

**Interrogating Inner Psychological Space through the Study of Virtual Memory Concept
in Lessing's SF Shikasta**

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Abstract

Doris Lessing is a British author, and has won almost all the awards in Europe, including the Noble Prize in 1997. Her science fiction series Canopus in Argos: Archives comprises of five novels, the first being Shikasta. Lessing's science fiction is a space fiction too, as it employs "space" as metaphor to derive multiple connotations of the word. The paper foregrounds her use of space as metaphor for "psychological" space in the opening novel of Canopus series. The research interrogates the use of psyche space through the virtual memory of the narrator, Johor. During the study, Deleuze's concept of memory aids in decoding the dual vision of memory: the empirical, personal memory and the ontological memory that preserves itself elsewhere than the brain. The "virtual" Johor provisionally subverts temporal limitations so as to facilitate intervention into the Archival cosmic memory matrix, where the virtual co-existence of the cosmos' past allows him to interact with the cosmic memory. His intervention in the cosmic memory through his multiple reincarnations and long virtual life helps generate the virtual chaosmos of multiplicity.

Keywords – Virtual memory, Personal & Macroscopic memory, impersonal cosmic memory matrix

Doris Lessing is a British author and a Nobel Laureate, who has attempted every genre through her writings, most critically debated being her science fiction series Canopus in Argos: Archives. The first novel of the Canopus Series, Shikasta (1979) had put her in trouble, when from a "realist" she turned into a "Visionary" and a science fiction writer. She although not much affected by the criticism continued to write in this genre, and extrapolated the first novel to the full five-novel Canopus in Argos Series. She is a self proclaimed "space" science fiction author, and thus "space" is dealt as metaphor for 'outer' and 'inner,' spaces, the latter term fathoming the metaphor of 'psychological' space too. This paper also attempts at foregrounding Lessing's "psyche" space through the study of "inner virtual

memory” concept in the cosmic evolution process in the opening novel *Shikasta* of the author’s first science fiction series *Canopus in Argos: Archives*.

Shikasta is composed of multiple archival records from various messengers, volunteers, eugenists, common *Shikastans*, and many others. *Shikasta* is metaphor that the author uses for the planet Earth, and takes the reader from its coming into existence to fall, and resurrection too. *Canopus* is the mother planet, addressed as “Providers,” that sends “prophetic messengers” variously termed as emissaries, envoys, and galactic or *Canopean* agents. The first novel’s narrator, *Johor* is one such *Canopean* emissary, reincarnating time and again on the planet *Shikasta* in the “Time of Need” or “Time of Catastrophe” to aid people from disaster. A major characteristic of *Johor*’s multiple identity is that he is androgynous. In one of the reports, *A Note on Sexual Choice*, *Johor* records, “Of course developed individuals with us are androgynous, to put it into the nearest *Shikastan* terminology possible: we do not have emotional or physical or psychological characteristics that are considered as appertaining to one sex rather than another, as is normal on the more backward planets” (*Shikasta* 74). Because *Canopeans* are depicted as naturally androgynous, their social, political, and mental structures are not conditioned by gender. In *Identity* in Doris Lessing’s space fiction, David Waterman explains: “Androgyny is the model on *Canopus*.... (the concept of androgyny, as we have seen in *Briefing*, goes beyond its everyday sense of gendered traits, to mean equilibrium on a much larger scale)” (40). Hence, the emissary *Johor* and others from *Canopus* are naturally kept androgynous by the author with the purpose. The purpose is clearly the unbiased recording of events as part of “virtual memory,” and their recalling in the future from the cosmic memory matrix thus formed.

