Tradition and Transformation
—On Gothic Elements in Doris Lessing’s Science Fiction

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Introduction

Doris Lessing has already been recognized as one of the greatest writers in this age, and she won Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007. She is regarded as “the grandmother of the literary circles” and “the ivy tree of the literary circles”. As a prolific and classic writer in the 20th century, she has published twenty-five novels, fifteen volumes of short story, seven works of nonfiction, five plays, a volume of poetry and her two autobiographies. Some important political movements and academic thoughts in the 20th century more or less can be found in her works.

In her life Lessing insists that the artist has a social responsibility. She believes in the “responsibility” of the artist “as a human being, for the other human beings he influences”, describing “him” as “an instrument of change for good or for bad” —
as “an architect of the soul”.[2] She not only embodied her idea in her earlier writings but also in her science fiction, which she began to write since the 1970s.

As far back as the fifties of the 20th century, Doris Lessing had begun to receive the critical attention. Especially after the sixties of the 20th century, her books received continued recognition. There are an ever-increasing number of articles and books on her works by applying different literary criticism and research. All shows a preference for her works in the world. But the research on Doris Lessing’s science fiction in China is not enough in comparison with the Western countries. Especially the scholars ignore the significance of her science fiction writing, and there is almost no profound research in this field.

Actually there is a close relationship between gothic tradition and science fiction. Some critics thought modern science fiction was born out of the sub-genre of gothic fiction. Brian Aldiss mentioned: “Science fiction was born from the Gothic mode, is hardly free of it now. Nor is the distance and unearthly.”[3] But the Gothic was only a symptom of the larger literary and cultural influence known as Romanticism. From Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the first science fiction, to Jules Verne’s and H. G. Wells’ writing, gothic elements became an important background, which established their artistic framework within their writings. Especially for two latter writers, Gothic tropes and a Gothic mood often define their manner of science fiction.[4] All of their efforts came into being a gothic history of science fiction.

Lessing can not escape this tradition and its influence in her science fiction. She has found a new vehicle to transmit the same philosophical principles she described in her earlier writing by Gothic tropes and a Gothic mood. She absorbed it and she transformed it. Although *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) has drawn little critical attention since its publication, it does appear to have played an important role in the development of Lessing’s later writing. It is a kind of bridge between the more conventional fiction she wrote at the beginning of her career and the science fiction she wrote later.

After Lessing established her new world in her space novels, she became an important figure in the evolution of scientific romance into contemporary science fiction. The publication of *Shikasta* in 1979 was a new beginning and it startled readers. By challenging her readers with unknown worlds and alternate realities, Lessing began to write science fiction of global and even galactic scope. She mastered a range of representative themes, such as odyssey in the unconscious, the alien invasion, the future-city, the anti-utopia and so on. *Briefing for Descent into*
Hell suffers from the difficulty of making the old mythic and metaphysical landmarks new. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* begins with the death of a city, in which readers try to come to terms with the two worlds of the future it describes.

Later she began to step out of the mirror world of meta-fiction with her epic ambitions, and into the outer space of new series, *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, which consists of five novels—*Shikasta* (1979), *The marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* (1980), *The Sirian Experiments* (1981), *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (1982), and *The Sentimental Agents* (1983), are all told from the perspective of aliens.

This research will explore Lessing’s literary achievements in her science fiction writing. Especially Lessing follows and transforms traditional gothic ways in her science fiction to change the perception of reality by describing worlds that are simultaneously similar to and different from our reality.

I. Transforming the Out Space

The critic M. H. Abrams lists the conventions frequently found in the Gothic, a mode frequently set “in a gloomy castle replete with dungeons, subterranean passages, and sliding panels” which made bountiful use of ghosts, mysterious disappearances and other sensational and supernatural occurrences...their principal aim was to evoke chilling terror.[5] But the Gothic in Lessing’s science fiction is only a literary tool that can help her to realize her new and utopian worlds.

