

Shikasta: Re, Colonised Planet 5: Personal, Psychological, Historical... Study Guide

**Shikasta: Re, Colonised Planet 5: Personal,
Psychological, Historical... by Doris Lessing**

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Plot Summary

Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikasta was written in 1979 by Doris Lessing, a Nobel laureate in literature. "Shikasta" is the name of the central planet in the book and is the first in a series of five in her Canopus in Argos series.

Shikasta is one of the colonies of the galactic empire Canopus, and is shared with a friendly empire named Sirius and a hostile empire known as Puttiora. It functions largely as an allegory for earth. The book covers Shikasta's history, from the beginnings of sentient life all the way until the mythical Third World War, where humanity mostly destroys itself. In fact, the book is subtitled, "Personal psychological historical documents relating to visit by Johor (Gerge Sherban) Emissary (Grade 9) 87th of the Last Period of the Last Days". The book has an unusual structure. It reads as a loosely tied-together series of reports ranging over hundreds of thousands of years. Some are reports from historical archives, and others are reports from emissaries on the surface and human records. The story contains many religious elements, mostly from the monotheistic traditions.

Doris Lessing calls Shikasta space fiction in the introduction. While it is a type of science fiction, it does not focus primarily and technology, but instead on the themes that a futuristic setting allows for; for instance, the viewing of humanity's rise and fall as a whole over tens of thousands of years.

The story begins with Canopean Empire introducing new species to Rohanda, a planet they're newly colonizing. They raise one of the dominant mammalian species to sentience in part by bringing "the Giants" from another colony to live on the planet. They do this in part to speed up Rohandan evolution. Their goal is to proceed to the "Lock" stage, where Rohanda will be locked in sync with all the other planets in the Canopean Empire. The "Lock" is a complicated concept, but involves bringing all life and thought into a kind of harmony that gives all life peace and strength. The Lock is in part brought about by rock formations on the planet.

As a result, the Rohandas live under utopian conditions for millennia, but an unexplained cosmic event breaks the Canopean Lock with Rohanda. Rohanda is not deprived of the mutual harmony - and they lose the most crucial resource in the universe - SOWF or substance-of-we-feeling. As a result, they begin to degrade. A renegade planet from Puttiora, Shammat, begins to exploit this weakness. This causes Rohanda to degrade further and for the Canopeans to rename it Shikasta or "the stricken."

The rest of the book is the story of Canopean emissaries' attempts to save Shikasta from the "degenerative disease." They send agents to the planet and try to identify individuals who haven't become too corrupt to fix Shikasta's history. In the 20th century, Shikasta is at its low point and on the brink of apocalypse. The core story of Shikasta occurs here, as one of Canopus's main emissaries, Johor, incarnates as a child and

becomes a world leader that ushers the remains of humanity into a new age, prepared again for the Lock. The book ends as the Lock is restored.



Chapters 1 - 5

Chapters 1 - 5 Summary

Chapter 1: Johor Reports

Johor, Canopean emissary, gives a report on his job, tending to the order of the Canopean Colonies. He notes that the rule of Canopus is Love generally speaking. He introduces us to Shikasta, one of his worst experiences. Shikasta is a particularly chaotic place.

Chapter 2: Notes on Planet Shikasta for Guidance of Colonial Servants

Chapter 2 is a guide for colonial servants on Shikasta. Shikasta is a world of extremes and that it is unusual in that all life preys on other life. Its nature is to be in tension. The guide notes that Shikasta contains six concentric shells. Zone Six is the shell that concerns human history.

Chapter 3: Johor Reports

Johor notes that he did not expect to spend much time in Zone Six, until Taufiq, his brother who was another emissary, was captured. Sometimes emissaries incarnate as beings of the planets they visit and usually these trips were planned. However, Taufiq's mission had been more complicated and he had been deluded into thinking he was the creature he incarnated as. There is a realm outside of Zone Six where lost souls exist, waiting to reincarnate on the earth. They are typically miserable. Johor encounters an old friend Ben and his daughter Sais; they are bewildered. Johor encourages them to try again on Shikasta. Far away in this area lurk the souls of the Giants, a race of large humanoids the Canopeans introduced to Shikasta. They are tormented and Johor speaks of their former glory.

Chapter 4 (unmarked, starts at p. 14): Pre-History

Shikasta had been watched for millions of years, back when it was known as Rohanda. It was full of surprises. The Sirian Empire had done some plant and animal experimentation there. Shammatt, a renegade planet of the enemy Puttiorian Empire, is also visited. Canopus and Sirius divided the planet and Canopus got the Northern hemisphere. They both saw that a sentient species was evolving. Canopus decided to give their evolution a boost and decided to introduce an alien species to the planet to aid the natives' evolution.

Chapter 5 (unmarked, starts at p. 18): Races

Descriptions of the Giants and the Natives are given. The Giants are much larger, live longer, and reproduce less. The relations between the two species are good. The Giants aid the Natives when needed. The Giants guide the Natives to the Lock. There are also



warnings that there are dangerous beings in the South. It appears to be Shammat. The report concludes that the Locke can begin but reminds the reader that Shikasta is subject to change and to keep an eye out for Shammat.

Chapters 1 - 5 Analysis

Chapters 1 - 5 are primarily introductory, describing Rohanda, the purposes that Canopus, Sirius and Shammat have for Rohanda and Rohanda's unique nature. Rohanda is a planet constantly in tension and flux and it is hard to control. These chapters also introduce the book's main character, Johor, one of Canopus's most eminent emissaries. He is characterized primarily as a man on a mission. His fellow emissary Taufiq is introduced and his future corruption as John Brent-Oxford is mentioned. The chapters also describe the nature of the Canopean mission of Rohanda - to civilize life there and bring it into sync with the Canopean empire through their Lock. The Giants are introduced in order to aid the development of the natives. Both races are described as they are in a pre-Lock yet largely harmonious state.

The structure of the book often imitates the Old Testament and the books of other ancient religions. This is clearly the 'creation story' of Rohanda/Shikasta. Metaphors and symbolism from religious texts will often reappear throughout the book.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Chapter 6 (p. 21): Pre-History

The Lock is a success. Everything appeared well. But Shammat worked in secret. Apparently the energies of Rohanda were being tapped by Shammat. What's worse, a cosmic disturbance would soon cut Rohanda off from the Lock allowing Shammat to drain it even faster, creating a disaster. Rohanda is then renamed Shikasta, the stricken.

Johor incarnates on the Planet to warn the people of disaster and train them how to survive it. He makes various observations about the peaceful interaction of the Natives and Giants. Each city is built in a geometrical shape with rock formations that keep the Lock going. Johor senses the Shammat transmitter and goes to locate it. He also tells the Giants to prepare for a disaster. Jarsum, one of the giants, is introduced. Johor tells Jarsum and the other Giants that they will not survive as a species, but only as individuals. For people under the Lock, this is inconceivable and a horror. The Giants are to be spirited away from Shikasta to other planets. He also explains the evil plans of the Shammat to them, but they do not understand the concept of 'enemy'.

The Lock was ending and the Giants began to be affected, losing many cognitive powers. Johor is affected as well. Things begin to fall apart on Shikasta. Now many of the Giants don't want to leave. Jarsum heads this group. The Natives are sad to see the other Giants go.

As the Lock deteriorates, the Rock formations that transmit the SOWF or substance-of-we-feeling begin to malfunction making the cities uninhabitable. Everyone leaves the cities, and forget nearly everything they've known for millennia about how to care for themselves. Johor must teach them anew. The remaining Giants disappear to their own city.

Johor finds a Native, David, and his daughter, Sais - the incarnations of Ben and Sais - and teaches them some of the basic commandments of Canopus, such as not being violent with one another and sends them off to teach the natives these basic rules as they relearn how to survive. Johor has a "Signature" of Canopus that he gives to David and Sais to prove their authority.

Next Johor goes after the Shammat transmitter. It is made of a substance, Effluon 3, that is toxic. But apparently the transmitter will eventually degrade. It won't matter because Canopus will be disconnected by Shikasta by the cosmic disturbance anyway. Further, Shammat had already implanted its nature into the Shikastans and so the Shikastans would be the transmitters themselves. He finds David and Sais and tells them they're on their own but that he will return. He then leaves.



