After the publication of *The Memoirs of a Survivor* one critic wrote: ‘One wonders where Lessing can go from here.’ And indeed, the tone of transcendence at the end of that novel is such that it is not surprising that Mrs Lessing moves out of this world altogether for her next five novels – a series which takes a cosmic viewpoint and which has the overall title *Canopus in Argus: Archives*. In her preface to *Shikasta*, the first in the series, she defends science fiction and science fiction writers:

> These dazzlers have mapped our world, or worlds, for us, have told us what is going on and in ways no one else has done, have described our nasty present long ago, when it was still the future and the official scientific spokesmen were saying that all manner of things now happening were impossible – who have played the indispensable and (at least at the start) thankless role of the despised illegitimate son who can afford to tell truths the respectable siblings either do not dare, or, more likely, do not notice because of their respectability.

It is a new phenomenon for a ‘respectable’ novelist to turn to space fiction, and some Lessing critics have experienced difficulty with this change of direction in her work. It demands a fresh perspective, a long view. Instead of focusing on one person in a small town, or on several people in one country, Mrs Lessing’s imagination takes off into space and she is exhilarated by the freedom. ‘It was clear I had made – or found – a new world for myself, a realm where the petty fates of planets, let alone individuals, are only aspects of cosmic evolution expressed in the rivalries and interactions of great galactic Empires’ (preface to *Shikasta*). And the cool, detached
tone of the archivist suits the perspective. In *Shikasta* the narrator is appropriately distanced from his material in a way unprecedented in Mrs Lessing’s work. Her previous narrators’ involvement in her plots has entailed emotional and psychological involvement also. In *Shikasta* there is pain and difficulty for the narrator, but it is understood in the context of a cosmic scheme, and therefore the personal signifies little.

*Shikasta* chronicles the decline of the planet earth, which is part of a galaxy influenced by a benign planet, Canopus; a technological planet, Sirius, and an evil planet, Shammat. Canopus has colonised Shikasta (which means ‘broken’ in Persian) and in this account we are shown the pathology of its disintegration. Shikasta was formerly peopled with superior beings who lived to a great age in harmony with each other, and who had telepathic powers. As the benevolent link between Shikasta and Canopus weakens, Shikasta suffers from increasing individualism, leading to wars and destruction. Agents from Canopus attempt to remind the degenerate population of their past, and of their latent potential. Like Charles Watkins in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, certain people are reincarnated for this purpose, and, like Sufi mystics, they take on the protective guise of the culture they are placed in. In addition, a character from *The Four-Gated City*, Lynda Coldridge, re-emerges in this novel as a woman with extra-sensory perception, a faculty necessary for humanity’s survival. Finally, *Shikasta* covers the same ground as *The Four-Gated City*: destruction of much of the planet, and the gradual, tentative beginning again.

The form of this novel is appropriate to Mrs Lessing’s rejection of the personal (and to her eyes, limited) point of view. The narration is partly in the first person, but the narrator varies. Sometimes it is the Canopean agent, Johor, at other times other agents and envoys. Sometimes it is Lynda Coldridge, or a girl called Rachel Sherban. The tone of the narration is also varied. Official reports in bureaucratic language, or formal extracts from the History of Shikasta contrast with informal letters and with the intimacy of Rachel Sherban’s journal. The characterisation is fleeting. The closest the novel comes to a realist delineation of character is in the attention given to the reincarnation of Johor, George Sherban. The settings change frequently: galaxies, planets, hemispheres, countries, cities. There is no loving construction of one particular