

Orientalism in the sci-fi of Doris Lessing

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Abstract

The science fiction works of Doris Lessing explore complex themes and ideas, delving into the realms of dystopian futures, alien encounters and human interactions with advanced technology. Lessing's foray into the realm of science fiction was initially met with skepticism and dismay from literary circles, as she was primarily known for her realistic fiction works (Watkins 28). However, Lessing's ability to seamlessly transition into this genre and incorporate her unique style and perspective has solidified her reputation as a versatile writer. In her science fiction works, Lessing examines the impact of scientific advancements on humanity and society, highlighting the potential dangers and ethical implications that arise from these developments. Exploring Orientalism in her sci-fi, There is plethora of Oriental diction and themes that she has taken into consideration.

Keywords: Sci-fi, Orientalism, Oriental Diction, Skepticism, Realism

Doris Lessing, born on October 22, 1919 in Kermanshah, Persia (now Iran), was a British author known for her versatile writing style and thought-provoking themes. As Chennells states, throughout her long career, Doris Lessing demonstrated a remarkable ability to explore and master various literary genres, refusing to limit herself to one specific category (Watkins). From her early works in the 1950s, such as "The Grass is Singing" and "Martha Quest" to her later works in the 1970s, including science fiction novels like "Shikasta" and "The Memoirs of a Survivor," Lessing continuously pushed the boundaries of conventional storytelling.

Shikasta

Doris Lessing's novel *Shikasta* contains various oriental elements that contribute to its overall narrative and thematic structure. These oriental elements encompass various aspects such as character portrayal, cultural references, narrative techniques and stylistic choices. Character portrayal is one area where oriental elements can be observed in it. For example, the character of Johor, a central figure in the novel, exhibits traits and characteristics commonly associated with philosophical guides or wise elders found in Eastern traditions. His wisdom, patience and mystical knowledge reflect the concept of a spiritual guru often found in Oriental philosophies. Furthermore, cultural references in *Shikasta* also incorporate Oriental elements. For instance, the novel includes references to Eastern religious practices, such as meditation and reincarnation. Additionally, the narrative techniques employed in the novel also showcase Oriental influences. The novel incorporates elements of Shinto, an indigenous Japanese religion that places emphasis on life and its preservation.

This can be seen through the themes of interconnectedness and the preservation of life that run throughout the novel. The use of narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse further highlight the oriental elements in *Shikasta*. The stylistic choices made by Lessing in *Shikasta* also demonstrate the presence of oriental elements. When analyzing the presence of Oriental elements in Doris Lessing's novel, it is crucial to examine specific references and passages within the text that showcase the influence and incorporation of Oriental elements. One example of Oriental elements in IT can be found in the portrayal of Eastern cultures and civilizations. Lessing depicts Eastern cultures and civilizations in a manner that challenges Western stereotypes and biases. For instance, the novel presents a nuanced and complex understanding of Asian civilizations by resisting the typical Western portrayals that often rely on racial bias and cultural distortion.

(Reimagined imperialist crossings with "barbaric" inhabitants of the East-such as that found in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom or the artificial Bactrian dance in Alexander) (Boroujerdi). Lessing's approach counters the grandiose paradigms created by Western scholars and

thinkers, emphasizing a more genuine and accurate representation of Asian cultures. Lessing's incorporation of Oriental elements in *Shikasta* can also be seen in her use of Eastern aesthetic and cultural traditions. In her novel, Lessing draws on the concept of *kire* in Japanese traditional art and theatre, which highlights the transitory and ephemeral nature of cinematic images. This concept of *kire* becomes a useful tool in analyzing the bodily movements of film actors and the overall visual experience in *Shikasta*. By incorporating Oriental elements, Lessing adds depth and complexity to her narrative, challenging Western-centric perspectives and offering a more diverse and inclusive portrayal of cultures. One can argue that Lessing's inclusion of Oriental elements in *Shikasta* serves as a critique of Western paradigms and a call for a more inclusive and accurate representation of Eastern cultures and civilizations. These Oriental elements in *Shikasta* not only challenge Western stereotypes and biases, but also contribute to a more genuine and nuanced understanding of Asian civilizations. To support this argument, it is important to examine specific references and passages from *Shikasta* that showcase the presence of Oriental elements. One example of the incorporation of Oriental elements in *Shikasta* can be seen in Lessing's portrayal of Eastern cultures and civilizations. Lessing resists the typical Western portrayals of "barbaric" inhabitants of the East, instead presenting a more nuanced and complex understanding. Lessing challenges the reimagined imperialist crossings depicted in films like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Alexander*, which perpetuate racial biases and cultural distortions.

