

THE CONCEPT OF UNITY OF BEING IN DORIS LESSING'S CANOPUS IN ARGOS: ARCHIVES SERIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an exhaustive examination of the metaphysical and cosmological framework of Doris Lessing's five-novel sequence, *Canopus in Argos: Archives*. Departing from her earlier realist works, such as *The Children of Violence*, Lessing utilizes the "space fiction" genre to explore the soul's evolution toward a holistic integration of consciousness, termed the "unity of being." Drawing heavily on Sufi mysticism—specifically the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd* as interpreted by Idries Shah—this study argues that Lessing presents spiritual maturity as a process of overcoming the "disease of fragmentation." Through a close reading of *Shikasta*, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, and subsequent volumes, the paper demonstrates how Lessing dramatizes the struggle for cosmic alignment as both a spiritual imperative and a sociopolitical necessity for humanity's survival in an entropic universe.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, *Canopus in Argos*, Unity of Being, Sufism, *Wahdat al-Wujūd*, Speculative Fiction, Idries Shah, Evolutionary Myth, Interconnectedness.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE META-FICTION OF DORIS LESSING

Doris Lessing's transition from the "small personal voice" of social realism to the "cosmic perspective" of the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series (1979–1983) remains one of the most significant pivots in 20th-century literature. Critics initially met the series with confusion, yet it represents the culmination of Lessing's lifelong obsession with the intersection of the individual and the collective.

The series—comprised of *Shikasta*, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, *The Sirian Experiments*, *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, and *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire*—functions as a "mythopoeic" history of the universe. At its heart lies the Unity of Being. This is not a static state of peace, but a dynamic, evolutionary alignment with the "Substance-of-We-Feeling" (SOWF), a Canopean term for the spiritual energy that binds the cosmos. This paper explores how Lessing uses the vast scale of interstellar conflict to mirror the internal psychological struggle for wholeness.

2. PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS: SUFISM AND WAHDAT AL-WUJŪD

To understand Lessing's "Unity of Being," one must look to her immersion in Sufi philosophy, particularly the teachings of Idries Shah.

2.1. The Sufi Influence

The concept of *wahdat al-wujūd* (Unity of Existence), often attributed to the 13th-century philosopher Ibn Arabi, posits that there is only one ultimate reality, and all created things are reflections or "mirrors" of that divine essence. In Lessing's cosmology, the empire of Canopus acts as the steward of this unity, while their rivals, Sirius and Puttiora, represent varying degrees of deviation—from cold empiricism to active evil (*Shammat*).

2.2. Beyond the Ego

Unity of Being requires the "annihilation of the self" (fana). Lessing portrays the human ego as a barrier to evolution. On the planet Shikasta (Earth), the inhabitants are "broken" because they believe in their own discrete, isolated importance. Lessing's work suggests that true maturity is the recognition that the "self" is a temporary vehicle for a larger, cosmic purpose.

1. SHIKASTA: THE ANATOMY OF DISCONNECTION

In the first volume, *Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta*, Lessing establishes the "Fall" of humanity not as a moral sin, but as a technical and spiritual "disconnection."

3.1. The SOWF and the Lock

The planet Shikasta was once in a state of grace through its alignment with Canopus via a metaphysical "Lock." This alignment provided the Substance-of-We-Feeling (SOWF). When the alignment shifted due to cosmic accidents, the SOWF could no longer reach the planet, leading to the "Degenerative Disease"—the loss of the sense of unity.

3.2. Fragmentation as Pathology

Lessing describes modern human history (the "Century of Destruction") as the inevitable result of this disconnection. Without the SOWF, humans view themselves as separate from nature and each other, leading to:

War and Greed: The logical conclusion of "I" vs. "Thou."

Ideological Blindness: The belief that a single political system can "save" a fragmented species.

Johor's Mission: The emissary Johor does not come to "save" Shikasta through miracles, but through the slow, arduous work of reminding individuals of their lost heritage of wholeness.

