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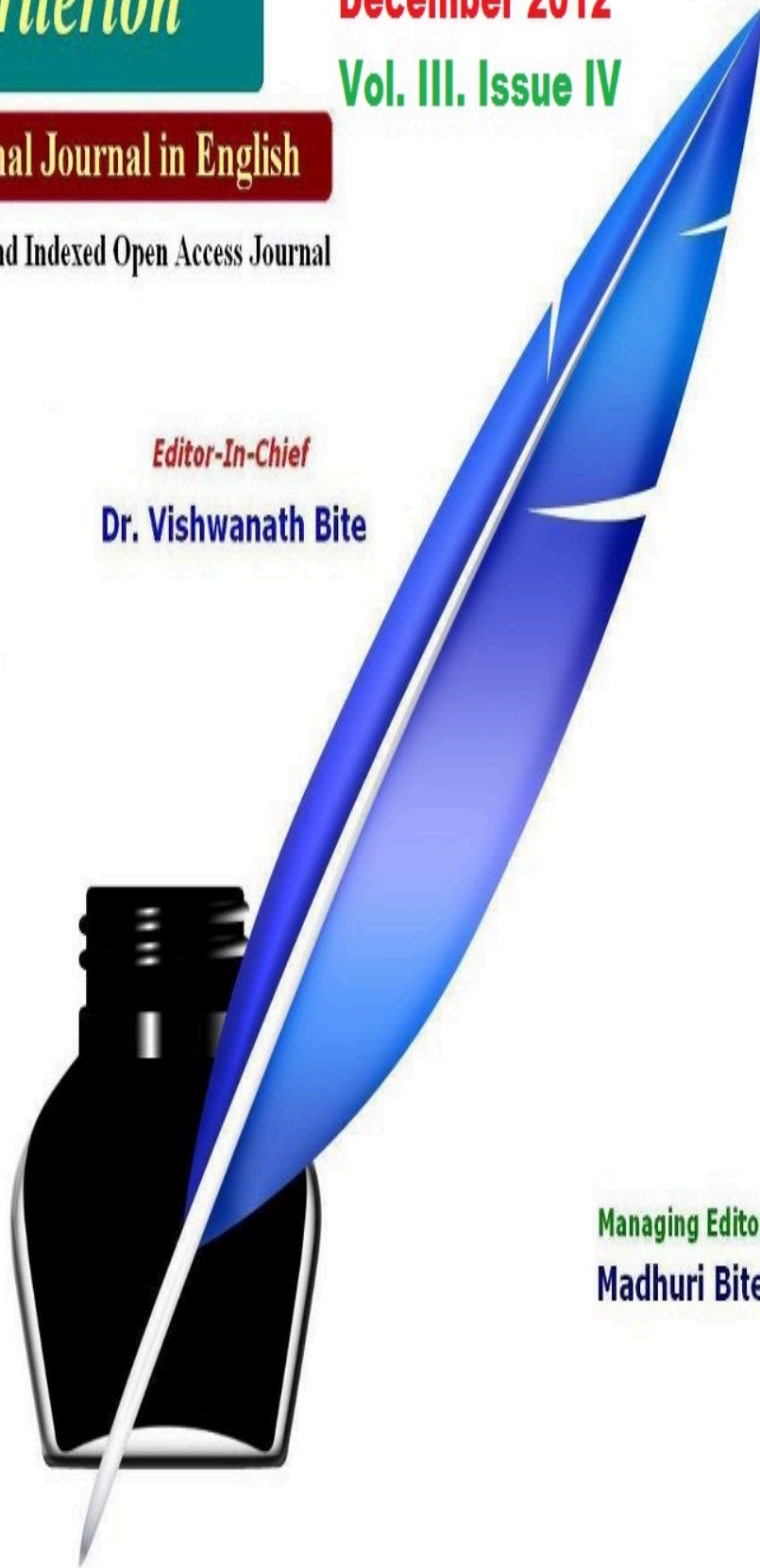
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Doris Lessing's Leap into Apocalyptic Fiction

