

Perspectives of Orientalism in *Shikasta* and *The Sirian Experiments* by Doris Lessing

Gautam Chatterjee¹, Dr. Achala Sharma²

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, School of Studies in English, Vikram University, Ujjain

E-mail: gautam.chatterjee1857@gmail.com

² Professor and Head, School of Studies in English, Vikram University, Ujjain

Abstract

Having been born and raised in Africa colonized by the British Empire, Doris Lessing's first observation of colonialism was from the perspective of colonizers. Despite this, she remained a severe opponent of colonialism. Her works decry the dispossession of black Africans and expose the incompetence of the white colonials. She addresses colonialism again, in her Space fiction series Canopus in Argos: Archives and presents an objective view of colonialism which indirectly and subtly mentions the possible differences between different imperial empires through her fictional universe. The present paper attempts to highlight Lessing's fictional representation of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in The Sirian Experiment. This paper attempts to bring forth the differences in objectives of different types of colonial powers presented by Lessing in The Sirian Experiments and analyze the same in the light of understanding of the postcolonial critical theory of Orientalism by Edward Said.

Keywords: Colonization, Orientalism, Colonizer, Colonized, Cultural Trauma, Apocalypse, Evolution, Post-colonialism, alien, Postcolonial, Racism, Civilizatrice

Introduction

Doris Lessing established herself as a bold innovator for her experimentation with form and genre, exploring mysticism and the boundaries of consciousness. In a career that spanned more than six decades, she produced twenty-seven novels, seventeen volumes of short stories, four memoirs, and several collections, and embraced a variety of genres. As a white woman raised in the conflicted world of colonial Africa, Lessing developed a strong sense of social justice that emerged in her fiction and autobiographical writings as a deeply personal examination of a wide range of political issues. Her writing examines not only the far-reaching effects of colonialism and postcolonialism but also the condition of women, the inequalities fostered by capitalism, and the destructive power of war. These works explore her critical views on Marxism and feminism. She

won a variety of literary awards, including the 2007 Nobel Prize in literature, with the Nobel committee lauding her as an “epicist of the female experience, who with skepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny.”

The historical period in which Lessing was born made sure that her growth mindset was deeply affected by Colonialism. She was part of the white race that colonized Africa but her works reflect her hatred for White Colonial rules. The white colonial rules have haunted her past. In his book entitled Doris Lessing's Africa (1978) Professor Michael Thorpe argues: “It is possible that everything she has written since she left Africa, not only her African writing, is the voice of such an exile”.

Doris Lessing was a superb writer and she masterly influenced readers by forms as well as by choice of words for her protagonists. For Lessing “the novelist talks, as an individual to individuals, in a small personal voice” (Lessing p 4-5). The artist’s responsibility is to give form to the nature of reality by letting the form organically grow from the whole of reality Lessing through her novels best tried to capture all the predicament of blacks and the ill intentions of Europeans to obliterate their happy lives. Apartheid came to an end in 1994 and the history of Africa changed. Today we are in the era of postmodernism followed by decolonization. The long and troublesome journey of decolonization brings what we see and enjoy today as independent states and nations. It is through various authors such as Salman Rushdie, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Frantz Fanon, George Orwell, and Doris Lessing’s work that we are able to see clearly the past pictures of colonial tribulations. However, the universally accepted view of colonialism as one of the darkest periods in human history and colonials as purely shameless exploiters who had but little concern with the subject races is a bit contrasted by Doris Lessing in *Canopus in Argos Archive* where Lessing has illustrated three different types of Colonial empires with different objectives and justification for their colonization. Here, I can’t stop appreciating Lessing for her fantastic vision and superb knack for spilling ink onto the papers very cleverly.

