their union in the beginning. King Ben Ata of Zone Four is trapped in such personal 'I' concept, the ego-based sense of personal identity that Gautama Buddha described in detail (Forman 81-92). Buddha taught that the illusory identifications with one's individuality, one's personality, or one's thoughts, which are simply transient events within the field of (eternal) consciousness, are the root of the ignorance that holds us in bondage. Buddha instructs his followers, once cleansed of all identifications, to "take refuge in the Self," referring to the 'Atman' of the Hindu Upanishads: the immortal, beatific inner Self that is one and the same in all beings. Buddha also echoes the Hindu teaching that Atman, fully unveiled, is none other than Brahman, the Source of all existence (Coomaraswamy 1943). To meet this "inner self," the process is moving up the ladder through the varied Zones in Lessing's *Canopus* series.

The first plane of existence is the Gross or Physical plane, termed as "Etheric Plane." This can be understood as human being's existence on Earth, or existence of people on the planet Shikasta in Lessing's cosmology. It refers to the visible reality of space, time, energy and matter. It is basically the physical universe in Occultism and Esoteric cosmology, and is considered the lowest or densest of a series of planes of existence. The physical plane, or Bhuloka, is the world of gross or material substance in which phenomenon is perceived by the five senses. It is the most limited of worlds, the least permanent and the most subject to change. The material world is where humans have experiences, manufacture 'Karma' and fulfil the desires and duties of life in a physical body. It is in the Bhuloka that the consciousness is limited, that awareness of the other two worlds is not always remembered. Mystics call it the unfoldment of 'prakriti,' primal nature, and liken it to a bubble on the ocean's surface. It arises, lives and bursts to return to the source.

Lessing introduces this physical plane with the landing of first 'Avataar' Johor on it, and declaring in the very beginning that people have lost their fruitful 'Bhuloka' into a 'broken one.' In *The Marriages*, Lessing works upon the four out of the six zones, she mentions in the



first book of the series. These are depicted as the metaphysical zones, where marriages take place between their rulers in the second book. Although the marriage is between the King and Queen of two Zones, but the consequence is felt by all the people of both Zones. This is Lessing's way of hinting that the readers are part of the journey too. Each zone in the novel can be related to the various levels of consciousness and enlightenment, which is "the knowledge of the Self" or "Atmavidya" in ancient Indian philosophy starting with "the internal world of man's inner nature, the self of man" (*Indian Philosophy and Religion* 7).

The second plane of existence is called as the "Astral Plane." This is described as a plane that exists between Earth and Heaven. It is sometimes termed as Emotional plane too, as the consciousness is believed to rest here after physical death. It is the world of the planetary spheres, crossed by soul in its astral body on the way to being born and after death, and generally said to be populated by angels, spirits, or other immaterial beings. Lessing calls it Zone Six in *Shikasta*. After undergoing the test that life on Shikasta (Physical plane) presents, the planet's inhabitants die and thus return to Zone Six, a gathering place for Shikastan souls between lives. This she describes as a Zone where souls rest and await their "turn" to take a physical form to go on the planet again. It is a place for reflection, where Shikastans are forced to evaluate the worth of their past actions and judge whether they may reincarnate, remain in Zone Six as a lost soul, or move up to other, better worlds. Zone Six thus becomes the only debarkation point for any Shikastan's journey toward the light, the place where individuals change form and re-evaluate their earthly actions.

