



CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES

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DORIS LESSING AND WOMENS APPROPRIATION
OF SCIENCE FICTION

by

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The Production of 'Science Fiction'What is SF?

The purpose of this section is not to seek out some essential characteristics, formal or otherwise, which might conclusively answer that question.

That this would be a forlorn undertaking is suggested by the diversity of the following 'definitions' of SF:

...Robert Scholes views it as the literature of the Darwinian and Einsteinian revolution which has 'replaced Historical Man with Structural Man'. Alvin Toffler suggests that its function is to help its readers adjust to 'future shock' or the constantly accelerating pace of social and technological change. And Scott Sanders argues that science fiction's tendency to present a de-individualized world of robots, androids, and featureless human beings results not from its artistic inadequacies but from its grasp of the phenomena of twentieth-century alienation.

(Parrinder, 1980, p.31)

Parrinder himself then proceeds to locate SF within the Literary traditions of Romance, Fable, Epic and finally, Parody. Kingsley Amis, admitting that his definition is 'cumbersome rather than memorable' suggests

Science fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesised on the basis of some innovation of science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin.

(Amis, 1961, p.18)

Darko Suvin devotes the first three chapters of The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction to defending his definition of SF as 'the literature of cognitive estrangement'.

It is interesting that both Suvin and Parrinder apparently find it impossible to state overtly that SF merits attention because some of its texts create structures of meaning that are interesting for a variety of social, political, aesthetic or intellectual reasons. Their evaluation of particular SF texts, for example, imply that one criterion for 'good' SF is its subversive qualities, yet this implicit political judgement is concealed by its presentation in an aesthetic guise. Both of them resort to the modes and criteria of bourgeois criticism in claiming to identify a natural and enduring value inherent in the whole genre (when properly defined, of course). In particular Parrinder uses the co-ercive and flattering phrase

'if one cared to think about it', analogous to Leavis's famous 'It is so, is it not?' which implies that of course anyone of his reader's intelligence has cared to think about it and has reached the same conclusion. Suvin also makes use of a parallel construction to that of the Great Tradition, 'a literary tradition which is coherent through the ages and within itself'. My own belief is that the critic or commentator who claims knowledge about such traditions has first of all to construct the object of such knowledge; it does not pre-exist the discourse in which it is constructed.

I shall myself assume (following the arguments of Tony Bennett in his Formalism and Marxism), that the genre of SF exists (as does the canon of established literary works) only through a continuing cultural work of construction and reconstruction:

Written texts do not organise themselves into the 'literary' and the 'non-literary'. They are so organised only by the operations of criticism upon them. Far from reflecting a somehow natural or spontaneous system of relationships between written texts, literary criticism organises these texts into a system of relationships which is the product of its own discourse and of the distinctions between the 'literary' and the 'non-literary' which it operates.

(Bennett, 1979, p.7)

My own definition of SF would include as a minimum any text which calls itself SF. It is the existence of the total corpus of SF which has created the opportunities which women writers have more recently seized. In giving a brief account of the cultural practices that have produced SF I shall try to indicate how these processes are open to interventions of different kinds and so suggest how women writers and readers have been able to make their influence felt.

The existence of a self-defining 'great tradition' of literary texts has recently been the focus of sharp attack:

Literature...cannot exist without literary criticism, without, that is, literary ideology operating in and for the educational apparatus.

(Davis, 1978, p.10)

Nevertheless, such a construction as 'literature' is very well naturalised and its influences are hard to evade. It is also one of the practices through which SF is defined and continues to define itself. Obviously popular genres, (as well as the 'mainstream' novels, plays, and poems which are considered as 'minor'), are necessary to literary criticism as that against which 'real' literature can define itself.