Chapter 6 Analysis

The story of Chapter 6 is that of the Fall of Shikasta, much like the Fall in Christian and Jewish religion. The people lived once in a state of perfect harmony, but something bad happens, an enemy (Shammat) corrupts the people. There is no apple in this tale, but the cosmic disruption of the SOWF and the Shammat transmitter play a similar role. Jarsum is the leader of the Giants who are the leaders of the Natives. He takes a queen of his and rebels against the angelic Canopeans - perhaps this is the Adam and Eve story replayed. The Shikastans must now build a society outside of the Ancient Geometrical Cities, perhaps an analogy to being thrown out of the Garden of Eden. Further, a ten commandments story is told here as well - as Johor instructs David and Sais in the laws of Canopus and has them spread the message across the planet.



Chapters 7 - 8

Chapters 7 - 8 Summary

Chapter 7 (p. 74): The Last Days

Johor now tells of his experience in "The Last Days" of Shikasta and of what happened to Taufiq. Taufiq is incarnated as a white. His name was John and was born in the "Northwest Fringes" analogous to Britain. World War II had just ended and John was supposed to become a lawyer but he was attracted into politics. Many emissaries were corrupted from time to time. Johor hoped to bring Taufiq to "come to himself" but he could not. Johor describes the distorting effects that being a politician has on John. He was now a national figure. Johor communicates to Taufiq one night and is able to change him and bring him back to being a friend of Canopus, but only after a long spell of being an enemy.

Chapter 8: (p. 83) History of Shikasta, The Century of Destruction

This chapter describes the rise of the British Empire and a description of the British people who are described as narrow-minded and imperialistic. Further, they tolerate a high degree of economic inequality. The general description of the British is intensely negative, describing them as self-deluded, materialistic, individualistic barbarians. It blames Britain and other countries in Europe for World War I. The report also characterizes the rise of Nazism and Communism, denouncing them more severely. The Canopeans see the 20th century as one long, horrible war that results from the near total absence of SOWF.

Some people are not totally corrupted, but life is quite difficult for them. After WWII, which the Canopeans call "The Age of Ideology," there is contact local division on earth. One dangerous ideology is that of "science" which gripped many of the elites. In this time "primitive" peoples rise up and resist oppression. They are thought to have more contact with the SOWF - they are purer and more wholesome. In general, the description of this period of time is as ruthless oppression by whites of the rest of the world in economic, social, religious and military modes. Whites are the most wicked race. By the end of the century, the population of Shikastan natives will be reduced by 99% and are reconnected to the SOWF. The rest of the story is about the few who survive the Shikastan apocalypse and how they do so.

Chapters 7 - 8 Analysis

The main point of Chapter 7 is to introduce Taufiq and set up his complicated role as John Brent-Oxford. Taufiq is victim to temptations as John Brent-Oxford, showing that even a Canopean, millenia old, can be corrupted by a lack of SOWF. It is, in some ways, an illustration of the depravity of 20th century Shikasta.

Chapter 8 is a history of the great corruption in the 20th century, where the author recounts the major horrors of the 20th century. In some ways, it is the story of John Brent-Oxford writ large to the people of Shikasta generally.



Chapters 9 - 10

Chapters 9 - 10 Summary

Chapter 9: (p. 93) Report by Emissaries Taufiq, Nasar, and Rawsti, Members of the Special Investigatory Commission into the State of Shikasta, Penultimate Time. Summary.

This chapter is a series of reports that covers much of Earth's history between the catastrophic end of the Lock and the 20th century apocalypse. The emissaries report that they've encountered Shammat without their knowledge. They also report the dwindling of species created by the Sirians, like Dwarves and Elves. They report the degeneration of the Natives. The ethical laws Johor gave to Shikasta have been built partly into religions. Taufiq reports the end of the ice age and the flipping of the magnetic polarization of the earth. Taufiq brings some humanoids from other colonies to Shikasta to shift the genetics of the population. Shammat is also influencing the genetics of the population and corrupting the major religions. The Canopeans decide to split the languages of the natives, paralleling the Tower of Babel story in the Old Testament. In fact, many of these reports tell stories that parallel events from the Old Testament. The old cities are still uninhabitable.

Johor reports on his return - 30,000 years later - that the state of Shikasta saddens him. The people are smaller, corrupt and live short lives full of disease and pain. He reports on the wickedness of the people. He interacts with a man who is clearly Abraham and tell the story of the births of Isaac and Ishmael from the Old Testament/Torah - arguing that they had "Canopean vibrancies."

Chapter 10: (p. 108) History of Shikasta, Period of the Public Cautioners

This history dates from one thousand years before a local flood which corresponds, probably, to the flood Noah endured in the Old Testament to 1,500 years before the final destruction of the Shikastan natives - about 500 AD. Men came to dominate women. Many emissaries were corrupted in their incarnate forms. Religion developed and at their best restrained human evil and at worst contributed to it. The major religions were all formed by emissaries. Yet over time Shammat corrupted them. Some Canopeans believed Shikasta should be jettisoned due to its cost.

Chapters 9 - 10 Analysis

Chapter 9 details further the Fall of Shikasta and its gradual corruption. It describes how the Shikastans are living shorter lives and are smaller and more wicked. Lessing reports what appears to be a version of the stories of Abraham and Isaac, who she argues were explicitly encoded with "Canopean vibrancies." Chapter 10 is also the repetition of a Biblical story - Noah's flood. It also details more of Shikasta's fall.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Chapter 11: (p. 113) Johor Reports

Several Shikasta individuals were selected by the Canopeans to play a special role in the final days. Taufiq had been responsible for influencing them. This chapter covers these characters and the ways in which Taufiq was supposed to influence them - otherwise known as the Britishman John Brent-Oxford.

The first individual is a depressed woman in the Northwest Fringes who finds herself alienated from her countrymen. She moved all over the world to find her home. She never does and has a nervous breakdown in a restaurant, destroying some property. If Taufiq/John had become a lawyer, he could have defended her, getting her to figure out that she was only alienated by her own thoughts.

Individual two is a young female left to television by her parents. She gets involved with some petty crime. As time goes on, she gets into worse crime, and eventually murder. She gets caught up in a cult and became cult leader. At her trial, had Taufiq defended her, he would have argued that she was the victim of indoctrination. This was supposed to produce a new public awareness of the propaganda mechanisms used in Shikasta society.

Individual three is a worker's leader and a Russian Marxist or something close to it. He is constantly angry on behalf of the poverty he saw as a child. He became a working class union leader. He becomes a major union leader but remains unhappy. He ultimately decided to put himself on trial on behalf of humanity. Had Taufiq been around, he would have been up to the task, bringing attention to the sorry state of humanity.

Individual four is a terrorist known as The Brand. She grew up in Concentration camps and formed terrorist gangs of former camp members and prisoners. They end up blackmailing a corporation to fund their activities and are caught. Murders were committed, so they faced heavy sentences. Taufiq's role is deferred to a later report.

Individual five is another terrorist and son of rich parents. He pulled off some blackmails and meets the Brand during these exploits. He found himself without any love for other humans. He was known as X. He was never caught like the Brand was and joined the international police in the Last Days.

Individual six was born to parents who had been in concentration camps. He couldn't understand evil in the world and ultimately saw it as a flaw in the entire interconnected human community. The boy begins to imitate the poverty he finds around him and wishes to begin society against. He rejects his nationality and sees everything around him as a lie. And while this development helped him see through the evil on Shikasta, it helped him little because he was unkind and resentful. He drifted from political group to



political group. He ends up establishing a terrorist cell, capturing a politician and accidentally killing the man. He is caught and faces trial, but delights in it because he can expose the wickedness of humanity. A year later he escapes from prison and gets a clerk job in a small town and is not caught for awhile. Finally he is caught and has a vision of what the world is really like, and then he kills himself.