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Doris Lessing is the writer who does not need much introduction as she has been in news for a long time and not for ordinary reasons. She has bagged number of awards starting from Somerset Maugham Award in 1954 and ending with Nobel Prize in Literature in 2007. In addition to these awards, she has got other fifteen prestigious awards also. All these awards show that Lessing is one of the most genuine, original and much sought after writer that contemporary times have produced. Her writings have been so much appreciated worldwide that many male writers can be of no match to her and will surely pale into insignificance. Keeping this in mind it is only a cynic who will treat women's writings as inferior or 'not at par with us' and that too, in the context of Doris Lessing. The argument of my paper would be to highlight that she is the writer who cuts across the barriers of gender bias. Although in many of her writings she may be highlighting the concerns of female identity or feminism like many women writers but what makes her different from others is that she deals with serious contemporary issues also which normally women writers do not talk about. She goes ahead of other women writers in that she highlights the apocalyptic tendencies in her novels *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and *The Four Gated City* in which she envisions the breakdown of order resulting in destruction. There are some critics who have labeled it as as her attempt to move towards supreme fiction. The New York Times wrote, "Lessing's message, recognizable from her apocalyptic works, is close to W H Auden's 'we must love one another or die'. Although we will inevitably be defeated and disillusioned, we still need to care about other people. In this respect, she can be compared with Kurt Vonnegut in America and Graham Greene in England who offers the same way-out in their writings that 'love' is the only hope left in the world, which is otherwise perhaps going to end. Therefore the attempt of this paper would be to show how Lessing transcends the stereotypical notions in her writings and boldly writes what has been called a supreme fiction. The paper would primarily look at some of the major novels of her supreme fiction and relate it to other male writers to argue to 'Women's writings are not inferior at all' and Lessing is an example to prove that point.

If genius is the power of anticipation, the passionate portrayal of things to come, then your work carries the mark of genius. (Thomas Mann to his brother Heinrich, 1941) (S. J. Kaplan 1975)

Lessing has warranted serious critical attention which is in its nature qualitatively different from the critical response to most women writers. She has been an octogenarian writer who has been publishing for fifty years and this poses sometimes a great challenge to the literary critics. Described by John Leonard as one of half a dozen most interesting minds to write fiction in this century, Doris Lessing is unique among women writers for her sheer scope and variety. Sydney Janet Kaplan says about Lessing that it is dangerous to assess her work as she is twenty steps ahead of us whenever we try to place her in a critical framework or predict the direction of her work. Almost all the Isms can be applied to her like Feminism, Marxism, Postcolonialism and Realism. She is a descendent of that tradition, stemming from, What Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* called the Epic Age of Women writing. An age in which, women wrote gallantly and crusadingly about poverty, slavery, class-conflict and women suffrage. She is a writer of epic scope and startling surprises. And as the abstract of the

paper argues that she is the writer who does not only transcend the boundaries of women writers but also many men as far as her canvass of writing is concerned. The way in which she breaks from the tradition of other writers, both male and female, is that she involves herself in a world of vital issues ranging from racial oppression to a recurrent threat of nuclear holocaust, women's movement, radical politics, apartheid, dream, madness, prophecy, Sufism and a critic of modern civilization. In the 50's not only were women writers accorded secondary status in the male dominated literary establishment, socially too their status, was despite all cries for equality still unequal. Perceived by the literary establishment as a woman, but not perhaps as a real woman, Lessing gained an authority to speak with both a public and a personal voice which differentiated her within the dominant discourse of femininity that of passivity in Britain in 1950's. Her voice may be truly seen as androgynous, partaking perhaps the most meaningful elements of both sexes. In doing this, she also goes beyond feminine stereotypes, prioritising serious and real concerns at the cost of personal relations. In fact, Lessing does not like the idea of being pigeonholed as a feminist author. When asked why, she explained:

What the feminists want of me is something they haven't examined because it comes from religion. They want me to bear witness. What they would really like me to say is, 'Ha, sisters, I stand with you side by side in your struggle toward the golden dawn where all those beastly men are no more.' Do they really want people to make oversimplified statements about men and women? In fact, they do. I've come with great regret to this conclusion (Lessing 1982:9).