Unlike readers and writers of such other genres as romances and westerns, SF enthusiasts seem to resist the classification of SF as inferior. John Baxter, himself an SF author, critic and film-maker has called this resistance a unique 'yearning for respectability'.⁽¹⁾ He also claimed that such was SF's down-market image that the 'better class' publishers held it at arms length when identified as such, and that a high proportion of its authors used pseudonyms to conceal their involvement in SF. What is important to notice here is that SF practitioners feel themselves to be marginalised; this is despite the fact that the SF market probably reaches a far wider audience and provides a better economic return than 'straight' literature. Doris Lessing has commented on the ironies of this situation:

'Mother Night' is the Vonnegut book that has not been reviewed anywhere, ever, because it was sold first into paperback for a handy sum: he needed the money for his large family. And paperbacks don't get reviewed, so it has been ordained. Authors always feel that readers should know and care more about this kind of literary imperative than they do; there is more to what makes reputations than is taught in classes on literature.

(Lessing, September 1975, p.139)

It is perhaps this sense of marginality that has been one reason why women writers have found it easier to stake out a space for themselves within this genre, rather than on the more tightly controlled central terrain of 'great literature'.

The (Masculine) History of SF

There seems little controversial about the assertion that the first truly mass production of SF took place through the 'pulp' magazines of the 30's and 40's in the USA. Klein⁽²⁾ has tried to trace the optimistic and unreflecting imperialism of SF in the earlier decades to the rise of the technically educated, professional middle-class in the USA. The transformation of SF's themes to those critical of science and technology, from the mid-50's onwards, he relates to the subsequent decline in the status and expectations of this class, and the expansion of its audience in the 1960's to the extension of the technological skills throughout society.

Research has shown that:

The vast majority of readers are male and a fair number of them are young men or boys who stop reading SF regularly when they grow older.

and also that

There are many scientists around who date their earliest interest in science to the time they read SF as boys.

(Sargent, 1978a, p.11-12)

This also suggests that this form of reading, this cultural pleasure is also closely associated with gender related constructions around work and around the various future identities available to the young male reader.

Ursula le Guin has characterised, with only slight exaggeration, the highly masculinist interests of such early productions:

Superman is a submyth. His father was Nietzsche and his mother a funnybook and he is alive and well... Other science fictional submyths are the blond heroes of sword and sorcery, with their unusual weapons; insane or self-defying computers; made scientists; benevolent dictators; detectives who find out who done it; capitalists who buy and sell galaxies; brave starship captains and/or troopers; evil aliens; and every pointy-breasted, brainless young woman who was ever rescued from monsters, lectured to, patronised, or in recent years, raped, by one of the aforementioned heroes.

(le Guin, 1978, p.67)

Similarly, the author and critic Pamela Sargent writes in her introduction to the first collection she edited of SF stories by women that

SF provided a world in which a male could experience high adventure and the interplay of scientific ideas and technological gadgets free from the interference of females.

(Sargent, 1978, p.30)

According to these accounts the prognosis for the introduction of women's interests would certainly seem unpromising, but the location of SF within wider cultural relationships, and the massive output of short-stories in the pulp magazines provided the internal conditions for the production of a transformation.

The fact that pulp SF was the chosen leisure reading of the rising class of technocrats seems likely to have played a part in the formation of the phenomenon of 'fandom'. Unlike women readers of romance, for example, who do not combat the devaluation put upon their chosen genre (although they may well read and use it in various ways, some of them oppositional), male consumers of SF were not content to let pass dismissive judgements upon their reading matter. Their location in relatively dominant positions in other institutions made it possible for male SF enthusiasts to

establish and maintain a new set of practices which sustained their own evaluation of the importance of their leisure reading. They were also more likely to have the financial means and organisational skills to do so because of their position within technological or managerial hierarchies. However, once women SF writers began to be published more widely in the early 1960's and to draw strength from the emergent women's movement at the end of this decade, these 'fandom' practices formed an important arena from which women could not be excluded through a lack of 'formal' qualifications.

The aggressively masculinist aspect of SF was also mitigated through the exclusion of SF from the mainstream literary canon. The effects of this exclusion and the creation of an SF 'ghetto' were of course ambivalent and, as le Guin has observed, there are fans:

...who don't want to see the walls come tumbling down, and who cling to their ghetto status as if it were a precious thing, making a religion of SF, which the touch of the uninitiated will profane. They were forced into that attitude by the attitude of respectable society, intellectual and literary, to their particular interest; and it was perfectly natural for them, like any persecuted group to make a virtue of their necessity... To cling to the posture of evasion and defence... is to be not a rebel but a cripple.