Individual seven is another child of rich parents. She grows up unhappy. She enjoys college and is active in various political organizations, but after college loses her sense of purpose. She continues to participate in demonstrations and meets a man there; she likes him and hopes to bring him into her groups. They were both devoted to the same cause but he abused her love for him. He asks her to assault a policeman and spends time in prison but largely ignores her; the prisoners call her "The Saint" to mock her. When she gets out of prison, her lover is living with another woman. She continued to seek his affection. She eventually assaults some policemen again but realizes she isn't being taken seriously and is then sucked into a socialist cell planning a coup. The group lasts for three years before the police dissolve it and she commits suicide to avoid arrest. She has come to believe that she doesn't deserve to be visible and sees her suicide as sacrifice to her cause. Johor notes that all of these persons are associated with an injustice.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 is a chapter about the 'special' ones, which perhaps correspond to the major and minor prophets in the Old Testament. Each individual is deeply complicated, flawed, and horrified by the depravity of the people around them. Each has a unique story to tell and can potentially bring a message of hope and rebirth to the Shikastans, directly or indirectly. But the tragedy of these 'prophets' is that their main helper - John Brent-Oxford/Taufiq is not there to aid them.

The chapter also brings out the theme of the utterly depravity and meaninglessness of Shikastan life. Each individual tries to find fulfillment in some group or ideology and each feels alienated by Shikastan life.



Chapters 12 - 13

Chapters 12 - 13 Summary

Chapter 12: (p. 144) Johor Reports

Johor finds that he cannot effectively contact the special individuals to make up for where Taufiq has failed. On the outskirts of Zone Six, Johor goes searching for some unincarnated refugees. He finds Ben and his old friend Rilla and attempts to wake them up with the Signature, but they are still bewildered. He then finds his friend Raneer and helps to improve Ben and Rilla.

The reports return to individual eight. She is an immigrant worker in a small town. She cleans for a family for years and they let her go in a fairly fast and indifferent fashion. She felt horribly wronged and died unhappy. Raneer finds her in Zone Six and attempts to convince her to give life another try.

Chapter 13: (p. 154) Sketches of the Shikastan Situation

Johor composes some notes beyond what was required of him. He sketches a few sad individuals' lives and then goes on to make some negative comments about the white races and how they conquered the Southern continents. He attacks their religion, presumably some version of Christianity, for being the most bigoted religion in human history. He then discusses a group of black people subjugated to the whites. Their lives are filled with horrible poverty and domination. He then tells the story of a ceremony in Ireland that originated from Canopean emissaries bringing a positive message to the people of that land centuries ago. They tell of the redemption of the Shikastans in future centuries. Johor laments that eventually the ceremony is distorted by some Christian monks but the ceremony continues to this day. The point of this chapter is to give students of Shikastan history a perspective on local conflicts that non-emissaries have a hard time grasping from afar.

Chapters 12 - 13 Analysis

In general, these two chapters express the impenetrability of the Shikastans to the SOWF, even those Canopeans incarnated as Shikastans, like John Brent-Oxford. But in Chapter 13, Johor indicates that he holds out hope for Shikastan redemption despite the incredible wickedness of the Shikastan peoples.



Chapter 14 - 18

Chapter 14 - 18 Summary

Chapter 14: (p. 171) Additional Explanatory Information. I.

Chapter 14 is an appendix with additional information. It explains the generation gap between humans and how divisive it is. It also explains the effects of unusually short lifespans. The author argues that short lives create a historical anxiety in humans where young people think they will live forever but eventually face the reality of their quickly coming death. The Shikastans are tragic because of their short lives - they can't enjoy the complexities of extremely long life.

Chapter 15: (p. 174) Johor Reports

Johor spends this chapter discussing a few characters and focusing on two in particular, a woman named Lynda Coleridge and her lover. The tale describes the environments in which they were reared, how they met and detailed a few of their psychological traits. The point of it though is to describe how Lynda is thrown into a psychotic depression after her lover's death.

Chapter 16: (p. 181) Document, Lynda Coleridge

This chapter is the scattered diary entries of a woman, Lynda Coleridge recording her experiences for her psychiatrist, Dr. George Hebert. Throughout her ramblings, she notes that some people don't seem to use all of their cognitive faculties. She notes that she has unique abilities that most people never experienced and have shut off. She can't help but have them - she receives some sort of energy and talks about receiving 6 or 7% of some substance rather than 5% like other humans. She seemed to be referring, without her knowledge, to the reception of SOWF. She notes that Dr. Hebert doesn't believe her initially but over time takes her more seriously. He works with her on her abilities.

Chapter 17: (p. 189) Brief Character Description

This is a brief interlude to describe a teacher insistent on teaching evolution in an area intolerant of such ideas. The report describes him as contributing to an overthrow of Christian dominion of these lands.

Chapter 18: (p. 191) Johor, Agent 20, asked for a report, contributed this.

A brief story a Canopean Agent, known only as Agent 20, reports through Johor. It's the story of a seemingly old male cat taking care of a female cat and dying. Presumably it represents the last gleaming of SOWF on Shikasta.



Chapter 14 - 18 Analysis

These five chapters are various character sketches meant to describe the glimmers of hope within the darkness of Shikastan life. Lynda Coleridge has a unique ability to receive more SOWF than others. Other characters will stand up as one shining light against the darkness, even a Shikastan cat can do this still.



Chapters 19 - 20

Chapters 19 - 20 Summary

Chapter 19: (p. 195) Johor: Additional Explanatory Information. II.

This archival material describes increases in drug use in the 20th century and the decline of the power of religious ideologies in favor of secular ideologies like nationalism. These new creeds are numerous and create great conflict. The report also describes the plight of some of the poorest on Shikasta and the small number of their meaningful experiences. This is a description of the state of the people on Shikasta "infinitely damaged" from their lack of SOWF.

Chapter 20: (p. 203) Johor Continues

Johor makes a survey of possible parents before reincarnating on earth. He narrows it down to two families, and ultimately picks a family of mixed-race because the first family is British - and these white peoples have a hard time understanding the perspectives of others. Johor then proceeds to reincarnate passing through the zone of unincarnated souls. He's looking for Rilla and Ben, to wake them up and convince them to reincarnate with him. They are to become the three main characters of the remainder of the book.

Chapters 19 - 20 Analysis

Chapters 19 and 20 are building up towards the main plot of the book - the life and times of George Sherban/Johor. Chapter 19 continues to describe the depravity on Shikasta, particularly in the form of 20th century secular ideologies. Chapter 20 contains Johor's survey of possible parents to incarnate into - which families would be more appropriate. This is a bit like the Christ-story - but Lessing's clear hostility to Christianity speaks against this interpretation.



Part II, Chapters 21 - 24

Part II, Chapters 21 - 24 Summary

Part II (p. 210): Documents Relating to George Sherban (Johor)

Chapter 21: Rachel Sherban's Journal.

Much of the rest of the book are the notes of Rachel Sherban (Rilla). She notes that she has two brothers, George (Johor) and Benjamin (Ben). Their parents are Simon and Olga and their last name is Sherban. The children were all born in England, but the Sherban's took them traveling all over the world. She describes Benjamin as chubby, argumentative and constantly jealous of the attention George receives. George on the other hand while seemingly like an ordinary child from time to time often becomes deeply depressed about very general matters - like the corruption of the world. Rachel is incredibly jealous that George gives her little attention. Note that all three children are mixed race, and look fairly different from one another. Benjamin, however, has white skin.

The tales continue. One important fact to note is that the Sherban's don't much care for political ideology, although their friends do. They're pragmatists who want to work out real problems with people. George finds a teacher named Hasan. Hasan teaches George many important and secret things Rachel wishes she knew more about. There is also mention of a Jewish woman who taught George in New York named Miriam. Rachel reports that she asked her parents numerous times about George's special treatment, but they never gave her a direct answer. Rachel complains about Benjamin's raucous and jealous behavior.

Rachel often could not understand the conversations between George and Hasan, but not because she couldn't hear. The words were beyond her. The author points back to conversations in pre-history, where Johor cannot communicate with the Natives because of their lack of SOWF. Some matters simply cannot be understood by people with too little SOWF.

She notes later that George wants her do the diary the reader sees now. George goes on to become a leader of a gang of boys that Rachel thinks are beneath him. Clearly George is meant to be a leader.

Chapter 22: (p. 231) History of Shikasta, Period Between World Wars II and III. Armies: Various Types of: The Armies of the Young.