Initially, Lessing implied that it was realism that held the key to effect the social change she hoped to bring through writings. Though she admired realism in 1957, she soon found it unsuitable for what she wanted to accomplish, which was a significant transformation. She experiments with various modifications of realism before she finally takes up to the writing of science/space fiction. It is here that she tries her pen at serious issues which concern the whole humanity. Hence the main contention of my paper is that she is the leading apocalyptic women writer of the present century as she argues that the international crisis of the second and third decades of the 20th century have put many established ideas and values upside down. The two World Wars have left the world with huge debris and everlasting scars. Modern scientific achievements have added much fuel to the fire. It is an age of pollution and explosion. It is an age of disillusionment and frustration. It is an age of neurosis and perversion. Life is but an extension of boredom. A vicious sense of failure is lurking from above and from within. In a May 1969 interview At Stony Brook, New York, Lessing spoke of the period in which *The Golden Notebook* takes place at a time when everything is cracking up. It had been falling apart since the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. She states further, "I feel as if the Bomb has gone off inside me and in people around me. That is what I mean by cracking up. It is as if the structure of the mind is being battered from inside. Some terrible thing is happening." Responding to the present state of affairs, she says:

What is the choice before us? It is not merely a question of preventing evil, but of strengthening a vision of good, that made it into evil (Lessing 1957: 16-17).

She is sceptical of Marxism also, which offers an "attractive vision of a future in which all men are free, equal and fulfilled human beings, in which humanity is moving towards a progressive future in a progressive way". She is disgusted with the myth of progress and that

everything is for the best, justice will prevail, that human beings are equal, that if we try hard enough society is going to become perfect. All these attitudes seem increasingly absurd to her. She clearly depicts the dissolution of society, with its prediction of world-wide destruction and catastrophe. Lessing had commented in an interview in 1969: "I am impatient with people who emphasize sexual revolution. I say we should all go to bed, shut up about sexual liberation, and go on with the important matters" (Raskin 1970: 175). The important matters for Lessing relate to the very future of the human race, to her apparent certainty that catastrophe is inevitable. In the same interview she flatly stated: "I believe that future is going to be cataclysmic" (Raskin 1970: 70). Raymond Williams in his essay 'Utopia and Science Fiction' situates the Utopian mode with a political culture and links the development of a feminist culture, contemporary women's writing and the politics of cultural practice. Raymond Williams states that the absence of dystopia within woman's Utopian writing suggests something of the relative health of socialist and feminist culture. This may be true of other writers, but Doris Lessing's inhabiting the mode is singular. Her concerns are with the sacred, the all embracing fundamental conditions of humanity. Lessing articulates her ideas not only about women and social problems but also about Armageddon or utopia. She believed that mankind was at a crucial point in history.

We are living in one of the great turning points in history...Yesterday we split the atom, we assaulted the colossal citadel of power, the tiny unit of the substance of the universe and because of this the great dream and the great nightmare of the centuries of human thought have taken flesh and walk beside us, day and night... (Lessing 1957: 16-17).

The Armageddon of technological disaster looms large in her works. Her novels put her in profound agreement with the observation made by Erich Fromm in arguing war and robotism are the threats of the present age. The danger of the past was that men became slaves; the danger of the future is that men may become robots. But given man's nature robots cannot live and remain sane, they will destroy the world and themselves, because they cannot stand the boredom of meaningless life for long. Recognising and accepting the social responsibility of a writer, Lessing faced the problems of how best to communicate her message to a world, intellectually and temperamentally unprepared to listen. Her philosophy is that she warns us to forgo the technological competitiveness and thus focuses on the argument of what would happen, if we do not. She gives outlet to such feelings in what she calls a sociological space fiction. Instead of focusing on one person, Lessing's imagination takes off into space. By creating make believe world, which develop technological and scientific speculations beyond the immediately possible, but based on what is known as fear for the future of the world and at the same time explores alternative models of social organisations. In some of her novels, she lays bare the myths of western superiority and technological advancement that have corrupted the soul and threaten the very existence of mankind.

Canopus in Argos: Archives is a sequence of five science fiction novels by Doris Lessing which portray a number of societies at different stages of development, over a great period of time. The focus is on accelerated evolution being aided by advanced species for less advanced species and societies. The novels take place in the same future history, but do not relate a continuous storyline. Each book covers unrelated events, with the exception of *Shikasta* and *The Sirian Experiments*, which tell the story of accelerated evolution on Earth through the eyes of Canopeans and Sirians respectively.