Discussion:

In *Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta* (1979), Lessing presents the entire history of the earth, relations among various species, and our history and future from an alien perspective. Although the struggle between highly evolved cosmic powers to have control on earth is blamed for most of the suffering of humanity, our collective mistakes as a species are presented to us from an alien point of view. *New York Times* reviewer George Stade finds that *Shikasta*, “forces us to think about first and last things, about what we are, how we got that way, and where we are going. It forces us to

look into the depths of the apocalyptic tide washing around us”(Stade 1979).

It is a tale of a fruitful planet Rohanda which is contested by three different Colonial empires. The altruistic among them is the Canopus, which strives to uplift its intelligent native species. Despite their efforts, the inhabitants of the planet tend to fall from the prescribed ways of life to ways of Shammat which are inherently violent. In an attempt to delay the Natives’ decline, Canopean emissary Johor attempts to identify less degenerated individuals who are amenable to his corrective instructions and asks them to spread them among others. However, due to Shammat’s influence over the Natives, the planet further declined. By the 20th century, the planet degenerated into various ways of exploitation, violence war, and self-destruction. To complete his mission, Johor returns through an incarnation as a Shikastan George Sherban. He contacts other Canopeans and resumes his work of salvaging Shikastans. Before World War III, emissaries take a few chosen natives to remote locations to save them from the coming nuclear holocaust, the war reduced the population by 99%.

The novel *The Sirian Experiment* that has been used to analyze for the present paper comes from *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, a sequence of five science fiction novels by Nobel laureate author Doris Lessing, which portray a number of societies at different stages of development, over a great period of time. The focus is on accelerated evolution guided by advanced species for less advanced species and societies.

The third novel of the much-celebrated space fiction series of five novels, the *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, *The Sirian experiment* is set in some distant future. Set in the intergalactic setting, Lessing creates an extraordinary new universe in which the rivalries and interactions of three powerful galactic Colonial empires: Canopus: the extreme form of evolution and benevolence in all dimensions; Puttiora is an inherently evil colonizer that has taken the wrong direction of evolution and it creates chaos in the

universe; Sirius is an empire whose sole objective is to solve problems through technological growth and expansion of their empire. Through the technique of first-person narration with limited perspective, Lessing describes how different colonial empires can have different shades of colonialism.

It retells the same story of the tragedy of planet Shikasta from the point of view of another colonizer. Sirius is another colonizer that has been allowed by Canopus to share half of the planet. Ambien II is a senior administrative authority of the Sirian Empire. She bears the responsibility of exploiting the abundant natural resources of Shikasta. The motives of the Sirian Empire are totally utilitarian. She makes many social experiments with the purpose of developing some animals which can be used for exploiting the resources of Shikasta and other planets near it.

The basic theme of this novel is colonialism and its effects. As Lessing is from a nation and race which colonized most of the world, she knows the ill effects this can have. In this novel, she enables us to see the historical events of our planet through a detached, unbiased alien view. She describes inherent flaws in our society, our cultures, our outlook, and even in our governments.

It may be a coincidence that Lessing's *The Sirian experiment* (1980) was published after two years of publication of *Orientalism* (1978) by Edward Said, a public intellectual, and a founder of the academic field of postcolonial studies. In his critical text Said establishes the term "Orientalism" as a critical concept to describe the West's commonly contemptuous depiction and portrayal of The East, i.e. the Orient. Societies and peoples of the Orient are those who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Educated in the Western canon at British and American schools, Said applied his education and bi-cultural perspective to illuminating the gaps of cultural and political understanding between the Western world and the Eastern world, especially about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the Middle East; his principal influences were

Antonio Gramsci, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Michel Foucault, and Theodor Adorno. Said argues that Orientalism, in the sense of the Western scholarship about the Eastern World, is inextricably tied to the imperialist societies that produced it, which makes much Orientalist work inherently political and servile to power. Like this proximity in times of publication, a close reading of the critical text of *Orientalism* and the novel under study by Lessing reveals similarity in ideas that find illustration in the fictional universe of *The Sirian experiment*.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) brought new dynamics to the study of postcolonial literature. He concisely demonstrates how the colonizers marginalize the culture and people of the colonized nation as "inferior" and the "other". Edward said is most famous for the description and critique of Orientalism as the source of the culturally inaccurate representations that are the foundation of western thoughts towards the Middle East of how the west perceives and represents the East.