This chapter is an excerpt of a record from Shikasta's history that describes the formation of 'youth armies' that form due to the economic and social problems on Shikasta. They are, in short, gangs writ large. As poverty increases and police states expand, their numbers only become larger. This phenomenon also produces a growing



gap and hostility between rich and poor. Over time the youth armies would sometimes overthrow world leaders.

Chapter 23: (p. 236) Rachel Sherban's Journal

This part of the journal begins with a description of one of the families that the Sherban's share a home with. They are a Muslim family that Rachel spends a lot of time with. There is a couple, Naseem and Shireen and Fatima, Shireen's sister. The record contains little of substance here except a description of Rachel's feelings of alienation from this family, her sense that she, Benjamin, and George are somehow different.

Chapter 24: (p. 245) A Letter from Benjamin Sherban to a college friend

Benjamin writes to a friend, Siri, in part complaining about all the attention George is getting as a youth organizer. Its also a report of a youth conference and how George is bringing together youth organizations of all stripes. Benjamin knows that George isn't interested in their ideologies and cannot figure out why George was at the conference in the first place.

Part II, Chapters 21 - 24 Analysis

Part II begins with Rachel Sherban's journal and the tale of the incarnation of Johor as George Sherban. George is treated specially as a child and is given a special education. He seems unnaturally mature, much like the young Jesus in the Christian New Testament. It also covers the complications among the characters within the Sherban family - particularly Rachel and Benjamin, who are deeply jealous of the special attention that George receives. The chapters also introduce the youth armies - or the large gangs of children that the Sherban's will come to command as the book progresses. There is some foreshadowing here, as it is clear that the youth armies and the Sherbans have a future together.



Chapters 25 - 28

Chapters 25 - 28 Summary

Chapter 25: (p. 250) Rachel Sherban's Journal

Eighteen months since the last journal. Hasan has vanished. George is visiting various foreign countries, particularly India. Rachel notes that only she and Benjamin must prepare for exams, not George. He seems to learn everything extremely quickly. George has an education. Rachel notes that "He is being education for something different." Suzannah is introduced. She is George's girlfriend. Rachel hates her because while she is beautiful, she is an idiot unworthy of George. George apparently is interested in Suzannah for sex, and Rachel finds this appalling. He should have someone better, Rachel thinks. Suzannah stays in George's life for awhile, and eventually Rachel confronts George about it but George rebuffs her attempts at condemnation. After awhile Rachel seems to convince George that he is using Suzannah.

Chapter 26: (p. 262) Letter from Shammat

This is a letter from Tafta, the Shammat Lord of Shikasta to his master, Lord Zarlem He describes the world leaders they control in various parts of the world. He forwards a letter that the Shammat run world-wide organization - the Pan-Europe Federation of Socialist Democratic-Communist People's Dictatorships for the Preservation of Peace - has sent to a Top Secret department. The letter describes the Shammat perspective on George, Benjamin and John Brent-Oxford. They see them as varying degrees of threat. They want to arrest George and force him to stop being a leader; if he refuses, they want to kill him. They think Benjamin is ripe for 're-education'. And John Brent-Oxford, who has not responded to re-education, is old and to be sent to a penal colony.

Chapter 27: (p. 264) Private Letter Sent Through Diplomatic Bag. Ambien II of Sirius, to Klorathy, Canopus

Here a Sirian agent reports the degeneration of Shammat. They're quickly becoming power-mad.

Chapter 28: (p. 264) Rachel Sherban's Journal

George urges Rachel to continue writing. The Sherban home is constantly full of people coming to see George. Benjamin is running one of the youth army's children's camps. They're attracted children of all ages and countries. Olga is near death from working in hospitals very hard for very long. In one entry, Rachel describes George in a meeting where a spy, a man named Raymond Watts, is present. But they know he is a spy and are able to bring him into their movement. George tells Rachel that Naseem, Shireen are dead. Rachel can hardly handle t. George tells her that if she can't handle it that "you'll have to come back and do it all over again. Think about it." The point of this is to



remind Rilla who is Rachel that she will have to come back to Shikasta in another form if she doesn't toughen up now.

Rachel travels with Benjamin to his youth camp. Rachel sees Benjamin in a new light, as he now has a purpose and his maliciousness has disappeared. He gives uplifting talks to the youth and runs the camp well. Rachel ends up not getting further involved in the youth camp. So instead, George charges her and Suzannah with the care of two young "special" children Kassim and Leila. Rachel is to live with Suzannah and give the children a special education.

Rachel introduces Sharma, a youth leader in India. She and George have fallen in love although George is often still with Suzannah. Sharma is everything that Rachel could want for George. Rachel notes that Simon and Olga die.

Rachel and Suzannah now live together and care for the children. Raymond Watts visits, having fallen in love with Rachel. Suzannah is unusually competent and thoughtful as a caretaker.

Chapters 25 - 28 Analysis

Chapters 25 - 28 are the tale of the rise of George Sherban to prominence. He begins to travel all over the world, meeting people in many countries and building his reputation and he comes to lead many disparate groups. Their ideologies are all different, yet they all respect George. George takes no position against some of them or for others. He instead seeks only harmony, much like the Shikastans of old.

Unlike the Christ-figure in Christianity, however, these Chapters expose George's flaws. He dates Suzannah in part for sex and has an emotional affair with a North Indian leader named Sharma Patel. He too is weakened by the lack of SOWF.



Chapters 29 - 32

Chapters 29 - 32 Summary

Chapter 29: (p. 284) Letters between Sharma and George

The next section of the book (p. 284) is a correspondence between Sharma Patel and George. She praises him for his leadership talent, discusses world affairs, and longs to be with him. George's letter is strange; he describes a dream that is clearly formed from Johor's memories of Rohanda and how he longs for a world in which they would be live a thousand years and enjoy one another on a level beyond the comprehension of any Shikastan.

Chapter 30: (p. 289) Rachel Sherban's Journal

Refugees are arriving to town all over the world. Suzannah continues to demonstrate strong judgment. Rachel begins to admire her. George had ordered Rachel to stay with Suzannah but she heard about a plot on his life and so decides to find him and inform him. She decides to disguise herself as him.

Chapter 31: (p. 294) Comrade Chen Liu, to Peking: re the George Sherban situation.

A Chinese agent of Shammat. The agent reports that Rachel was discovered and had a mental breakdown. She was arrested in Paris on Shammat instruction and then committed suicide. They also note that George is going to seek election as a representative for all the youth armies in North Africa. Shammat have tried to kill him nine times, and this has cost them five employees. They decide to refrain from killing him for now. Benjamin is undergoing brainwashing but they cannot tell if its working.

Chapter 32: (p. 295) Benjamin Sherban, Camp 16, Czechoslovakia, to George Sherban in Simla

Benjamin reports to George what life is like in the re-education camp. He has managed to fool the administrators into thinking the brainwashing is working. He's also interacting with other prisoners. He also reports his interactions with various people in the camp.

Chapters 29 - 32 Analysis

Chapters 29 through 32 are largely a series of letters reporting on various, distinct events. We see George recount some of his memories of pre-History as Johor without quite realizing their full significance. We see Rachel desperate to protect George from assassination, putting herself in danger to save him. This risky maneuver ends in her death. In some ways, she is a martyr for George's cause. Benjamin is also in dire straits for George's cause, enduring 're-education' in a Shammat re-education camp.



Chapter 33

Chapter 33 Summary

Chapter 33: (p. 300) Comrade Chen Liu reports

This chapter is a series of letters from Chen Liu to various other individuals and councils about George's activities and the political movements within the youth armies. He describes that all the peoples historically oppressed by whites, Africans, South Americans, Native Americans, Asians, etc. want to put the white races on some kind of public trial. The youth armies yearn for revenge. The letters occur sporadically, updating the reader on the organization of the youth armies. The youth armies decide to stage a mock trial. George Sherban is picked to be the Prosecutor and John Brent-Oxford has been selected from a penal colony to defend the white peoples.

Several thousand representatives of the youth armies gather in Greece to stage the Mock Trial. Benjamin Sherban has left the re-education camp and is unaffected. He joins George. Five thousand representatives congregate in camps for the trial and the scene is fairly erratic, with all kinds of young peoples with different ideas. Apparently the camp is so excited as to border on rioting. The only elderly person present in the entire camp is John Brent-Oxford (Taufiq).