The author makes use of virtual memory of *Johor* to account for his accumulated experiences revised, and recalled from the virtual cosmic memory matrix for immediate action time and again in future. The paper examines Lessing’s creation and conjoining of two contradictory narratives regarding memory in her *Canopus* series. One involves detailed, psychological memory, and the other, impersonal, macroscopic memory. After the narrator, *Johor* is sceptical of the legitimacy of his personal records of *Shikasta*. He aided by the ape, the Giants, and the cosmic force *Lock*, is able to explore and even transform impersonal memory, thus symbiotically revising cosmic evolution. Deleuze’s concept of memory aids in decoding the dual vision of memory: the empirical, personal memory and the ontological memory that preserves itself elsewhere than the brain. The “virtual” *Johor* provisionally subverts temporal limitations so as to facilitate intervention into the Archival cosmic memory matrix, where the virtual co-existence of the cosmos’ past allows him to interact with the cosmic memory. His intervention in the cosmic memory through his multiple reincarnations and long virtual life helps generate the virtual chaosmos of multiplicity.

Early in *Shikasta*, to provide the reader with an “outer-space view,” a “long view,” Doris Lessing reveals that the *Canopean* galactic messenger (*Johor*) can oscillate forward and

backward in time and access the archived history of the colonized planet Shikasta for millions of years, including its relation to its colonizing planet Canopus. At heart, Shikasta delineates how a God-like, “benevolent” galactic empire Canopus oversees the fate of Shikasta. The virtually immortal Canopeans supervise and record the history of Shikasta from its Golden Age (Shikasta’s prehistory), through its fall in the “Century of Destruction” (Earth’s 20th century, when World War III breaks out), and on to its visionary, post-catastrophic future. It is the story of a paradise lost and, not regained per se, but organically reconceived and reconstructed, not rationally, but intuitively, in the complex flow of cosmic symbiosis, imperceptibility, and evolution.

The narrator and Canopean Emissary, Johor can be considered to have five identities in both the actual and the virtual fields: (1) the galactic messenger who is subject to the cosmic plan, (2) the immaterial galactic messenger who is androgynous, has a long lifespan, and can transcend the spatio-temporal coordinates, (3) the incarnated George (Johor’s incarnated form on Shikasta), who is conditioned by the rules of the species in gender and physicality, (4) the same George who is able to problematize the marital relationship by recalling the ancient concept of high marriage, which echoes Canopeans’ androgynous, harmonious relationship, and (5) Johor’s soul in Zone Six. Although Johor is conditioned by the cosmic plan because he is a messenger sent by Canopus to warn and rescue the Shikastans, Johor’s unique multiple identities in the actual and virtual fields make his relationship with Canopus paradoxical. He can transcend the spatio-temporal coordinates because he is immaterial and has a long lifespan. In his report, he talks about his lifespan indirectly: “It is thirty thousand years since I was in Shikasta; 31,505, to be exact” (Shikasta 69). His life on Shikasta is only a tiny part of his life so that his lifespan is nearly immortal.

In Shikasta, Lessing creates a virtual, immaterial galactic messenger with multiple incarnations so as to highlight the interconnectedness of the individual and other beings, indicating that the individual is not merely a fixed subject but, rather, a fluid and contingent being who precedes the species. Johor’s material embodiment as a Shikastan, George Sherban, and his immaterial, androgynous identity as a galactic messenger comprise a complex, controversial relationship. What enables Johor to shuttle among five identities is a question that could be answered by the examination of it in light of Deleuze’s theory of individuation. In *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze*, Keith Ansell Pearson argues that the species “is a transcendental illusion in relation to the virtual-actual movement of life, which is always evolving in the direction of the production of individuation” (62). Deleuze’s theory of individuation sheds new light on Lessing’s portrayal of the paradoxical relationship between the individual and the species. For Deleuze, individuation is the double movement of differentiation/differenciation: differentiation refers to the process of becoming virtual while differenciation that of becoming actual. The movement allows the individual to break from the control of the species under certain

conditions since the individual signifies two entities at the same time: the virtual individual and the actual individual. Thus, for Deleuze, the individual not only follows the evolution of the species but also precedes the species. Here, the individual is not born just to enhance the survival of the species but to enable the multiplicity of life as well as cosmic evolution, which enables communication among disparate individuals/elements.