(le Guin, 1979, p.218)

SF: On the Margin

Sharing le Guin's perspective, I would like to focus, not on the myriad ways in which the SF of the decades 1930-1960 unconsciously reproduced the ideological patterns of its day, but on the way in which its aficionados felt themselves to be both persecuted and rebels. The institutions of fandom served as a forum for discussion of key topics for people without academic support or intellectual patronage. In some respects such readers expected themselves to be 'ahead' of the general public, as far as technological 'progress' was concerned, and occasionally they were. In 1944, for example, the offices of one SF magazine were visited by the US military intelligence after the publication of a story, 'Deadline', by Cleve Cartmill, which dealt with the production of atomic weapons. Military intelligence had assumed that such speculation could only have come about through the contravention of the official secrecy surrounding the development of the H bomb, then clandestinely in progress.⁽³⁾ It was this oppositional stance, at a minimum the sceptical eye the ghetto casts on the society which excludes it, and the increasing attention paid to the

social rather than the physical, sciences, that created a space for the differently accented interests of women.

Finally, the existence of this corpus of short stories and novels claiming the virtues of extrapolation and prediction, often replete with the ideologies of militarism and science, was yet ready made in the 1960's as a site of fictional modes which could permit inversion, satire and parody. In this, as in other ways, SF seems untypical of popular genres: a parody of a romance would no longer be a romance, but SF abounds in parody of its own themes and conventions, as well as in pastiches of other genres. While some SF critics, such as William Atheling Jr. (alias author James Blish) tried to excommunicate such 'New Wave' writers from the SF canon, on the grounds of generic demarcation, others 'deliberately set out to travesty the scientific imagination'. (Parrinder, 1979, p.18).

This was not, of course, an inexplicable 'evolution' of the literary genre from within, but the result of a process (too complex to trace here) whereby such forms were available to 'carry' growing political concerns arising from the ecological movements, the nascent Women's Movement and the campaigns against the Vietnam war. One of the most prominent authors, editors and critics of that 'decade of civil unrest and revolution' (his words) Harlan Ellison, clearly saw SF in this explicitly polemical way:

Had I done this book (Approaching Oblivion, a collection of his own stories) in 1970, as originally planned, you'd find in this space a clarion call to revolution, a resounding challenge to the future, but it's four years later, Nixon time, and I've seen you sitting on your asses mumbling about impeachment, I've gone through ten years waiting for you to recognise how evil the war in the Nam was...
What fools you are. Happy, secure corpses you'll be.
You're approaching oblivion, and you know it, and you won't do a thing to save yourselves...
I'm over here...saying, 'This is what tomorrow looks like, dummy'. And if you hear me sobbing once in a while it's only because you've killed me too, you fuckers.

(Ellison, 1977, p.16)

SF readers will recognise here some of the recurrent 'voices' of SF, the didactic, the prophetic, the impassioned.

I would therefore point to four sets of practices which have enabled women to enter SF as writers and as readers. These particular cultural practices were highly significant in that through them women were able to make a place for themselves. I would not want to argue, however, that the

practices which constructed SF are in themselves a sufficient explanation either for women writers becoming relatively prominent within the genre, or for the particular themes selected by the women. (A fuller account, which is outside the limited scope of this paper, would need to identify social, economic and political activities quite external to the practices around SF, which both contributed to the involvement of women in SF and which were also, at times, represented in the texts which those women produced). In summary:

1. The conditions of production and consumption of SF as a commodity. This involves the institutions of hard and paperback publishing, the production of magazines and the fields of marketing and distribution, including texts own self-identification as SF. More generally, the proliferation of a new, little policed field of writing.
2. The interest taken in SF by more establishment critics and authors, as well as sociologists, which has supported its self-evaluation as significant, while simultaneously assigning it a subsidiary location within wider cultural concerns.
3. The existence of 'Fandom', with its fanzines (an SF coinage before the era of punk), its conferences and conventions, its annual awards, its connoisseurship, its close reciprocity between readers, authors and critics, permitting individuals to graduate from one position to another.
4. The disparity of SF themes, styles and sub-genres, in which the subversion of dominant reading and writing positions is continually encouraged. I go on to discuss this later.