In her novel *Shikasta*, Lessing shows how legends get distorted into rigid and oppressive systems of beliefs. She finds much to criticise in all organised religions and when it comes to Christianity, she is at war with it. That is why in *Shikasta*, Johor describes Christianity as being the most inflexible, the least capable of self-examination, a religion as bigoted as *Shikasta* as ever seen. In focusing on Christianity Lessing apparently wants to demonstrate how the hierarchy of the church has debased sacred myths for its own political purpose. The best example she offers is in Johor's account of the 'Festival of Children' which is clearly a defamiliarised reference to the Holy Child of Prague. According to Johor, the festival originated when itinerant teacher visited a village, wanted to make the people see the human potential and what social equality meant. To prove this he used the example of several different children and proclaimed that each one of them was a miracle, a wonder that held within her/him all the past and the future (Lessing 1979:167-68). After the teacher left the villagers initiated the ritual to preserve what they had heard. But the local monks felt the ritual a threat to the hegemony and tried to ban it. Failing, they converted it into the Christian ceremony- a ceremony that the priest controls. With this reference she shows that instead of serving the spiritual needs of the people, the Church serves primarily the fiscal and political needs of its own bureaucracy. The human need for transcendence which falls into the hands of unscrupulous leaders leads to the perversion of what is most noble in humanity. This has led Lessing to conclude that politics is really nothing more than an analogue of religion. Johor reports that religion in the 20th century has become less tyrannical because it has lost most of its certainties, but the gap that has been left by religion has been filled by nationalism, "that pernicious new creed which uses much of the energies that once fed religion" (Lessing 1979: 196). One is reminded of Nirad C Chauddhuri who makes a very valuable argument observation in his famous book *The Three Horsemen of Apocalypse* and calls this new nationalism one of the three horses of apocalypse. He calls this feeling a xenophobic nationalism-a feeling that all foreigners are potential enemies. It has become largely a nationalistic inferiority complex. Consciousness of being 'we' not 'they' is strong and ineradicable in the present day nationalists. All the present day nationalistic people of Asia and Africa have a feeling that they are confronted by hostile peoples and nurse endless grievances. There are four outstanding features of contemporary nationalism and these are seen in four ethnic conflicts in the present day world: **1.** In India between the Hindus and Muslims **2.** In the Middle East in the conflict between the Arabs and the Jews **3:** In the British Isles between the Roman Catholics of Ireland and the Protestants and **4:** Between the Whites and the Blacks in South Africa. (Chauddhuri 1997:35-50) In addition to nationalism the other creed that Johor identifies is science describing it as "the most recent of the religion and contrary to its promise of intellectual freedom as bigoted and inflexible as any of them" (Lessing 1979: 196). In the section 'Century of Destruction' science is virtually identified as political institution calling it "the most recent ideology which World War II had immeasurably strengthened" (Lessing 1979: 197). In an era when religion is unable to counter the spiritual crisis raised by scientific discoveries and when politics threatens to destroy the world itself human beings have been left with virtually no external comfort and when they look to nature they see only a world of vast space-the world that modern physics has introduced us to a sub-atomic level. *Shikasta* is finally destroyed by a nuclear war as a result of mechanical failure. Johor and people are there to pick up the pieces and create what promises to be a better place to live. Ninety-nine percent of the world population is destroyed by radiation, poison and other agents of death released by war, the remaining one percent is restored to themselves to have sufficient substance of we feeling to keep them all sweet, whole and healthy. In *Shikasta* therefore, Lessing demonstrates that the major powers of the 20th century have consistently evoked the myth of their national defences to

camouflage their virtually undistinguishable imperialistic action-action that threatens the very existence of the world itself.