Deleuze holds that evolution develops, not according to a pre-established blueprint of the species, but aims at the changeability and potentiality of evolution itself. Survival of the species for Deleuze is not the aim of evolution; instead, evolution traverses species and organisms in order to enact its multiplicity. In *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition* of Deleuze, Ansell-Pearson claims, "If Darwin's theory of 'descent with modification' put an end once and for all to the theological doctrine on the fixity of species, then Deleuze's thinking of radical difference also aims to expose the impossibility of the fixity of fields of individuation" (95). Deleuze overthrows the priority of species in proposing that the movement of evolution is not for "the sake of species and organisms," but for creativity and difference. According to Deleuze, "[S]pecies and parts are not primary; they are imprisoned in individuals as though in a crystal. Moreover, the entire world may be read, as though in a crystal ball, in the moving depth of individuating differences or differences in intensity" (*Difference and Repetition* 247). The image of a crystal is employed to emphasize the generating characteristics of the individual since the surface of the crystal is not where its limitation is but indicates where it starts to proliferate in response to the milieu. The virtual individual serves as the reservoir of infinite assemblages, which trigger the (trans)formations of the species and parts on the way to individuation or evolution. Most importantly, the crystal individual expresses the world through unfolding and actualizing differences. The individual here refers to the embryonic state of life, which is not a limited subject but rather a larval life form.

Deleuze further extrapolates from Von Baer's embryology and employs the image of an embryo to signify how the embryo manifests movements that transcend the limitation of the species. Deleuze argues that an embryo does not reproduce ancestral adult forms belonging to other species, but rather experiences or undergoes states and undertakes movements which are not viable for the species but go beyond the limits of the species, genus, order or class, and can be sustained only by the embryo itself, under the condition of embryonic life (*Difference and Repetition* 249). Deleuze proposes that "the embryo is the individual as such directly caught up in the field of its individuation" and that "it is the individual which is above the species and precedes the species in principle" (*Difference and Repetition* 250). Based on the above arguments, individuals shall never be considered as members of a species; instead, according to James Williams, "they cross species and are a condition for the emergence of species through a process that Deleuze calls indi-drama-different/citation" (*Difference and Repetition* 189).

Extrapolating the concept of individuation from Gilbert Simondon, Deleuze places emphasis on the process and claims that the process of individuation or indi-drama-different/citation is similar to that of an egg's development: The world is an egg. Moreover, the egg, in effect, provides us with a model for the order of reasons (organic and species related) differentiation-individuation-dramatization-differenci-ation. We think that difference of intensity, as this is implicated in the egg, expresses first the differential relations or virtual matter to be organized. This intensive field of individuation determines the relations that it expresses to be incarnated in spatio-temporal dynamisms (dramatisation), in species which correspond to these relations (specific differenci-ation), and in organic parts which correspond to the distinctive points in these relations (organic differenci-ation). Individuation always governs actualisation: the organic parts are induced only on the basis of the gradients of their intensive environment; the types determined in their species only by virtue of the individuating intensity. Throughout, intensity is primary in relation to organic extensions and to species qualities. (Difference and Repetition 251)

There are three stages of individuation in which the intensity "actualizes" difference in multiple ways. The first stage, "differentiation," signifies virtual multiplicities that distribute differential relations along with their singularities. The second stage is dramatization or intensities, in which difference of intensity expresses differential relations or virtual matter and incarnates the virtual multiplicities into spatio-temporal dynamisms. The third stage is differenci-ation: if the dynamism is revealed in species, it is specific differenci-ation, and if revealed in organs, it is organic differenci-ation. Therefore, differenci-ation includes actualized individuals, or species and parts. Individuation possesses both sides of virtual and actual or intensity and extensity. The "virtual" aspect of difference in the first stage is dramatized in the second stage, the "spatio-temporal" aspect of difference; in the third stage, the "specific" aspect of difference is actualized.