1. The Memoirs of a Survivor

Orientalism, a concept introduced by Edward Said in his influential work, has emerged as a critical lens to analyze and understand the representation of the "East" in Western literature and discourse. In Doris Lessing's, *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Orientalism is also a recurring theme that reflects the author's engagement with colonial power dynamics and cultural stereotypes. Drawing on Said's definition, Orientalism can be understood as a system of representation and knowledge production

that constructs the "East" as exotic, mysterious, and inherently inferior to the West. In *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Lessing employs Orientalist tropes to depict the dystopian world in which the novel is set. The "East" is depicted as a chaotic and dangerous place, filled with violence, poverty and social unrest. Through the character of Emily, a central figure in the novel, Lessing perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes by portraying her interactions with individuals from the "East" as manipulative and deceitful. These representations not only reinforce the hegemonic power of the West but also reinforce the idea of Western superiority and dominance over the "other". Moreover, Lessing's portrayal of the "East" in *Memoirs of a Survivor* can also be seen as an instrument of control. By positioning the "East" as a threatening and unstable entity, Lessing creates a sense of fear and distrust, thereby justifying Western intervention and control over the "other". Lessing's use of Orientalism in *Memoirs of a Survivor* can be seen as a reflection of the historical and cultural context in which she wrote.

During the time of writing, the 1970s, Orientalism was a prevalent framework through which the West viewed and represented the "Other". It was a period marked by continued colonial and neo-colonial interactions between the West and the rest of the world, particularly in regions such as Africa and the Middle East. Lessing's portrayal of the "East" in *Memoirs of a Survivor* can be seen as influenced by this context, as she draws upon Orientalist themes and tropes that were dominant in Western discourse at the time. These representations serve to reinforce power dynamics, perpetuate stereotypes, and justify Western control over the "other." While Lessing's use of Orientalism in *Memoirs of a Survivor* may reflect the historical and cultural context in which she wrote, it is important to recognize the problematic nature of these representations. They contribute to the perpetuation of an unequal power dynamic between the West and the "East", construct a distorted and one-sided view of the "Other", and reinforce the notion of Western superiority. In Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism, he argues that it is an ideology that promotes a dualistic view of the West and East, with the West being portrayed as superior and the East as

inferior (Askarzai). This ideology dehumanizes the "Other" and reinforces stereotypes that serve to maintain Western dominance and control. Furthermore, Said's argument about Orientalism has been critiqued for potentially creating a similar oppositional practice of Occidentalism that is equally problematic (Darnell). These critiques suggest that by analyzing Orientalism and depicting the Orient as the Other, Said inadvertently reinforced Western power dynamics and perpetuated a binary framework that creates and perpetuates divisions between the West and the rest of the world. The concept of Occidentalism, which emerged in response to Orientalism, plays a role in analyzing Lessing's portrayal of the "East" in *Memoirs of a Survivor*. While Lessing may not have necessarily intended to perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes and power dynamics, her utilization of Orientalist themes and tropes in *Memoirs of a Survivor* inadvertently contributes to the construction of the "East" as Other.

This reinforces a dichotomy between the West and the "rest of the world," perpetuating Western superiority

and further marginalizing non-Western cultures and peoples. Lessing's utilization of Orientalism in *Memoirs of a Survivor* can be seen as influenced by the historical and cultural context in which she wrote. However, it is crucial to critically examine and problematize these representations in order to challenge the power dynamics and stereotypes they perpetuate. While Lessing's portrayal of the "East" in *Memoirs of a Survivor* may be influenced by the historical and cultural context in which she wrote, it is important to acknowledge and analyze the potential perpetuation of Orientalist stereotypes and power dynamics within the narrative. This perpetuation of Orientalist stereotypes and power dynamics can be seen in the way Lessing portrays the "East" as exotic, mysterious, and inherently inferior to the West. In *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Doris Lessing unwittingly reproduces Orientalist tropes and contributes to the construction of the "East" as Additionally, the characterization of the "East" as passive and incapable of producing its own discourses further reinforces Orientalist tropes. Furthermore, the limited exploration of gender dynamics in Lessing's