In Lessing’s science fiction, the readers have to confront an alien reality and an unknown world which people try to understand on the basis of what people already know about the universe. It is Lessing’s dialectical sense of the interrelationship between sameness and otherness that gives her work much of its potency.

Africa plays a crucial role in Lessing’s science fiction. Lessing will spend the rest of her life writing them through in her fictional characters and situations. Lessing recalled her father how at night he would take his chair outside to watch the sky and mountains, smoking, silent, “[...] make you think [...] there are so many worlds up there, wouldn’t really matter if we did blow ourselves up [...] plenty more where we came from”. “Is it any wonder I turned to space fiction?”[6]

She was particularly adept at stories of fantastic events. She combined gothic tropes and African elements to explore a deeper set of concerns, which are about the British, rather than the Marxism and Empire, about the violence of empire-building and about the anxieties of otherness and encounter with otherness that empire
imposes on the imperial people. This gothic difference produces some of the novel’s most overwrought passages.

*Shikasta* is colonized in its infancy by three galactic empires. It also is Lessing’s most famous novel of the encounter with difference. This novel had had such a lasting impact on the traditions of science fiction. The environment in novel as far removed from the sort of environment readers are used to as it is possible to find on the surface of our planet. In the novel, history of human being becomes a by-product of cosmography. It mentions something happened in Africa, especially British governments’ events in Africa.

In fact, *Shikasta* is also dedicated to her father. She once wrote: “who used to sit outside our house in Africa, watching the stars. ‘Well,’ he would say, ‘if we blow ourselves up, there’s plenty more where we came from!’” Time is our disease, space our cure: *Shikasta* ends as it begins with a vision of a world that lives in this awareness, with men breeding and dying as the slow stars dictate, in stone circle, triangles, crescents, listening to the clear, minimal signals from across the light years.[7]

That is a perfect combination between Gothic tropes and African elements, which leads Lessing to transform the out space. It is clear that *The Sirian Experiments* and *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* repeat the central theme of *Canopus in Argos*, which is species-consciousness. This is a kind of dialectic of sameness and difference that Lessing has always been obsessed with.

Through Lessing’s transforming out space readers are afforded a glimpse of the scope of Lessing’s achievement in creating not only a new system of thought but a powerful imaginative bridge to possible alien worlds and to a transformed vision of the world.

II. Transforming the Inner Space

For gothic novelists, the extremities of experience in the novel, the extreme violence and the extreme fear are gothic attempts at sublimity and articulating a state of being other than the ordinary. This kind of gothic trope enables Lessing to write fluently about the balance between civilization and extremities of experience in humankind.

Although Doris Lessing was officially a member of the Communist Party in Britain for only a short period of time, this temporary experience seems to have had a lasting impact on her writing, especially her science fiction. She described the
extremities of experience made by ideological oppression. So Lessing’s darkness is less romantic, instead, much more to do with the repressive mechanisms of society.

She published her experimental work in 1971—Briefing for a Descent into Hell. It is difficult for readers and critics to read as a psycho-drama or a science fiction, because it drew on such diverse literary traditions in it. Gothic trope is one of them. She used the perspective of a purported madman to bring the shortcomings of our world into focus. In this book Lessing also wants her readers not only to enjoy the story but also to attend closely to how it is being told.

Lessing explores the relationship between individual conscience and the collective in Briefing for a Descent into Hell, especially how society responds to a so called madman and how this individual conscience responds to the pressures of the collective. In the whole book, she uses the metaphor of madness to express her ideas about relationship among perception, reality and language. This way provides Lessing with straight for word vehicle for satirizing politic beliefs.

But behind all of this is Lessing’s fascination with encountering difference embodied in material form, and the sense of the symbolic possibilities of the imaginative way. She does not allow her political purposes to overwhelm her aesthetic principle. Inner space can not escape mapping, fencing and colonization, but there remain areas that will never be private property. She invites the readers to join her characters in their miraculous journey to points the unknown. If so, the awful joys, madness of transcendence and transforming the inner space would be offered.