As Said says further, "Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine built over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the west which eluded the Orient's difference with its weakness" (*Orientalism*: 204). In other words it is the western misconception of the East that has been portrayed by Said. The west created a false image of the Orient both subconsciously and consciously in order to assert their own power over them. With the help of various notions derived by Edward Said in his critical work *Orientalism*, this paper discusses different ways in which Colonialism has been portrayed in Doris Lessing's *The Sirian Experiment*.

Born in an Arab Christian family in Jerusalem and Educated in the Western canon at British and American schools, Edward Said inherited a perspective of the detached and unbiased critical observer which enabled him to describe the perils of colonialism from an objective perspective and reveal the biased western attitudes of Colonialism and Racism. A similar perspective is shared with Doris Lessing

who has been much criticized for her strong stance against colonialism to such an extent that she was banned from entering her nation of birth by the govt of South Africa. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said mentions the advantages of being away from culture to observe it critically. This imparts an alien disinterested objective perspective to the culture that the observer is analyzing or criticizing. Said finds: “The more one is able to leave one’s cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision. The more easily, too, does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance.”

Lessing born in Southern Rhodesia, was part of colonial civilization by birth yet was raised in a continent where the debilitating economical condition of her family and her father’s she never felt to be part of the colonial world order. This gave her a subjective point of view which is akin to Said. In the *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, she used the first-person narrator. Whose primary role is not to participate in the events but to report them back to her empire for records. The gradual impact of Canopean agents immunizes her from following the rhetoric of popular colonial records and she views her works from an alien point of view:

If there is, if there has been, a minority of individuals who have in fact maintained a view different from the official one, then they will have considered me as a bastion of orthodoxy. This is not an apology I am making. We all see truths when we can see them. When we do, it is always a temptation to consider those who have not yet seen them as quite intrinsically and obdurately stupid.

The long existing traits and techniques of Colonialism were evident to the unbiased scholarly perspective of Edward Said. These techniques start with justification of colonial rule due to moral reasons. Said argues.:

Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission civilizatrice.

The above quote from the preface of *Orientalism* by Said describes the inherent illusory, framework which provides a logical yet self-deceptive direction to the flawed moral compass of Colonizers who consider themselves responsible for the upliftment of Colonized subject races rather than abject unabashed exploiter and demeaning destroyers of civilizations who never sought their aid. This belief is evident by the title of a famous poem by Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden" (1899). The same self-deceptive and selfish mission enveloped as beguiling altruism seems to form the basis of the relationship between different empires in *The Sirian experiment* and other novels of the series. As already mentioned the supremely powerful yet altruistic Canopus empire is always shown to be highly motivated for universal harmony. Though they work on the Sirian Empire on Rohanda, their main concern is to solve various problems such as existential crises, unplanned technological advancements, and the Sirian empires’ attitude towards the subject species. *Ambien II* records the attitude of their colonial empire who colonized many planets for solving their self-made problem of unplanned technological growth which reduced the need for human labor. Due to this, “there was nothing for billions upon billions of individuals to do. They had no purpose but to exist, and then die.”(16). Moreover, after such technical advancement, the population of labors in the Sirian empire considered manual labor “abhorrent or demeaning”. To resolve this they occupied this

surplus population in the Colonisation of different planets. This further caused problems for newly colonized planets whose residents are considered inferior and deliberately belittled in reports of *Ambien II* by calling them “savages” and considering their work of uplifting these unworthy brutes. It is noteworthy that the Colonial mindset denies considering themselves as the cause and blames the colonized species. *Ambien II* records. :

Very soon in our career as the makers of Empire, we knew that if we established ourselves on even the most barbarous of planets with the intention of using its inhabitants in various necessary ways for the good of our Empire as a whole, then it must be expected in short time these savages would demand—at which point they would be freely given—all the advantages at our disposal. Our Empire could be regarded as a mechanism for advancement of an almost unlimited number of planets, in different stages of development, towards a civilised norm.