In *The Marriage between the Zones* (1980), it is the same dangerous xenophobic nationalism which characterises current world politics. As a result of their blind nationalistic drive they share, both Zones are threatened by the same problem of a seriously declining birth rate. In this novel Zone 3 is a zone of feeling and intuition and is an apparently utopian society, without violence or destruction or oppression. It is one of harmony, beauty and peace, but it suffers from virtual sterility, even the animals don't seem to conceive. Though it is beautiful and harmonious, full of feeling, it has forgotten a higher and more spiritual dimension. Lessing debunks those people who aspire to create utopia, which however beautiful do not look to spiritual needs. Even a utopia like Zone 3 is fruitless without access to higher zone of spirituality. The novel also deals with events on Planet 8 during the time of Ice Age. As the story opens, Planet 8 is about to be locked in a global **Ice Age**, that will destroy all forms of life. Canopus promises to save them by transporting them to Rohanda but when Rohanda is wrecked by disaster and transformed into Shikasta, Canopus is forced to change his plans. He instructs the people to build a wall to keep the ice under control. As the climactic situation worsens, and the inhabitants of Planet 8 lose control and understanding of their environment, they abrogate all possibilities of self help, neglecting the present, they seek to escape in their dreams of heaven. The deification of Canopus is presented as a weakness. It is not Canopus who has failed, but their perception of Canopus. Instead of working, the people of Planet 8 have literally slept their time away, in the mistaken belief that Canopus would save them, and had failed in their responsibilities. The novel questions the absolute faith that people base on technological solutions. The collapse of the wall is a burning example-the wall-one of the earliest and the most effective forms of technology. Lessing borrows Sufi metaphor to explain the situation of the co-existence though paradoxical of the many with the one. In *Minimal Self*, Christopher Lash includes in his chapter 'The Survival Mentality' and says: "it is not the prediction of doom that characterises the apocalyptic imagination but a belief that a new will rise from the ashes of the coming conflagration in which human beings will finally achieve a state of perfection." The description is true of what Lessing believes. The important thing about this novel is that there is a striking affinity between this novel and Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* which was written in 1963. Just as in this novel, Planet 8 is about to be locked in a global Ice Age that will destroy all forms of life, in the same way in *Cat's Cradle*, Dr Felix Hoenikker, the inventor of the atomic bomb and the infamous ice-nine which is capable of freezing the oceans and thus destroying the world. As Hoenikker says: "the ice-nine would travel through the water in the mud causing all of the water to freeze." (Vonnegut 1963:265) He goes on to say that even the rain would be troublesome: "When it fell, it would freeze into hard little hobnails of ice-nine and that would be the end of the world".(Vonnegut 1963: 265)

Lessing shares with Vonnegut many things. One of them is the realization of the responsibility that we cannot act as mute spectators to the present state of political, religious and social crisis and hence she comments on Vonnegut in the following way:

The force of Vonnegut's questioning is such that one has to sit down to think, to define degrees: Vonnegut simply cannot bear what we are, of course--like a lot of writers. The growl, the wince, the scream, that come off so many pages is due to this. But no other writer's sorrow, no other writer's refusal to play the child's game of *Goddies and Baddies*, is strong enough to make me remember, for instance, that before 1939 a great many people were shouting we should stop Hitler, that Nazism could be stopped if America and Britain wanted to. What Vonnegut deals with, always, is

responsibility. Vonnegut takes the full weight of responsibility, while more and more people are shrugging off their shoulders. Majority of us see history as a puppet show and our--humanity's--slide into chaos as beyond our prevention, our will, our choice. The strength of Kurt Vonnegut Jr., this deliberate and self-conscious heir, derives from his refusal to succumb to this new and general feeling of helplessness (Lessing 1973:140-141).

Vonnegut himself said that “I like Utopian talk, speculation about what our planet should be, anger about what our planet is. I think writers are the most important members of society, not just potentially but actually.” In one of the YouTube interviews, he says: “We are a disease; we should stop reproducing and comes up with the message for the future generation. The Message is “apologies” for we have failed so far to establish the paradise on earth and therefore, he concludes, “I think the world is ending.”(Sort by time, YouTube Broadcast-Yourself).

The last novel, in the sequence of *Canopus-The Sentimental Agents* in *The Volyen Empire*, exposes political rhetoric and propaganda and focuses on the worst of modern political history. Its target is the nationalistic rhetoric that motivates the opposing armies of World wars I and II. What all have common is the use of words misleading enough to drive millions to self-destruction, against all reason or the instinct for self-preservation. The seductiveness of words is shown in three key passages, where Klorathy in order to help Incent, describes three different periods in history-World War I, French Revolution and the rise of Soviet Russia. And she says:

All these developments were described in words for purpose of enslavement or manipulation or concealment or arousal...tyrants were described as benefactors, butchers as social surgeons, sadists as saints, campaigns to wipe out whole nations, as acts beneficial to the nations, war as peace, and as slow degeneration a descent into barbarism as progress, Words, Words (Lessing 1983: 126).