The Trial opens with George repeating the indictment: "that it is the white races of this world that have destroyed it, corrupt it, made possible the wars which have ruined it, have laid the basis for the war that we all fear ..." and on and on. The trial proceeds by George calling representatives of various races to the stand to report on the crimes that whites have committed against their peoples. George first calls an Asian woman to the stand, who condemns whites in ferocious terms. The next day a man from the Hopi tribe in the Southwest US is called to the stand. He proceeds to condemn whites as well. Next George calls Sharma Patel to the stand to represent Northern India. She spoke to British Imperial Rule over India. Various witnesses continue to detail the 'horrors' of the white races. Eventually George rests his case and John Brent-Oxford is invited to speak. He pleads guilty to everything, but argues very strongly that all the peoples represented were guilty of evils as well and copied the wicked practices of the whites. The next day George speaks to the crowd, noting that he is a mixture of many races. He then launches into a long speech detailing the evils that non-white races have perpetrated on each other, such as the Indian caste system, that the slave trade in Africa was run by Arabs, and so on. The Trial became an indictment of all of humanity, which was apparently the goal of George and John Brent-Oxford - to wake all peoples of Shikasta to see their generally depravity.

The Trial ends, but the amphitheater is bombed. John Brent-Oxford is killed by a rock and no one else is hurt. Many left; the entire Trial was anti-climatic. Chen Liu cannot understand what has happened but notes that the Trial elevated him to a position as undisputed leader and spokesman of all peoples, even though he only spoke a few



sentences at the trial. George never argues for any particularly strong political position, yet all peoples want to follow him. Chen Liu reorders his murder. But in a note as the reports end, Chen Liu and his friend KU Yuang were removed from their positions by a competing group. They were both arrested, re-educated, and killed.

Chapter 33 Analysis

Chapter 33 is the climax of the book - it is The Trial of the White Races. In some sense, it is the judgment of all of Shikasta, even its greatest villains. George and John Brent-Oxford - Canopean emissaries Johor and Taufiq - accuse first the whites than the representatives of all Shikasta peoples of great, deep and profound wickedness. The purpose of pointing out this depravity is to call the people to redemption, to find those few chosen who truly understand. Again, this bears deep affinities to Christianity and Judaism - the depravity of the people, the role of prophets exposing this corruption and calling the few, the 'remnant' to redemption.



Chapters 34 - 41

Chapters 34 - 41 Summary

Chapter 34: (p. 341) History of Shikasta, Period Between World Wars II and III. Summary Chapter.

The chapter notes that the people of Shikasta grow more restless and corrupt, and become interested in beings from space. Sirius has withdrawn their experiments and now Shammat, using the SOWF drained from Shikasta, is controlling the Puttioran Empire. But the cosmic disturbance interfering with the flow of SOWF to Shikasta is about to end and Shammat does not know when. This pushes them into a frenzy, draining resources from Shikasta at a faster rate. However, they are also degenerating. Shammat begins to fight each other as well. To cope, Canopus gathered a few remaining Shikastans who were not totally ruined by Shammat and organized them to lead the remaining Shikastans after the cosmic disturbance ends.

Chapter 35: (p. 347) Notes added to the above by Johor, Taufiq, Ussell, and others.

The emissaries report that Shikasta is about to undergo a cleansing apocalypse. They try to preserve genetic material to preserve for the after-time. During this period, war between races is an increasingly likelihood.

Chapter 36: (p. 349) Shammat Transmission

This chapter is a Shammat Transmission rejoicing in the flow of SOWF from Shikasta to Shammat, but the letter is full of praises and makes little sense. Clearly the Shammat have been utterly corrupted.

Chapter 37: (p. 350) Lynda Coldridge and Doctor Hebert to Benjamin Sherban

Lynda Coldridge, the woman with the mental disorder earlier in the book, writes to Benjamin on George's request. She and Doctor Hebert are training people to more effectively receive SOWF in preparation for the new time. Doctor Hebert sends a similar note, in particular commenting on he'd recovered his own SOWF receiving abilities from Lynda.

Chapter 38: (p. 353) Benjamin Sherban to George Sherban

Benjamin reports briefly that his five hundred folks are building a new city in a remote place and that it goes well.

Chapter 39: (p. 354) George Sherban to Sharma Patel.

George expresses some feelings to Sharma but does not send the letter.



Chapter 40: (p. 355) From Suzannah in Camp 7, the Andes, to George Sherban

Suzannah sends a loving report to George. Clearly they are back together and Sharma is out of the picture. She is pregnant with George's child.

Chapter 41: (p. 357) From Kassim Sherban

Kassim sends a letter to Leila, Suzannah and Suzannah's child, Rachel. The peoples George has organized have survived the apocalypse. Kassim describes the reintroduction of large quantities of SOWF. The new towns are like the towns of pre-history, built in certain shapes with rock formations to transmit the SOWF. Kassim describes picking up new people in his travels and their stories of recovering long lost faculties. He notes that George was once thought to be unique, but there are more and more 'George-people' all the time - people like George. Benjamin dies and Suzannah has a new child named Benjamin. George tells Kassim that he is going to Europe but that after he sets up some cities their, his job will be finished. Then he will die. Kassim ends the book with a lament for the Shikastan peoples without the SOWF, for us, really, and all our tragedies.

Chapters 34 - 41 Analysis

Chapters 34 - 41 are the book's denouement. Although the apocalypse has not yet occurred in Chapters 34 - 40, George, Benjamin and others begin to organize new cities in far away places to survive the apocalypse and prepare for the reception of SOWF once more. This in some ways reflects the story of Revelation in the Christian Bible - where a remnant of people are left on earth during a greatly corrupt time and somehow remain holy until they are called home and the rest of the world destroyed. Chapter 41 is the re-creation of the earth and the re-creation of the heavens that were once full of war of Shammat against Shammat. Kassim ends the book with a reflection of the newness of the people, their rebirth - and how they are reborn in the image of George. Again, this is importantly similar to Christianity and Judaism and the tales of redemption they hold in common.



Characters

Johor/George Sherban

Johor is perhaps the main character of the book. He is an emissary from Canopus who is often responsible for overseeing the development of Canopean colonies. He is one of the main emissaries put in charge of the development of Rohanda and spends a great deal of time there. Johor incarnates into a Native Shikastan at two different times in its history, first in pre-history where he informs the Giants that a cosmic disturbance is about to disrupt the flow of SOWF to Rohanda and to help the Giants leave the planet. He also teaches the Natives some of the basic rules of morality in order to help them survive the coming SOWF shortage. Finally, he locates the Shammatt transmitter and discovers how the Shammatt are taking systematic advantage of Rohanda.

Johor, like other Canopean emissaries, has telepathic powers that can influence native Shikastans and other emissaries that are incarnated as natives. He spends some time attempting to 'wake up' Taufiq/John Brent-Oxford and eventually decides that he must incarnate against to help Shikastans realize their incredible wickedness and prepare those few remaining Shikastans who 'understand' for the coming apocalypse and re-establishment of the SOWF flow.

He incarnates as George Sherban, a child of mixed race from parents Olga and Simon. As a child and teenager he is sensed by those around him to have a kind of special power. He learns incredibly quickly, can speak to others in ways beyond the understanding of most, and is incredibly charismatic without taking any particular position. George lives with a deep sense of purpose to redeem the world - he organizes youth armies and ultimately becomes their leader. He uses the youth armies to gather the remaining 'best' Shikastans that will survive the apocalypse and uses The Trial near the end of the book to wake up the remaining Shikastans to their utter depravity. Finally, after the apocalypse, George helps the remaining Shikastans set up the same ancient cities as the Natives and Giants had in pre-history and dies.