While some critics have puzzled over the sudden shift from physical nature in *Shikasta* to the metaphoric character of the zones (Drane 156), Lessing emphasizes in her description of Zone Six in *Shikasta* that they are regions attainable by Shikastans only after death, as the realization of their multiple possibilities is reasserted between lives. Although the concept of zones is further developed in succeeding books, *Shikasta* provides eloquent details of this purgatorial afterlife. Described by Johor as a desert of despair that weighs down all of its inhabitants with the snares of Shikasta's degeneration, it is also a place of opportunity. He lists three paths of action which are available to Shikastans between their lives, which may determine their eventual fates. Some lost souls never have enough courage to either pull free or return to the living Shikasta, and, almost unable to realize that they are dead, hover around the fringes of earth. While observing the events of Shikasta: "You may yearn and learn and pine here for long ages and never know anything but frustration and emptiness and longing" (*Shikasta* 207). Their souls, their very essences will be gone like "a reflection on water" and they will be forever lost, never a part of the eternal Unity. The second way of leaving Zone Six is to return to Shikasta by rebirth, in order "to enter Shikasta and win its prize, which [is], by enduring it, to be free of it forever" (*Shikasta* 9). When that has been accomplished, a third avenue presents itself for the determined individual, that of escape to another zone. Some Shikastans have done that successfully, and entered "Zones One to Five . . . their inhabitants [being] those who have worked their way out of and well past the Shikastan drag and pull,



and are out of the reach of the miasmas of Zone Six” (*Shikasta* 7). The third is the Mental Plane, where those souls are believed to reach who are more spiritually developed and reach this stage in between their incarnations. This plane doesn’t find a parallel in Lessing’s cosmology and can be taken as exception.

The fourth is the Buddhic Plane or Unity Plane. This is described as a realm of man’s consciousness. According to Theosophy, the Buddhic plane exists to develop buddhic consciousness which means to become unselfish and solve any problems with the ego. Charles Leadbeater wrote that in the buddhic plane man casts off the delusion of the self and enters a realization of unity. Annie Besant defined the buddhic plane as plane of persistent and conscious spiritual awareness. This is the perspective consciousness which is the outstanding characteristic of the Hierarchy. This seems to purely coincide with the next Zone of Lessing’s intergalactic world, i.e., Zone Four. However, it’s important to mention here that this state of consciousness is only achieved by this Zone in the latter half of the book, when Ben Ata, the King of the Zone Four is transformed by his wife, who is spiritually from a higher Zone. She becomes a vehicle to put the people of this Zone in accordance with the features of this Plane, after great deal of sacrifice and suffering. This Plane is considered the realm of pure consciousness, where the soul becomes unselfish, and keeps the unity before self. It is a middle state of consciousness, which is to be crossed to land into higher sphere of consciousness.

This self-consciousness and stability is exemplified by the ruler of Zone Four. Ben Ata is the king of a militaristic society who keeps himself busy through continual war games and skirmishes. As Al.Ith summarizes after one of her visits:

“the nature of Zone Four— it was conflict and battle and warring in everything. A tension and a fighting in its very substance: so that every feeling, every thought held in it its own opposite” (Marriages 114).

Unfortunately, the cost of instability for Zone Four is poverty. The women of Zone Four consequently have formed a sub-culture of their own, maintaining the secrets of spiritual advancement for ages, although they have not had any way of enlarging on their dormant powers. The arrival of Al.Ith becomes a catalyst for their liberation and the consequent sharing of knowledge which may lead to higher states of understanding for all of Zone Four’s people. When Al.Ith becomes the bride of Ben Ata, her example of moderation and balance in all things finally forces him into a realization of higher potentialities for spiritual development. Ben Ata is only slowly developing his potential. Al.Ith brings him to a much greater awareness of his powers, at the same time as his country finally recognizes the insights available in the zone’s own female population.



The hierarchy of the planes of existence continues into the fifth plane, termed as the Spiritual Plane. It is represented by the people who come from a more advanced realm, the mountainous Zone Three in *The Marriages*. Here those people reach, who are more advanced than the ordinary men, who are wringed continuously by their inner desires. Zone Three occupies land comparable to that of the Himalayan countries; it is an airy, windy, colour-filled series of plateaus which supports its pastoral, egalitarian citizens in prosperity. The society is matriarchal, led by its mother-queen who embodies the group mind that unifies its people. The zone's main form of communication is through telepathy, both amongst humans and with animals.

