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 Argos: 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)\(^{36}\) 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