Though Johor appears governed by the rules of the species, in Deleuzian terms, he actualizes the virtual power of intensities of the species. The two levels of individuation, the double movement of differentiation and differenci-ation, in Deleuze's theory, help explain the relationship between Johor and "his" mother planet, Canopus. On the one hand, when Johor is manifested as a virtual, larval state of life, which connects with the cosmic forces SOWF and Lock, he is moving towards differentiation. Johor describes the interacting currents, manifested on Shikasta as SOWF and Lock, which connects Canopus and Shikasta with other planets. "Now we had to look outwards, away from Rohanda--in the balances of powers elsewhere, among the stars who were holding us, Canopus, in a web of interacting currents" (Shikasta 17). The interacting currents virtualize Johor and enable him to connect with other beings. On the other hand, the virtual individual Johor is turned into the actual galactic messenger, Johor, and the Shikasta, George Sherban. What is more, George is virtualizing himself through "high marriage" that exemplifies the disappearance of the boundary between

the individual, earth, and heaven. Between the virtual and the actual is Johor's soul. In Deleuzian terms, it can be said that Johor's intensity is fixed as extensity or the virtual differential relation is incarnated (dramatized) into actualized individuals by the process of "differentiation." In the process of individuation or indi-drama-different/citation, both actualized individuals and the species are crystallized. In this way, the species evolves with the transformation of "virtual" individuals while "actual" individuals abide by the rules of the species/the cosmic plan. Evolution of the individual incubates the species, and the individual, undergoing creation, follows the rules of the species/the cosmic plan.

The virtual individual precedes the actual species (Canopeans) in Johor's role as the galactic messenger. His encounters in various milieux result in doubts and divergences, which indicate to him the infeasibility of underplaying differences and inequalities by following the fixed rules of the species/the cosmic plan. Deleuze's theory of individuation or indi-drama-different/citation involving the oscillation between the actual and the virtual helps us understand implicit mutuality in the relationship of the individual and the species. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze proposes that the difference or inequality between the virtual and the actual will be cancelled when virtual intensity is turned into actual extensity; nevertheless, the transformation is never complete because there are always remainders, which trigger transformation of the virtual and thus the actual. In *Shikasta*, the remaining differences and divergences between the virtual and the actual enable Johor to move between the virtual (SOWF and Lock) and the actual (the role of messenger) and transcend them at the same time. On one hand, Johor as the virtual individual enacts the virtual intensities that trigger the differential relations within virtual matter. On the other hand, Johor's virtual intensities have to be incarnated in qualities and extensities, such as the actualized individual, George, who follows the rules of the species. The virtual individual, Johor, determines the trajectory of the species while his actualized individual follows the rules of the species set by Canopus. Johor as a virtual individual is a crystal or embryo—in a larval state of life. Johor as an actualized individual is attached to the cosmic plan and to extensities such as stellar alignments, architectural structures, and individual temperaments. Johor's incorporeal characteristics and undetermined sex challenge the idea of a fixed subject, and his ability to transgress the boundary of time and space emancipates him from pre-established spatio-temporal confinement. Embedded within Johor is the virtual potential of the whole cosmos. He serves as the reservoir of infinite genetic possibilities. Through him is witnessed the whole dramatic cosmic dance.

The Deleuzian perspective helps in the understanding of *Shikasta*'s complicated structure of narrative, time, and memory, which is way beyond the relatively static depiction of individuality and memory in Lessing's earlier novels. It also reveals the revolutionary force of the dual vision and foregrounds Johor's oscillation between the virtual past and the actual present to trigger cosmic evolution. The fact that this novel, according to Gayle Greene,