Women, S.F, Realism

SF and feminism:

A checklist of SF writers, 1950-1980, by Roger Schlobin in New Moon, an American quarterly journal of SF and Critical-Feminism, provides good evidence of the marked increase in SF writing by women over this period. Including earlier titles by authors who published during the 30 year period it covers, it lists:

1 title from the 1920's
3 titles from the 1940's
54 titles from the 1950's
122 titles from the 1960's
214 titles from the 1970's

and 33 for the year 1980. Some of these are reprints, but the fact they were reprinted at a later date is indicative of the growing audience for SF written by women.

The editorial in this journal also confirms that the location of SF outside mainstream institutions is one sort of reason for its attraction for women writers:

Women's studies conferences, SF conventions, smaller group interactions, womens and SF small press publishing, these are our praxis as well as the place where we can develop our theory, and from our theory, our future.

(New Moon, Winter 1981/2, p.2.)

And again:

The SF community and the women's community are two neighbours who should talk to each other more. Both trail mythologies about what they are and what they do, both are active in writing and publishing, both are developing their own criticism and both are experienced in making excellent use of conferences. Moreover, within each group there is a core of readers and writers strongly committed to the other - women who read, write, review SF and SF groups that offer women's programming or review feminist material.

(New Moon, Winter 1981/2, p.3)

The other set of reasons the editors identify which makes SF of importance to feminism are those concerned with the project of SF:

Very little material is available that moves women to actively speculate on their present lives and to make the connection of present to future through their lives.

This is, of course, no accident, but the result of heavy conditioning against speculation. ...Necessary as it is to share and analyze our feelings and reactions, women also have a great need to be able to act, make mistakes, and re-write life again and again.

(New Moon, Winter 1981/2, p.3.)

One of the purposes of the rediscovery of the marginalised traditions of women's writing in general has been celebratory. Such work has also been read

...for its thematic representation of particular systematic concerns: patriarchy, androgyny, domesticity, feminism and others.

(ed. Hall et al, 1980, p.247)

These concerns have found useful forms of articulation within the elastic conventions of SF.

SF and 'Realism'

So far I have looked at the cultural practices that produce SF. Now I

wish to turn to the central issue of how the conventions available in, and produced through, the genre of SF are related to the construction of meaning and how such conventions are useful to women. I shall also focus on how certain conventions are attempted solutions to the difficulties and limitations of realist form. There are a range of meanings which cannot be articulated in the forms of the realist novel or its descendants, both because of the forms widely accepted claims to represent reality and because of generally shared beliefs about what that reality is. The persistence of women's oppression makes problematic the representation of social relations in which this oppression is overturned or transcended. At one time SF was defended on the grounds that it genuinely represents a 'basic reality of society' by popularising and explaining new scientific ideas and the new technology derived from them. This is a claim that SF has a positive and specific relationship to reality through the extrapolation of scientific 'trends'. Later emphasis on the fictional rather than the scientific aspect of SF, however, freed writers to create meanings that do not reproduce social relations, or time, or space, or human nature in ways that conform to dominant accounts in a social formation.

In particular women writers were able to construct societies without men or where masculinist values did not prevail. The biological basis of gender could now be challenged, not on the basis of likely technological change, but on the grounds that such constructions represent ways of disrupting deeply naturalised ideologies and so represent emergent forms of potential human relations. SF also provided a space where constructions around the category of 'science' itself could be transformed and represented, especially challenging those which construct science as progressive or neutral.

This is not to claim with Suvin that SF is 'essentially a subversive genre', because although these ways into alternative or oppositional constructions of reality certainly exist, they are not always used. Indeed there are times when the shutters are firmly put up. At the end of a novella, 'Songs of War', in which all the women in a small town leave home to join a subversive Women's Army, the final paragraphs recuperate the overt theme:

Standing at their windows in the town the women could look up to the hills and see the campfire still burning, but as the months wore on, fewer and fewer of them looked and the column of smoke diminished in size because the remaining women were

running out of volunteers whose turn it was to feed the fire.
Now that it was over, things went on more or less as they had before.