III. Transforming the Last Day

For most of writers of Gothic novels, they prefer to use “Imagination” as the key artistic faculty to describe the “Last Days”. The Gothic Eden in novel also includes a biblical version. Lessing arrived in London in 1949. The war was just over and what struck her most was the ruined landscape, the mood of self-righteousness and nostalgia. She conveyed this feeling not only in The Four-Gated City, but also in The Memoirs of a Survivor (1974) through the descriptions about the last day. In The Memoirs of a Survivor, the ending has the quality of fable, myth, folktale and romance.

The Memoirs of a Survivor begins with the death of a city—London that has lost its name, where warmth, food, water and even oxygen drain away. People are left living off the corpse. In the last part of the book, the fiction crumples up its world
like a sheet of paper: "that world, presenting itself in a thousand little flashes, a jumble of little scenes, facets of another picture, all impermanent, was folding up as we stepped into it, was parceling itself up, was vanishing, dwindling and going—all of it, trees and streams, grasses and rooms and people." It is a picture that recalls versions of "last days". This sort of writing is clumsy, maybe, but it does set a certain urgent vividness. A passage like this symbolically apprehends the theme of the novel.

This novel ends with the end of the world and a breakthrough to another world. In the ending of the book, on one hand, Lessing depicts the sort of devastated urban scene, predicts the fall of Western civilization; on the other hand, she also introduces an imaginary universe. The purpose of this writing is both a warning and a promise of better things to come if only human beings learn to mend their way.

Even though Lessing describes something happened the same kind as doubled-speak satirized by George Orwell in 1984. She does not leave her readers entirely without hope. Hope comes in the alternatives to chaos that appear in her description of the world behind the wall. Like other utopian writers, Lessing is trying to make it easier for us to realize another way of life by giving it through language. She always keeps the debate with her readers alive and her texts open.

**Conclusion**

How to deal with the literary tradition is an important topic in a contemporary literary field. Lessing, as a social critic and a prophetic writer, has presented her social criticism in her science fiction. Her writing sets out to erase some of the most stubborn boundaries on reader's mental maps. She criticizes modern social and political structures by gothic tradition. The space-odyssey pattern has already served its purpose. This shows the significance of gothic tradition in her science fiction.

All her science fiction shows how literary tradition can be used by those in power to create social myths that would enslave our minds, and they also show how gothic tradition can be used by writers like Lessing as a tool of intellectual liberation, help readers to transcend both the authority of the state and the boundaries of known reality. There is a striking similarity between Lessing's philosophy of wholeness and the discoveries of modern physics, especially those of quantum mechanics. Her example has done as much to shape science fiction as any other single literary influence.
All in all, Lessing is an innovative writer who has had to teach her readers how to read her and how to understand her. Science fiction has brought her a kind of artistic liberation and enabled her to explore ideas and sociological possibilities. This research will serve as an illuminating guide for Lessing readers and a valuable resource for courses in science fiction. Her science fiction cuts to the center of contemporary cultural paranoia and challenges the readers to imagine a shareable space. All the efforts force her and her readers into new ways of thinking about the world. She not only provides an example of change in her own life and work, but also has been the inspiration of change to others.

Notes:
[1] Zhang Helong, *A Critical Survey of Postwar British Fiction* (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2004) 202.
[2] Ibid. 11.
[3] Brian Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1973) 18. (Updated in 1986 as *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*, London: Gollancz.)
[4] Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006) 44.
[5] Ibid. 42.
[6] See Gayle Greene, *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994) 5.
[7] Lorna Sage, *Doris Lessing* (London: Methuen, 1983) 80.
[8] Doris Lessing, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (New York: Knopf, 1975) 182.
[9] See Katherine Fishburn, *The Unexpected Universe of Doris Lessing* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985) 42.

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