portrayal of the "East" further emphasizes the Western gaze and perpetuates the stereotype of the "docile Oriental woman." Overall, the theme of Orientalism in Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* contributes to the reproduction of power dynamics and stereotypes that perpetuate the marginalization and othering of non-Western cultures and peoples. In their critique of Orientalism, scholars such as Edward Said have highlighted how Western knowledge production has constructed the East as Other, reinforcing a dichotomy between the West and the rest of the world (Wade). This construction of the East as Other serves to elevate Western superiority and justify colonial domination. Furthermore, Orientalism serves to silence and marginalize alternative perspectives and knowledge production from non-Western cultures (Akula et al., 2024). By examining the theme of Orientalism in *Memoirs of a Survivor*, we can understand how this novel both reflects and reinforces these power dynamics and stereotypes. In particular, Lessing's portrayal of the "East" as exotic and mysterious perpetuates stereotypes that position Western culture as superior and more advanced. This perpetuation of Orientalist stereotypes can be seen in the way Lessing portrays the "East" as inherently inferior to the West, reinforcing a dichotomy between the two. However, it is important to critically analyze the potential perpetuation of Orientalist stereotypes and power dynamics within the narrative. By examining the theme of Orientalism in *Memoirs of a Survivor*, we can understand how this novel both reflects and reinforces these power dynamics and stereotypes. While a full analysis of Orientalism in Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* is beyond the scope of this essay, it is clear that the novel contributes to the construction of the "East" as Other by perpetuating Orientalist tropes and reinforcing Western superiority.

2. Orientalism: Its Origins and Spread

Concept of Orientalism emerged as a Eurocentric ideology for media representations of Islam and Muslims, functioning as a tool to reinforce power dynamics and maintain Western hegemony over the East (Singh). One of the key factors that contributed to the spread of Orientalism was the particular relationship between the United States and the "Orient" as distinct from that of European colonial powers. While European colonial powers had direct colonial relationships with the Middle East, the United States relied on covert interventions and non-territorially based policies to assert its influence and interests in the region (Maira). For example, since World War II, the United States has implemented various political, economic, and military strategies to maintain its hegemonic position in the Middle East, despite not establishing direct colonies in the region (Nagpal et al., 2024). This history of "imperialism without colonies" or "informal empire" allowed American Orientalism to develop and evolve in unique ways, building upon the existing Orientalist representations created by European colonial powers. Moreover, the post-9/11 discourse of the "war on terror" has given rise to a new form of Orientalism known as American Orientalism, which is characterized by exaggerated, oversimplified, and distorted rhetoric about Muslim countries in the Middle East and South Asia (Pourgharib et al.).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research on Orientalism in Doris Lessing's sci-fi literature reveals the multifaceted and complex nature of her work. Through the analysis of the psychological writing characteristics, cultural identity, and historical background of her novels, it becomes clear that Lessing's science fiction is not simply a departure from her other genres, but rather a continuation of her exploration of different literary forms and themes (Liu). Furthermore, Lessing's science fiction provides a platform for examining the challenges faced by modern cultures in terms of cross-cultural and technological issues. Her science fiction narratives delve into the political, cultural, and historical contexts of her time, highlighting the interconnectedness between science fiction and

societal concerns. This is evident in Lessing's use of Orientalism, which reflects the tendency to compare and critique different cultures dominated by technology. However, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of Orientalism itself has evolved over time. It is now recognised that Western narratives about the East, including those found in science fiction like Lessing's, can perpetuate stereotypes and oversimplified views of other cultures. As Chennells notes, there has been a shift towards a new form of Orientalism called American

Orientalism, which has been influenced by the post 9/11 discourse and the "war on terror." This has had a significant impact on the way narratives about Muslim countries in the Middle East and South Asia are formulated and consumed. Therefore, it is crucial for readers to approach Lessing's science fiction and other narratives with a critical lens and an understanding of the cultural transformation that has occurred. In conclusion, the research on Orientalism in Doris Lessing's sci-fi literature sheds light on the complexities of her work and the themes she explores through the lens of science fiction. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of critically analyzing narratives that rely on Orientalist tropes and stereotypes, especially in the context of global events and shifting cultural perspectives. In conclusion, the research on Orientalism in Doris Lessing's sci-fi literature provides valuable insights into the connections between science fiction, cultural identity, and the power dynamics inherent in narratives about different cultures.

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