Said argues that colonial empires see it as their duty to uplift the barbarians and inhuman degraded civilizations of the east and for this purpose. To them anything lying out of their boundary of civilization notions is barbaric. Said traces a typical relationship between knowledge and geography. He uses Levi- Strauss's theory to prove that terming the objects is purely arbitrary. Said finds it true for relatively uncommon things, like foreigners. He terms this arbitrary positioning as “imaginative geography and fictional reality”. He observes:

A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call "the land of the barbarians". In other words, this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" which is "theirs" is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary.

Similar notions of typifying some people as barbaric based on their geographical location are exposed in various places in the narrative of *The Sirian Experiment* as well. This is very well-trenched inside the plot and characterization of the novel. The characterization of the novel is flat and although the protagonist changes with exterior influence, the difference between good and evil has been maintained throughout the plot and made evident quite often. For instance, without proper analysis of the historical background, the narrator *Ambien II* describes the Shammatt Empire as barbarians. Such natural hatred can confluence and justify any kind of torture on subject civilizations. In *The Sirian Experiment*, Lessing connects such oppression with illogical racism. Present throughout the text is the idea of the subordinate nature of the natives who are by nature considered to be endowed with all that is undesirable in a human being. “The white race” uses this to make their dominance appear logical to the other native races. *Ambien II* describes this nature of alienating and dehumanizing others to be the guiding principle behind colonization by the west, “If what I see is different from myself then it must be punished or wiped out. Anything that is not me is primitive and bad...”

Although Said ignores to include the Science of Anthropology, He gives examples of scientific and secular rationalization of Orientalism in the works of the two main figures of the 18th century who transformed Orientalism into a secular field: Silvestre de Sacy and Ernest Renan. Said first discusses Sacy as the individual who created the first "systematic body of texts" on Orientalism and confirmed the position of the Orient not as an unknowable divine, but rather as another object of "European scholarship." Apart from the moral responsibility to uplift the Oriental subject race as evident from the above discussion, such scientific experiments justified colonialism by proving the inferiority of the subject race. In the fictional universe of *The Sirian Experiment*, *Ambien II* reports about the inhumane scientific experiments done by the ruling colonial power of “Lelanian” on the subject of native species. “They did not enjoy causing pain, they insisted. But they

believed that the experimenters, being of an inferior kind, did not feel physical or psychological pain as they themselves did.” Ambien II is so shocked by the vile nature of these experiments that she recommends complete genocide of the Lelanians. Ironically, such experiments are part of the colonial doctrines of the Sirian Empire. The Canopean emissary successfully exposes the unsympathetic colonial attitude of the Sirian Empire to Ambien II and thereby inspires her to alter its objective from exploitation to necessity.

The title of the novel *The Sirian Experiments* is suggestive of the results of the experiment which have been shown by Lessing to vary according to the purpose of the experiment. As Said finds, “There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external enlargement of horizons .” The novel concludes with Ambien II in exile while her reports on experiments change the objectives and ideologies of the Sirian Empire and make them ask, “What foundations? What uses, what purposes? What service? What function?”

Conclusion :

From the above discussion it can be concluded there are evidenced reflection of theoretical framework of ground breaking work in the field of colonialism : Orientalism , in the fictional universe of Doris Lessing. The novels analysed in this paper can be seen as Lessing's attempt to understand the colonial mindset in order to transform it and from the above discussion it is evident that various ideas presented by Lessing in this novel have also been articulated by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. As discussed the proximity of publication of these texts suggests inductive influence of one on another. Though one can not deny the functions of novelistic vision of Doris Lessing as the fictional exemplification of critical

notions of Said, thereby furthering their comprehension.

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