Taufiq/John Brent-Oxford

Taufiq is another Canopean Emissary who is responsible for overseeing Shikasta. It becomes clear in Taufiq's reports from Shikasta that he does not like the job. He requests numerous times to be transferred. Finally, he is asked to engage in a great mission - to incarnate as a British man, John Brent-Oxford. He is to become a lawyer, finding several important Shikastans that are more alive than most and using their life stories and conflicts to wake up Shikasta. Earlier in Shikastan history, after the breaking of the Lock, Taufiq is responsible for attempts to redeem the Shammatt pollution of the Shikastan genomes, and comes to dislike the struggle against the inevitable corruption of the Shikastans. When he incarnates as John Brent-Oxford, he strays from his important task. He becomes a major politician in the British Labour Party, and forgets



the practice of law almost entirely for awhile. This leads Johor to report on several important individuals that Taufiq was not around to help and how this made the task of preparing Shikasta for the apocalypse all the more difficult.

When Johor incarnates as George Sherban, he eventually runs into John Brent-Oxford, who has been imprisoned by the British Dictatorship and is hated by the Youth Armies, as at this time he is quite old. At The Trial, where the crimes of the white races are put on full display, George is the Prosecutor and John is appointed as the defendant. After many days of accusations of evil laid at the white races' feet, John admits to the charges but makes a countercharge: that all the other races are wicked as well. This trial makes it clear to all Shikastans that they are all wicked. After the end of the trial, someone bombs the amphitheatre where the Trial takes place and John Brent-Oxford is killed.

Ben/Benjamin Sherban

Ben is a companion of Johor's from Shikasta pre-history. Johor originally finds Ben stuck in the nether-region where un-incarnated Shikasta souls await re-birth. Ben and his companion Rilla are being led by Johor's friend Raneer to reincarnate. But in this realm, these disembodied souls are easily confused and Johor must lead them bit by bit to be reborn. Ben is reincarnated as Benjamin Sherban, George's brother. Benjamin has a distinct appearance from George, but is also of mixed-race due to his parents. He is a gossip, raucous and resentful child, but as he grows up he finds a sense of purpose in life. He runs one of the Youth Camps and eventually comes to lead the youngest of the Youth Army children - ages 8 - 14. He leads them to meet George at the Trial. Afterwards, he helps George organize new cities that will survive the Apocalypse and then helps to build the new cities on Shikasta before dying.

Rilla/Rachel Sherban

Rilla is Ben's companion in the nether-regions of Zone Six. She reincarnates as Rachel Sherban, the youngest of the three Sherban children. Her journals comprise much of the second half of the book. Rachel is often jealous of her brother George, as George seems to garner so much attention and to have such great intelligence, wisdom and charisma. She is jealous of the attention he receives from others, particularly Suzannah. She begrudgingly accepts the jobs that he assigns to her. When he assigns her to raise young orphan children with 'special' abilities, Kassim and Leila and asks that she do so at a home with Suzannah, she becomes restless. Eventually she hears of a plot of George's life, disguises herself as him, is apprehended by French world police, and commits suicide.

Jarsum

Jarsum is one of the Giants from Rohandan/Shikasta pre-history. When the Lock breaks, he is one of the Giants that refuses to leave and leads the other Giants away



from the now-broken down ancient cities to their own settlement, where he becomes King. After the Giants die, they are trapped in the nether-regions of Zone Six. Johor visits them from time to time and tries to reason with them, but to no avail.

David

David is a Native Shikasta from pre-history. He and his daughter Sais are charged by Johor with the task of spreading the Laws of Canopus - or the basic structure of morality that the Natives run the risk of forgetting since the breaking of the Lock.

Sais

Sais, David's daughter, becomes the major prophetess of this early, Pre-History spreading of the moral law, as she is more together and intelligent than her father.

White Giant

The freakish, white giant is a genetic aberration among the Pre-History giants. She eventually becomes Jarsum's queen.

Sirian Agents

The Canopean empire has an ally, the Sirian empire. Sirius and Canopus divided up Shikasta into two halves, Canopus taking the Northern hemisphere and Sirius taking the Southern hemisphere. They primarily are interested in genetic experiments on animals and other humanoid races. But when the experiments are complete, they often remove the species from the Shikasta to another area. Sirius keeps agents around on Shikasta throughout its history, and helps Canopus thwart Shammat.

Shammat

Shammat is the villain race in the book. They are a renegade planet of the enemy empire Puttioria. Their planet is one of the largest in the Galaxy and is utterly barren. Everything they have they take from elsewhere. Shammat agents prepare to drain SOWF from Shikasta for their own gain before the cosmic disturbance by placing a transmitter on the planet. However, they gradually interfere with Shikastan genetics to make the Shikastan natives themselves the transmitters. When Shikastans are immoral and excessively individualistic, Shammat gains energy and power. Shammat becomes one of the richest and most lavish planets in the galaxy as a result. But as the cosmic disturbance reaches its end, Shammat begin to grow hysterical and degenerated themselves and ultimately destroy themselves in civil war.



Individuals One - Eight

Part of the book describes eight nameless individuals who are 'special' Shikastans capable of making an impact on history and re-awakening many Shikastans to their sad state. Most of them are ones that Taufiq could have helped, and that Johor struggled to help but could not.

Lynda Coleridge

Lynda Coleridge is an apparently psychologically damaged woman some of whose journal entries are recorded in the book. She is one of the 'special' Shikastans, able to receive more SOWF. She is one of the leaders after the apocalypse that helps to rebuild.

Dr. George Hebert

Dr. George Hebert is originally Lynda Coleridge's psychiatrist. Over time, however, he becomes her student in unlocking his own SOWF-receiving faculties.

Ranee

A friend of Johor's who helps Ben and Rilla through the nether-regions of Zone Six.

The Giants

The Giants are a race of large, long-living humanoids that have few children. They are introduced onto Shikasta by the Canopeans to aid the evolution and improvement of the natives. After millennia, they become accustomed to aiding the Natives, and after the Locke breaks, many decide to stay on Shikasta against Canopean orders. They die and many of their souls are locked in the nether-regions of Zone Six.

The Natives

The Natives are humans, the species that achieved sentience through evolution on Shikasta. With the SOWF flow, they live in harmony with one another for ages, but as the SOWF flow breaks down they decay into a race of savages with short lives, disease, war, and hatred. Their birth, rise, fall and rebirth is the story of Shikasta.



Olga and Simon Sherban

The multi-racial parents of George, Benjamin and Rachel Sherban. They go to great lengths to aid their children's development, particularly George's. Their long hours of work in difficult jobs exhaust them nearly to the point of death.

Hasan

One of George's mysterious teachers.

Suzannah

Suzannah is George's long-time lover and mother of his children. Rachel Sherban regards her as stupid and unworthy of George generally. Ultimately, Rachel comes to respect her maternal confidence.

Sharma Patel

Sharma Patel is leader of youth movements in Northern India. For a brief time, she is George's political ally, then lover. As time progresses, though, George returns to Suzannah and their relationship ends. She is one of the many witnesses for an oppressed people at The Trial.

Miriam

Miriam is a Jewish woman from New York and another one of George's teachers.

Shireen, Naseem, Fatima, Yusuf

Shireen and Naseem are a married Muslim couple with several children who share a flat with the Sherbans and have a major impact on Rachel. Fatima is Shireen's sister, and she ultimately married Yusuf.

Chen Liu

Chen Liu is a Chinese Spy and indirectly a Shammat agent who reports on the events of The Trial.



Youth Armies

The youth armies are organizations of young people in the last days of Shikasta that represent the political, economic and social interests of younger Shikastans. They play a major political role in the last days of Shikasta, and George uses them to organize people for survival of the Apocalypse.

Kassim and Leila Sherban

Kassim and Leila Sherban are orphans adopted by George and Suzannah. Rachel and Suzannah are charged with raising them while George is involved organizing the youth armies. They are set up to play a prominent role in the post-apocalyptic period of Shikasta.

The Canopeans

Canopus is the central planet of the Canopean Empire, the colonizers of Shikasta and the source of the emissaries, like Johor. They espouse a philosophy of love, harmony and fellow-feeling that they attempt to spread amongst the planets in their empire by way of a "Lock" that syncs up the Planet's energy flows. The Canopeans consider themselves "the children of the Purpose" which appears to be to bring everyone willing into a non-violent unity where they share love and energy, specifically through a common SOWF flow. We know little about their form, but they can incarnate as any concrete creature, so they are presumably very advanced. It is not clear why Lessing tells us so little about the Canopeans. Speculation suggests that she only means them to represent "the good guys."