(Kit Reed, 1976, p.95)

Like the late nineteenth century naturalistic novels, such as those of Hardy, this novella validates, by its very choice of such a topic for representation, the struggle against existing social structures, in this case gender relations. At the same time, by representing the oppositional stance as necessarily a failure it tends to remain within the dominant version of reality.

As I have already argued, it is untenable to define SF according to essentialist criteria. Nevertheless, it seems useful, by comparing SF with the realist tradition in the novels, to try to discern new spaces for emergent meanings created within the different conventions of SF. The classical realist project is defined by Williams as

...showing a man or woman making an effort to live a much fuller life and encountering the objective limits of a particular social order, and depicting the creative contradiction between the impulse towards another life seen not as an individual but as a general aspiration, and the structural constraints of a society.

(Williams, 1979, p.221)

This optimistic project, as Williams describes it, which originated at the time of the ascent of the bourgeois class, gradually breaks down. The naturalistic model shows society as a second, immutable nature, impervious to change, and in its turn this is transformed into modernism, which deals with the isolated psyche.

The distinctions which Lukacs makes between these projects provide useful grounds on which to make comparisons with SF. In the realist tradition, he says, the protagonists have:

...human significance, their specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which they were created.

(Lukacs, 1969, p.19)

whereas

...the image of man (sic) in the work of leading modernist writers is the exact opposite of this. Man, for these writers, is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships...
There is not for him therefore, any pre-existent reality beyond his own self, acting upon him or being acted upon by him...
the examined reality is static.

(ibid, p.20-21)

Both Lukacs and Williams claim for the novel that its project is to represent the historical potential and social determinations of recognisable individuals. But SF, by claiming a more oblique relationship to reality, is able to question all the categories that secure the realist project: what is history? is the past immutable? what is identity? what is humanity? what are the 'real' determinants of events? And for women: what are 'masculinity' and 'femininity'?

Texts and Readings

There are obvious difficulties in handling an argument that depends for some of its evidence on making readings of texts. The specific texts of SF do not in themselves carry inherent, univocal messages, but rather exist as sites for the construction of meaning. In theory there may be an infinite number of possible meanings, but in concrete situations the likely meanings are constructed not only through the internal determinations of the text, but through the relationship of one SF text with another, its explicit signalling of itself as SF, and the relationship of SF as a genre to other forms of fiction. The impact on both author and readers of the other, larger, determining processes of class, gender, race and age must also influence the nature of the readings made. All these wider determinations tend to place individuals in particular positions in the discourses of science, imperialism, democracy, sexuality, aggression, nature, and so on, all of which are grist to the mills of SF.

It is not possible within the limits of this paper to do more than gesture towards this whole debate. Texts clearly exercise some form of determination on what readings are made of them. They are produced under particular conditions by individuals who may or may not hold similar locations in the social formation to those held by the individuals who will read or 'consume' them. The degree to which these different locations coincide will clearly affect what meanings are derived from the text. For example, an English reader without knowledge or experience of West Africa might find it difficult to make any satisfactory reading of Chinua Achebe's Nigerian novels; men rarely, if ever, read Mills and Boon romances. On the other hand such ventures as the Women's Press and Virago indicate that audiences or readerships can be created which assume a pre-existing disposition to make pleasurable readings of texts written by and about women. This would suggest that readers do not come to texts 'innocently', prepared to receive the innate messages

inscribed there, whatever they may be. A condition of any particular reading is therefore, a set of assumptions by the reader about her reading (in all senses) before she begins.

Thus, I do not wish to claim that the readings I make are in any way privileged, either in explicating the real meaning of the text or in reducing it to a 'guilty silence'. (S. Hall *et al*, 1980, p.237). What I am seeking to do is to explore the sort of meanings that disrupt the socially constructed forms of knowledge that underlie the realist project. This exploration is more concerned with indicating further areas that might repay examination than with providing any conclusions. These problematic areas include what political alignment can mean in the production of fictional representations; the theoretical possibility of the production of a feminist/feminine aesthetic and its relation to previously existing forms; the significance for such a project of the inevitably polysemantic nature of representations.

Doris Lessing

i. The Break With 'Realism'

In this section I shall look at the work of Doris Lessing whose most recent work has explicitly abandoned the formal conventions of realism.