In her novel *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), Lessing envisions the world we will surely inhabit after the destruction of our present civilization. In this novel London is shown as a gradually degenerating city. Set in the future, the novel documents the spiritual and material degeneration of Londoners. The female protagonist, who is a survivor narrates the events that had led to the falling apart of the city and its social systems. Money had been replaced by barter, all essential systems like gas and electricity were cut off, people had moved from agricultural to a nomadic way of life, and London was being threatened by tribes of cannibals from the underground. The world of everyday reality is represented by a city in the advanced stages of decay, where nothing works except the self serving bureaucratic machinery that feeds off the weaknesses of people. In this novel, Lessing envisions the world we will surely inhabit after the destruction of our present civilization.

The Memoirs of a Survivor is set in the near future at “a time of savagery and anarchy” (Lessing 1974: 54), although it is never made clear what kind of global crisis brought about such anarchic conditions. In this respect, *Memoirs* is less explicit than the final dystopian section of the earlier novel, *The Four Gated City* (1969), which describes planet Earth as contaminated by the aftermath of war and radiation. In *Memoirs*, the degradation of the atmosphere, the collapse of law and order, and the loss of a material infrastructure lead to, among other destructive effects, the break-up of stable, biologically related families. Thus the novel demonstrates Lessing’s persistent interest in familial groups and collectives as alternatives to the nuclear family. Groups of people, disparate survivors of one kind and another, band together for self-protection. Feral children, selfish, primitive and lacking articulate language, are also forced to join together for survival. The novel is set after an

apocalypse where most services have stopped, and electricity, food, and water are scarce. People stay in their homes, as large gangs of kids run through the city, stealing useless electrical gadgets from homeowners. The narrator of this book is a woman who turns a cool, faceless attention to the crumbling society around her. From her window she records the landscape of apocalypse with total control, and with a rhetoric that measures (and weights) her experience, that seeks out the phrases that will correctly answer the events of that time, “the protracted period of unease and tension before the end... The city is besieged. Wandering packs of youths devastate an area and then move on. Hordes of people have already left for the country and relative safety. “While everything... broke up, we lived on, adjusting our lives as if nothing fundamental was happening” (Lessing 1974: 52).

After the catastrophic devastation, everything that people know is irrevocably shattered. In *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, people left the city although “there was no single reason for people leaving. We knew that all public services had stopped to the south and to the east and that this state of affairs was spreading our way”. For most people, the means of survival is leaving the city and try to begin a new life somewhere else although everything has been destroyed inside the city and outside but it is the urge to do something that moves them.

The Four-Gated City is a novel, published in 1969, concludes the five-volume series *Children of Violence*, a literary achievement which took nearly twenty years. The book, which finishes like a science fiction story with its bloody end to an epoch, created a stir upon publication, with claims that the novel promoted communism. *The Children of Violence* series develops the central character, Martha Quest, from her birth in Southern Africa at the end of the First World War, through an adolescence, youth and marriage shaped by the Second World War. The novel is set in Post-War Britain. Martha is in London as the 1950s begin. She is integrally part of the social history of the time - the Cold War, the Aldermaston Marches, Swinging London, the deepening of poverty and social anarchy. The volume ends with the century in the grip of World War Three. In the year 1997, Martha dies on a contaminated island off the northwest coast of Scotland. Most of the people of Britain have died before her, in 1978, of multiple afflictions: bubonic plague, nerve gases and nuclear explosions. The novel takes on the medical profession, which is argued to be destroying that part of humanity which is in fact most sensitive to evolution. It criticizes the scientists who have created and perpetuate a climate in which "rationalism" has become a new God; the novel further explores the possibilities of people having "extra-sensory perception", in varying degrees, but having been brainwashed into suppressing it, and that schizophrenia is the name of our blindest contemporary prejudice. In this novel, Lessing describes Martha's struggle to develop innate but limited extra-sensory powers which might help her to forecast the oncoming disaster and allow her to make preparations to escape from it.

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