The Sirians

The Sirians are a kind of neutral-good third-party in Shikasta. They were once enemies with the Canopeans long, long ago. However, since that war ended, they've been friends and allies. They set up experiments in Rohanda's southern hemisphere, but they removed their experiments once they were finish. However, they kept agents on the planet and they sometimes aid the Canopeans struggle to save Shikasta from the Shammat.

The Shammat

Shammat is the planet of the Shammat, the renegades stealing SOWF from Shikasta. The Shammat are the people living on a renegade planet within the Puttiorian empire, but after amassing great power from SOWF make Puttioria their puppet. We know little about them as well. What we do know is that their planet is the largest in the region and is barren, such that everything has to be imported, including energy. They get their



energy from the Shikastans, having converted their genetic material partly into SOWF transmitters. The Shammats generally speaking are a group of renegade pirates whose philosophy of life is to feast on the energy of others, the polar opposite of the Canopean philosophy.



Objects/Places

Rohanda/Shikasta

Rohanda/Shikasta is the colony of Canopus that is the setting of the book. It was always an unstable, quickly-changing planet, even before its corruption. The Canopeans and Sirians colonize it and perform various experiments on its animal, plant and human life. The Canopeans raise the Natives to a higher level of sentience in part through the introduction of the Giants. The Natives and Giants live in harmony for millennia until the flow of SOWF is disrupted by a cosmic disturbance and the Shammat. As the flow of SOWF dries up, the Canopeans call Rohanda Shikasta, "the stricken."

Canopus

Canopus is the central planet of the Canopean Empire, the colonizers of Shikasta and the source of the emissaries, like Johor. They espouse a philosophy of love, harmony and fellow-feeling that they attempt to spread amongst the planets in their empire by way of a "Lock" that syncs up the Planet's energy flows.

Sirius

A planet that is the center of the Sirian Empire, an ally Empire to Canopus. They engaged in various experiments in Shikasta's southern hemisphere during its pre-history and have agents on the planet until the last days. We know very little about them, although the author explores their experiments in a later novel. The Sirians were once at war with the Canopeans long, long ago, but since then they've been friendly allies.

Shammat/Puttioria

Shammat is the planet of the Shammat, the renegades stealing SOWF from Shikasta. They are a renegade planet within the Puttiorian empire, but after amassing great power from SOWF make Puttioria their puppet. We know little about them as well. What we do know is that their planet is the largest in the region and is barren, such that everything has to be imported, including energy. They get their energy from the Shikastans, having converted their genetic material partly into SOWF transmitters. The Shammat generally speaking are a group of renegade pirates whose philosophy of life is to feast on the energy of others.

Northwest Fringes, Isolated Northern Continent

These are apparent references to the United States and the United Kingdom.



Shammat Transmitter/Effluon 3

The Shammat Transmitter is on Rohanda during its pre-history and transmits information across Shammat perhaps into the Shikastan genetic code and transmits SOWF to Shammat. It is composed of a substance known as Effluon 3 that will quickly decay. Encountering the transmitter causes Johor to have physical ailments for a brief time.

The Signature

The Signature is a device that Johor has in pre-history and in the nether-regions of Zone Six that is used to remind Shikastans of the authority of Canopus.

Ancient Geometrical Cities

The ancient geometrical cities are built in Shikastan pre-history in a geometric form to facilitate the transmission of SOWF.

SOWF

SOWF stands for Substance-of-We-Feeling. It is the substance that keeps the Canopean Empire in harmony and gives individuals a sense of community and love for one another. It eliminates conflict and promotes cooperation. The problems on Shikasta are caused by a significant dwindling of the supply of SOWF.

Zone Six

Shikasta is composed of several 'shells' or concentric worlds. Zone Six is the innermost shell and is where the Natives live. In the outer regions of Zone Six, the souls of the dead awaiting reincarnation are held in misery. Johor spends some time there interacting with its inhabitants.

Youth Camp

A youth camp is where members of the youth armies live and are trained and educated. Benjamin Sherban runs one such camp.

The Trial

The Trial occurs in an amphitheater in Greece. It is a trial concerning the crimes of the white races against all the other peoples of Shikasta.

The Lock

The Lock is a procedure that the Canopeans use to harmonize the energy-flow and SOWF flow between all the planets in their empire. The Lock begins when a society is mature enough to enter into this intimate relationship of sharing and when their cities are set-up to receive the SOWF. On Shikasta, this is accomplished through geometrically shaped cities and rock formations. The Lock "locks" the (then) Rohandans into harmony with Canopus and its other colonies.



Themes

Natural Harmonies

There is a very strong theme of natural harmonies in Shikasta. The natural state of all beings in the Canopean empire is to be in harmony with one another. The Canopeans aid the process of linking together. They attempt to impose a "Lock" on all of their colonies that brings together the SOWF - or the "substance-of-we-feeling" which binds all planets and beings on those planets in harmony with one another. The idea of harmony in Shikasta, however, is complicated. It appears that harmony among humans means that individuals never use violence against one another and naturally cooperate. They do not consider their interests as individuals but only the common good. Thus "harmony" appears to mean that individual interests do not conflict in societies in harmony. There is peace, prosperity, love and long life. Another sense of harmony is love, and in fact Shikasta begins on this theme. The SOWF is really just a fellow-feeling or love for one's fellow man. Thus harmony is love, unselfishness, cooperation and the compatibility of individual's interests. What's notable in particular though is that the SOWF flow can be aided and amplified with certain living formations. The cities on Shikasta with a high SOWF flow are strict geometrical forms and they contain within them rock formations that aid the flow of SOWF. Some activity and direction then is needed to keep the SOWF flow high.

The idea of natural harmony of this sort is common in many world religions - in the pre-Christian Fall, the Odic Force, and the notions of Mana and Qi. Lessing attempts to give her own interpretation of this same, millennia old idea.

Total Depravity of Humanity and the Possibility of Redemptio

One common theme in Shikasta is the nature of the Shikastan populace without the regular flow of SOWF. Without SOWF, the pre-historical Shikastan societies break down. They once lived in peace and harmony, within geometrical cities. They had great natural knowledge and directly shared the ideas of their entire culture with one another naturally. They had no war, no fighting, and not even the notion of an 'enemy'. Without the SOWF, war, death, plague, short life, evil, oppression, cruelty, exploitation, economic inequality all rear their heads. The Shikastans have become totally and utterly depraved, wicked and sinful. The goodness of life is fleeting and tragic in its shortness. The author describes the history of Shikasta in the worst terms, point out all the war, the oppression, imperialism, theft, murder, torture, gassing, genocide and so on. She describes the malaise of the Shikastan populace, the struggle they face finding meaning in their lives and their inability to experience love for centuries because their lives are too short.



On the other hand, the author leaves the Shikastans not wholly without hope. Some Shikastans still "understand" and can receive higher degrees of SOWF. Sometimes they recover memories of old abilities and can sometimes use them, as is the case with Lynda Coleridge. Also, the Shikastans have 'angelic' aides in the form of Johor and the other emissaries. They can send thoughts to the Shikastans and also incarnate as Shikastans and interact with them directly. Further, the cosmic disturbance is coming to an end eventually, so the salvation of the Shikastan populace is in the future, even if they must pass through catastrophe first.

Anti-Individualism

A pervasive condemnation of individualism animates the book. Individualism is sometimes understood as the social philosophy that holds that the needs and interests of the individual are morally primary or deserve moral consideration before the needs and interests of the community. Lessing and the Canopeans she animates are clearly hostile to this philosophy of life. The animating force of the universe - the substance-of-we-feeling is explicitly anti-individualistic even in name. A society is in harmony when the interest of the individual is in submission to the common good. And the SOWF removes individuals' desires to promote their own interests over the interests of other.

An example of this is illustrated explicitly when Johor in his pre-history incarnation attempts to explain to the Giants that they must be removed from Rohanda. However, they will not survive as a group but "as individuals". They could not comprehend the horror of existing merely as individuals, and some considered this a fate worse than death, so badly in fact that they refused to leave.

Individual runs rampant on Shikasta, particularly among the white races. This leads them to have trouble understanding the modes of thought in other cultures. They are only able to think of things from their own perspective. It also leads them to commit savage, brutal acts against the non-white races, sometimes enslaving them. Further, it leads them to pursue their economic self-interest above the economic interests of others, leading to vast inequalities of wealth.