confronts us with a “disconcertingly remote narrator” (Johor) and a “chronology that defies human comprehension” (163) confirms the counter-productivity of approaching the novel via chronological, psychological memory. In Deleuze’s view, memory is trans-individual and is stored, not in the brain, but in the virtual past. The question of where recollections are preserved is the initial point of their exploration. For him, memory is not triggered by the motor system of the brain, but by the power of the trans-individual memory to preserve itself. Memory refers not only to empirical, personal memory but also to ontological memory that preserves itself and is not stored in the brain. As Johor delves into trans-individual, impersonal Cosmic Memory, he enters a state where coexistence of different levels and beings subvert the boundaries between them, between human and inhuman, between subject and object. The “virtual” Johor temporarily subverts temporal limitations so as to facilitate intervention into the Archival cosmic memory matrix, where the virtual co-existence of the cosmos’ past allows him to interact with the cosmic memory. His intervention in the cosmic memory through his multiple reincarnations and long virtual life helps generate the virtual whole of cosmic evolution.

Lessing’s dual vision in *Shikasta* paradoxically incorporates both the close, partial view of Earth, embedded in the contemporary socio-political milieu of individualism, and the long view of Earth, producing a reconceived cosmos “where the petty fates of planets, let alone individuals, are only aspects of cosmic evolution” (*Shikasta* 2). Like the paradoxical rebirth of the Phoenix in the ashes of its own death by fire, Lessing’s utopian chaosmic process, in defiance of conventional time and space, surpasses discrete identities, boundaries, and dichotomies by depicting the organic interplay of dichotomous elements and forces such as the individual and his and her society or the colonized and the colonizer. Ironically and profoundly, in *Shikasta* the colonizing planet Canopus, working mainly through its galactic messenger Johor, enforces its cosmic Master Plan on its colonized planet and, as well, does not prevent Johor from empathizing with Shikastans and diverging from his intended role. He strays further than merely retrieving Shikastans’ personal memories of catastrophe.

Johor’s multiple identities complicate the entwined colonial relationship between Canopus and *Shikasta* by enabling him to intervene into the cosmic memory, revise it, and revise the cosmic Master Plan. He further revises the pre-established plan by guiding the Survivors in reconceiving and rebuilding the cities intuitively, achieving connectedness of all beings and forces with the cosmic forces Substance-of We-Feeling (SOWF) and Lock, so that all become “We” as mutual participants in the symbiotic chaosmos of cosmic evolution. Indeed, Lessing’s vision embraces dichotomous roadblocks by conjoining both outdated transcendental, ideal, utopian cosmology and the more immanent, dynamic, symbiotic, cosmic evolution, in which the cosmos is “subject to sudden reversals, upheavals, changes, cataclysms, with joy never anything but the song of substance under pressure forced into new forms and shapes” (*Shikasta* 4).

Lessing's allegory of Earth is an ugly, hopeful, beautiful, fragmented tapestry of oxymoronic imperceptibility and complexity. Dichotomous beings and forces pass into each other in an unceasing process of becoming. The symbiotic whole is never complete, for completeness would indicate assumption of a discrete identity, a Deleuzian impossibility. Deleuze's theory of the virtual, including his concepts of individuation, becoming, percept, affect, chaosmos, and impersonal memory, is essential in decoding Shikasta. An example is Johor's multi-oscillations: between his actualization, his incarnation, on Shikasta as George Sherban and his virtualization as Johor the Canopean galactic messenger; between the ancient, geometric cities, which follow the pre-established colonial cosmic Master Plan, and the post-catastrophic expanding cities, which co-evolve with the mutating, divergent Survivors; and between Johor's actual present memory and the virtual cosmic memory. In this Deleuzian cosmos of multiplicity and imperceptibility, nothing remains separate or static. Everything becomes connected and dynamic. Canopus' galactic messengers, archival cosmic memory, and access to the cosmic force, plus Shikasta's Survivors and cities in need of rebuilding—they pass into one another in a virtual cosmic dance, and their virtual symbiosis, each becoming the other, all together becoming-evolution, generates the virtual chaosmos of cosmic evolution.

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