Living in direct mental communication with the Providers' wishes, Zone Three emphasizes moderation and sharing above all. In Zone Three, a child has two 'gene-parents,' but many 'mind-parents' as well, assuring its development in group unity. The zone's main code is aestheticism, which results in songs, pictures, buildings and clothes that deliberately encourage the harmony of mind and body which supports their society. Consequently, Zone Three has become a virtual utopia for its inhabitants, serene, unified, and complacent. Having achieved a state of near perfection physically, it has become static. It is nevertheless unwilling to even look beyond its borders toward the mysterious potential of Zone Two. The Providers end the stagnation of Zone Three with their command that Al.Ith must descend to Zone Four. Eventually the borders of Zones Three, Four and Five open to admit fresh ideas from all directions, the changes that all major Eastern philosophies insist are necessary for a soul's migration towards the Light.

The next in hierarchy is the Divine Plane, which is the Sixth plane in the journey of consciousness of the soul. Here, all souls are believed to be born. The souls can be opened to conscious communication with sphere of Divine known as the 'Absolute,' and receive knowledge about the nature of reality. This corresponds to the Zone Two of Lessing's Cosmological Zones. Al.Ith from previous Zone goes even further. Having seen Zones Three and Four, she risks banishment and loss of connection from her group's consciousness as she studies Zone Two. Like the disastrous visit that Zone Four's unprepared women attempt, Al.Ith's initial foray into Zone Two is unsuccessful; but she subsequently devotes her life to a slow absorption into its truths. She leaves behind the "serene balance and equilibrium" of the Zone Three and prepares herself for a new range of experience that she can feel but not describe.

Zone Two is a much more vague area than any of its neighbours. Its inhabitants never enter the book's preview, and their characters are sketched entirely through Al.Ith's eyes. It is a land where physical nature has been almost shed in favour of the spirit. With inhabitants that live a mountaintop existence, in the religious as well as the physical sense of that phrase, Zone Two may be best described as a 'land of flames.' The mountain pass that opens from Zone Three is intensely blue, and Al.Ith perceives the citizens of Zone Two in the form of



flickering blue flames of consciousness. Their contact with her comes only through her dreams, a state of telepathy beyond even the capacities of Zone Three. She feels their potential, but like the less refined Zone Four inhabitants, she has difficulty comprehending Zone Two's essence, though she knows that understanding is the point of her existence:

"It is as if wind had become fire, or flames. . . the blue is only the matrix of the real light . . . and if I shut my eyes . . . I can see images, pictures, reflections. . . they are not like us, to them we are just . . . they pity us and help us, but we are just . . ." (Marriages 230).

Al.Ith may touch the fringes of Zone Two perception, but its qualities are still as far beyond her comprehension as its traits are indescribable. Al.Ith's finally evolving into spiritually enlightened being and thus passing through to Zone Two, and making a way for pulling all up the chain to make a spiritual progress is echoed in following lines from the book, *The Key to Theosophy*:

Perpetual progress for each incarnating Ego, or divine soul, in an evolution from the outward into the inward, from the material to the spiritual, arriving at the end of each stage at absolute unity with the Divine Principle. From strength to strength, from the beauty and perfection of one plane to the greater beauty and perfection of another, with accessions of new glory, of fresh knowledge and power in each cycle, such is the destiny of every Ego. (Blavatsky 155)

The journey undertaken reaches its finalization stage when it reaches the Logoic or Monadic Plane. This is the highest plane of existence, a plane of total oneness, and the plane where has been achieved the complete unity with God. The Monad, Holy Spirit or Oversoul is believed to exist here. This by general rule should follow the Zone one of Lessing's world, but there is no concrete mention of this Zone even once in any of the five novels, but it does correspond to the Canopean emissaries' training ground. It could conceivably be analogous to the stage at which a student achieves much of his higher potential and contemplates returning to lower levels as a teacher. Nothing in *Canopus in Argos* hints at the qualities of Zone One, but the oblique characteristics which Canopus' emissaries display provide shadowy hints toward the apex of human philosophical illumination. The brief glimpses into Canopean wisdom offered in each of the five books may be the essence of Zone One, or of other, unnamed worlds in this universe. The whole of Lessing's theory of ascending from the lower to higher cosmological zones on deeper evaluation foregrounds the marriage between not the two Zones, but also between man and God. The images of union and development of the soul with its ideal provides a familiar and powerfully positive note in Lessing's Space Science Fiction Series.



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