Style

Point of View

The perspective of Shikasta varies significantly with which character is speaking or reporting. The reports of the emissaries are often short and unemotional, but sometimes they express care and distress. Some records are much longer than others. The records of Sirian agents and Chinese agents are also fairly unemotional. But they often related their personal opinions. Taufiq, for instance, is concerned to escape duty as a Canopean Emissary. Johor feels a strong sense of tragedy and responsibility for the Shikastans. Chen Liu, the Shammatt Agent, is disgusted by the youth armies and white people particularly. The Sirian transmissions are fairly nondescript. However, there are detailed copies of journal entries by various individuals, particularly Rachel Sherban and Lynda Coleride. Lynda's perspective is that of a very intelligent, mentally ill individual; her thoughts are sporadic, easily distracted and full of delusions, although some of them turn out to be accurate. Rachel's writings are appropriate to a journaling format, full of her own thoughts, hopes, fears, hatreds and loves. There are letters in Shikasta as well, which reflect the attitudes and perspective of the author.

While the perspective varies due to the character but the author's perspective seems most closely aligned with Johor. Shikastans are wicked, need SOWF and their wickedness manifests itself in inequalities, materialism, individualism, dictatorship, police states, oppressive religion, crime, war, and meaninglessness.

Setting

Rohanda/Shikasta is the colony of Canopus that is the setting of the book. It was always an unstable, quickly-changing planet, even before its corruption. The Canopeans and Sirians colonize it and perform various experiments on its animal, plant and human life. The Canopeans raise the Natives to a higher level of sentience in part through the introduction of the Giants. The Natives and Giants live in harmony for millennia until the flow of SOWF is disrupted by a cosmic disturbance and the Shammatt. As the flow of SOWF dries up, the Canopeans call Rohanda Shikasta, "the stricken."

The Canopean empire is centered on Canopus. And the Canopeans are the colonizers of Shikasta and the sources of emissaries, like Johor. They bring a philosophy of love, harmony and fellow feeling to Rohanda but are thwarted by the Shammatt and a cosmic disturbance that disrupts the flow of SOWF. They attempt to maintain the flow of SOWF through "The Lock" which syncs up the Planet's energy flows. The setting of the book is primarily on Shikasta after the SOWF flow is disrupted. Part II of the book occurs in the '20th century' on Shikasta - analogous to the 20th century of earth - the height of Shikasta's depravity. The events of the book in this century occur all over the world, in part to maintain that the story of Shikasta is the story of the corruption of the peoples of earth as a whole.



Language and Meaning

The tone of the book again varies from author to author. But the vast majority of the characters write against a broad background of sorrow. The story of Shikasta is largely a tragedy, although it ends with a rebirth. It is the tale of a planet that has been deprived of a sense of community and as a result is the victim of short lives, disease, hatred, pollution, war, slavery and a thousand other forms of oppression. The primary character - Johor/George Sherban speaks in this tone most clearly. He is often sad and from time to time is strongly condemnatory. The entire book and his writings in particular evince the acceptance of a tragic, catastrophic but inevitable decline. There is, however, a glimmer of hope. Sometimes the SOWF can be brought out in particular individuals and there is also hope that some Shikastans may survive the planet-wide apocalypse. The purpose of Johor's incarnation as George Sherban is to prepare for survival.

The author seems to phrase her characters, particularly the Canopean observers, as sharing a kind of ideology, although Lessing herself appears to believe that the view she expresses is beyond ideology. She has a strong communitarian streak, believing that individualism leads to social chaos. She is also a strong feminist, talking often about the oppression of women and other marginalized groups. She has the tone of an anti-imperialist, arguing that the European Empires were incredibly destructive and that this imperialism was due to a particular wicked culture. She also has a secularist inclination as well, rejecting religious as largely dangerous, particularly Christianity.

The language of the book reflects this tone very strongly. In different passages, the language and meaning of the book is condemnatory, harsh and full of tragedy. Shikasta is the story of the corruption of an entire species - the Shikastans - and the meaning of the terms in the book reflects this. The author is a Western feminist - as such she is harshly critical of the masculine, oppressive culture she sees as common in the West. The book promotes equality, non-violence, community, and the primacy of the common good. Sometimes her word choices are deeply emotional but other times the author's attitudes are restrained in, for instance, the historical records cited in the book. They report the events of Shikastan history in fairly non-emotional terms, but they make substantive value judgments.

Structure

The Structure of the book is very unusual. It is meant to be a compilation of documents relating to various disparate, yet connected events in Shikasta's history. It is composed of archival records, reports from emissaries and primary sources from the Shikastans involved. It also contains reports from Sirian and Shammatan agents. There are no chapter headings whatsoever. Instead, the book proceeds largely in chronological order but jumps between writing styles and even fonts every few pages or so.

Let's describe each type of document recorded in the book. First, there are archival records. They are usually taken from the History of Shikasta series from a particular volume. These reports are useful for students studying Shikastan history and are written

in bold type and have a very official tone. Second, there are emissary reports, particularly from Johor and Taufiq. They report back to Canopus on the status of their missions; these letters reflect their various attitudes at the time. There are primary sources - letters from significant individuals, records of their histories, journal entries from these individuals, and so on. Finally, there are reports from non-Canopean agents, like Sirian, Shikastan and Shammat agents that have apparently been collected by Canopean agents over time. These four types of documents give the book a very piecemeal structure.



Quotes

"Yes, I do believe that it is possible, and not only for novelists, to 'plug in' to an overmind, or Ur-mind, or unconscious, or what you will ..." (ix).

"What these rules amount to, I would say, is love." (3)

"But it was Shikasta now: Shikasta the hurt, the damaged, the wounded one. The name had already been changed." (24)

"I said to them that those who decided to stay would be committing Disobedience. For the first time in their history, they would not be in conformity with Canopean Law." (46)

"Shammat had fixed itself into the nature of the Shikastan breed, and it was they who were now the transmitter, feeding Shammat." (68)

"This was true of all sects, groupings, 'parties': for what was remarkable about this particular time was how much they all resembled each other, while they spent most of their energies in describing and denigrating differences that they imagined existed between them." (78)

"It will have been noted that none of the individuals categorised here was among those identified with a particular injustice, such as suffering under an arbitrary or tyrannous power, or being deprived of a country, or persecuted for being one of a despised or subjugated race, or kept in poverty by the thoughtless, the careless, or the cruel." (144)

"The 5 percent of sight hearing etc. is energies. ... The answer is some people are born to receive not 5 percent but perhaps 6 percent. Or 7 percent. Or even more. But if you are a 5 percent person and suddenly a shock opens you to 6 then you are 'mad'." (186)

"I see that our education has been far from ordinary. I am seeing a lot of things for the first time ..." (211)

"I understood that I was understanding. I could have understood before, that when George is with Hasan and Hasan is talking, George is hearing things in what Hasan is saying that are quite beyond me. That I can't hear at all." (226)

"He is being educated for something different." (254)

"I open this Trial with an indictment. This is the indictment. That it is the white races of this world that have destroyed it ..." (315)

"Why is it that you, the accusers, have adopted with such energy and efficiency the ways you have been criticizing?" (335)

"There are more and more George-people all the time." (360)



"I can't stop thinking of them, our ancestors, the poor animal-men, always murdering and destroying because they couldn't help it." (364)

"And here we all are together, here we are ..."



Topics for Discussion

Name at least three direct analogies between Shikasta history and the Torah/Old Testament.

How is the Fall of Shikasta different from the Fall of humanity in world religions?

What is the SOWF? Is it a feeling? A substance? How is it transmitted? What does it do? What does losing it produce?

How do the Shammat bring about the demise of Shikasta? How does their role in corrupting Shikasta lead to their own demise?

What does it mean for an individual like Lynda Coleridge, Individuals One through Eight and George to be 'special'?

To what extent do you think that George Sherban is aware that he is Johor? In his teenage years? In his adult years? After the apocalypse?

What is the significance of anti-individualism in the book?

How does the theme of natural harmony play out in the book?

Please explain the theme of fall and redemption in Shikasta.