Lessing is unusual in several respects, not least in that she was already a well established, reputable author when she turned to SF. This suggests that her use of SF is a conscious solution to constraints experienced in realist fiction. Second, she has written extensively about the nature of political affiliation and about gender issues.

Doris Lessing was raised in what was then Southern Rhodesia. Her first published novel, The Grass is Singing (1950) was set in Southern Africa and had as its focus the relationship between a black 'house-boy' and his white employer, a farmer's wife. This achieved some celebrity, not least because of its subject matter, considered 'controversial' at that time. In 1949 Lessing came to live in England and continued to be one of the very few individuals at that time who spoke out against the oppression of Black Africa.

Publication of one of her major works, the autobiographical five novel sequence, Children of Violence, began in 1952 with Martha Quest. She has described this sequence as a 'study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective'. (Lessing, September 1975, p.14). It can also be read as a politically aligned work in that its protagonist is a Marxist, the representation of political activity is central to its

structure, and its depictions of social relations are predicated on a class analysis. This construction of political practices and principles as of central importance once again marked out her work as innovative, as did also, in the English context in which it appeared, her internationalism.

In 1961 The Golden Notebook was published. This also became a celebrated text in that it was read as articulating concerns that were still mainly to do with women's experiences as independent, sexual individuals. It was also experimental in form, constructing different representations of the 'same' events. The final volume of Children of Violence, the futuristic Four Gated City, with its themes of madness and armageddon, was published in 1969. This was the first substantial departure from her earlier commitment to realism:

I hold the view that the realist novel, the realist story, is the highest form of prose writing; higher than and out of the reach of any comparison with expressionism, impressionism, symbolism, naturalism or any other ism.

(Lessing, September 1975, p.4)

In all these publications Lessing has consistently produced works that exemplify the phenomenon described in Politics and Letters:

...an experience which is really very wide suddenly finds a semantic figure which articulates it. Such an experience I would now call pre-emergent.

(Williams, 1979, p.164)

Her achievement in articulating pre-emergent structures of feeling, rooted as they are in experience excluded by the dominant forms of representation, makes Lessing's change to SF of particular interest. SF was clearly offering her, and many other women, the chance to explore new ways of thinking.

The reason for this shift can perhaps be found in a piece first written in 1957 and republished later. Two concerns intertwine. One is the nature of political alignment:

...the warmth, the compassion, the humanity, the love of people ...which makes all these old novels a statement of faith in man himself. (sic)
This is what I mean when I say that literature should be committed.

(Lessing, September 1975, p.6)

The other is the negation of class, racial and gender differences by the prospect of nuclear extermination:

We are all of us made kin with each other and with everything in the world because of the kinship of possible destruction.

(ibid, p.9)

Unlike most women SF writers for whom it is precisely differences between the sexes, or specifically female experiences and their potentiality which demand representation, Lessing is seeking a way of transcending such oppositions. She herself seems to identify the articulation of this kinship as part of the function of a writer's work:

...to know that one is a writer at all because one represents, makes articulate, is continuously and invisibly fed by, numbers of people who are inarticulate, to whom one belongs, to whom one is responsible.

(ibid, p.20-21)

What she does share with other women SF writers is the rejection of the dominant account which makes these differences natural and invisible.

In the final volume of Children of Violence, The Four Gated City, then the action of the novel moves into the future, into forms of relationship, including madness, that are not within definitions of normality, and into the fictionalisation of possibility or probability in an extrapolative way. This is one kind of technical solution to the impasse reached in the realist convention. Especially for subordinated groups certain ways of representing themselves run so counter to the dominant ideology as by definition to seem 'unrealistic'. The representations of the future or distant interstellar space to which a reader has no 'real life' access, is another possible solution to this impasse.

However, since novels are regarded, within the tradition of English literature, as being 'about people', the novelist still faces the problem of representing social determinants at work solely through the depiction of personal experience. Williams has himself suggested that a technique for extending the range of the novel might be 'subjunctive realism':

...an experience which is not realist in the indicative sense of recording contemporary reality, but in the subjective sense of supposing a possible sequence of actions beyond it.