4. THE MARRIAGES: DIALECTICAL WHOLENESS

If *Shikasta* is about the loss of unity, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* is about the synthesis required to regain it.

4.1. The Masculine and Feminine Principle

The novel presents a symbolic landscape of "Zones" that represent different levels of consciousness.

Zone Three: High-vibrational, intuitive, and egalitarian (The Feminine).

Zone Four: Low-vibrational, rigid, and militaristic (The Masculine).

The "Providers" (the unseen Canopean authorities) order a marriage between Al-Ith and Ben Ata. This is not a romantic union, but a metaphysical necessity. Unity of Being cannot exist in Zone Three if it ignores the strength and order of Zone Four; likewise, Zone Four is stagnant without the empathy of Zone Three.

4.2. The Pain of Evolution

Lessing emphasizes that unity is painful. Al-Ith must descend into the "heaviness" of Zone Four, losing her grace, while Ben Ata must suffer the vulnerability of emotion. This reflects the Jungian process of individuation—the integration of the "shadow" to reach a complete state of being.

5. THE SIRIAN EXPERIMENTS: THE LIMITS OF INTELLECT

The third novel focuses on Ambien II, a high-ranking official of the Sirian Empire. Sirius represents the peak of technological and administrative achievement, yet they lack the "Unity of Being" that Canopus possesses.

5.1. Technocracy vs. Spirit

The Sirian Experiments are cold and empirical. They treat living beings as data points. Ambien II's transformation occurs as she observes Canopus. She begins to realize that the Sirian obsession with "objective" science is actually a form of fragmentation because it separates the observer from the observed.

5.2. The Recognition of Pattern

Ambien eventually perceives the "Canopean Way"—a recognition that all events, however tragic, are part of a vast, purposeful pattern. Her journey is the transition from Information (Sirius) to Wisdom (Canopus).

6. PLANET 8: THE SUBSUMPTION OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 is the most abstract and arguably the most profound exploration of unity in the series.

6.1. The Physical End and the Spiritual Beginning

As Planet 8 faces a literal ice age that will wipe out all life, the inhabitants are forced to confront the futility of physical survival. The Canopean Representative, Doeg, learns that the "Representative" is not a person, but a collective soul—a distillation of the memories, feelings, and essences of the entire population.

6.2. The Transmutation of Matter

As their bodies freeze, the people of Planet 8 are "harvested" into a single entity. This is the ultimate "Unity of Being": the transition from biological multiplicity to a singular, non-corporeal state of consciousness. Lessing uses this to suggest that the "unity" we seek on Earth is merely a shadow of the total unity that exists beyond the material plane.

7. THE SENTIMENTAL AGENTS: THE CORRUPTION OF UNITY

The final book addresses the greatest enemy of unity: Language.

7.1. Rhetorical Disease

In the Volyen Empire, words like "democracy," "freedom," and "justice" are used to manipulate and divide. Lessing argues that when language is divorced from the "Substance-of-We-Feeling," it becomes a tool for fragmentation.

7.2. The Discipline of Silence

The Canopean agents in this novel must practice "mental hygiene" to avoid being infected by the emotionalism (sentimentality) of the Volyen people. Unity of Being requires a clarity of thought that transcends the "white noise" of political rhetoric.

8. CONCLUSION: THE EVOLUTIONARY NECESSITY OF WHOLENESS

Across the Canopus in Argos series, Doris Lessing reconstructs the human story. She moves the focus away from the "individual hero" of Western literature and toward the "collective evolution" of the soul.

The Unity of Being is presented as:

Ecological: The realization that the planet is a single organism.

Psychological: The integration of the anima, animus, and shadow.

Cosmic: The alignment of human will with the "Canopean" (divine) purpose.

Lessing's final message is one of cautious hope. Though Shikasta is "broken," the potential for reconnection remains. In a century defined by fragmentation—social, political, and ecological—Lessing's vision of a unified cosmic order serves as both a warning and a guide. She reminds us that we are not "accidents" of history, but participants in a grand, albeit difficult, process of becoming.

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