(Williams, 1979, p.219)

It is the possibility of constructing meanings in this mode of subjective realism that gives space to women writers, feminist and otherwise, to create social relationships that are structured according to transformations of existing social determinations.

the realist/metaphysical dichotomy.

Using the general categories indicated by Raymond Williams in Marxism and Literature, I shall try to analyse what can be said in the SF conventions that is excluded from traditional realism; or, in other words, examine

...the reality of conventions as the mode of junction of social position and literary practice.

(Williams, 1977, p.179)

The conventions that Williams names are narrative stance; wholeness of account, which involves radical questions about the nature of events as random or determined; temporal sequence, which implies theories of causation and consequence; place, which conventionalises assumptions about the relationship between people and places, between humankind and nature; and action, in which variable assumptions about human nature are naturalised, especially in constructions around killing, sexuality and work.

An analysis of the varying formal conventions used throughout these four published titles of Canopus in Argos does not suggest an abandonment of the realist project of showing individuals formed by their society and the processes inherent in these relationships. However, the whole structure of work suggests that the grounds of the realist project are inherently inadequate for achieving this, since dominant accounts of reality are always incomplete.

Many SF novels by women seek to extend this project to include those processes by which individuals are assigned to their respective genders, and Lessing certainly does not exclude these.

These concerns are not however, central to the Canopus in Argos books, as they are to other SF by women writers and to her own earlier work. The project of the Canopean sequence is to represent the apocalypse:

...it is already clear that the whole world is being shaken into a new pattern by the cataclysms we are living through; probably by the time we are through, if we do get through at all, the aims of Womens Liberation will look very small and quaint.

(Lessing, September 1975, p.25)

In order to make this representation, all existing ideologies are subjected to re-focussing through the lens of SF, although it is, as well, quite possible to make readings that re-confirm dominant, or historical, modes of thought.

It is only with Shikasta that Doris Lessing makes the decisive break with her long preoccupation with realism. This is the first volume in Canopus in Argos sequence which is explicitly presented as SF. The first four or five promised titles have appeared so far: Shikasta 1979; The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five 1980, (Marriages); The Sirian Experiments 1981; The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 1982, (The Making).

Lessing has emphasised the fictitious nature of this work. It does not make reality claims, but rather exposes the assumptions of realism to be themselves no more than that: constructions by human agents, rather than obvious natural truths. The areas on which the Canopean novels focus have also been identified I believe elsewhere:

How are we to explain the possibility of liberating responses to a system that do not seem to have in any obvious ways been prepared by social conditions? Certain relationships occur which are very difficult to understand by normal canons and which give force to metaphysical or subjectivist explanations because these remain virtually the only terms to hand for them.

Yet the problem of these non-traceable...liberating impulses is in the most emphatic sense not only a question of literary analysis, but a very urgent political issue.

(Williams, 1979, p.255-6)

The reason for this urgency was given by Lessing as long ago as 1957 in a piece called 'A Small Personal Voice', which concerns the function of the novel:

We are living in a time which is so dangerous, violent, explosive and precarious that it is in question whether soon there will be people left alive to write books and to read them. It is a question of life and death for all of us...

What is the choice before us? It is not merely a question of preventing an evil but of strengthening a vision of a good which may defeat the evil.

(Lessing, September 1975, p.7)

Both these writers are here, I believe, confronting the immediacy of the nuclear threat, and seeking to understand what might be the possible ways to construct 'liberating responses' or the 'vision of a good which may defeat the evil'. Williams still expresses faith in the possibility of extending the canons of material realism to encompass such a project, as against embracing metaphysical explanations. The meanings to be derived from Lessing's work, on the other hand, both incorporate the realist project and overturn it by transcending the contradictions structured in

What is at issue here is whether it is possible to define a single relationship that a text 'ought' to create between its constructions and reality. Clearly if a text's meanings are inherently polyvalent, the answer cannot be a simple 'yes'. I would, however, wish to go further and argue that what is needed is a recognition that texts are necessarily productive in a variety of ways. Transformations or re-accentuations of ideological discourses, creation of new subject positions anger as well as pleasure, identification as well as disruption can all be valuable. A prolonged lament for the failure of texts to conform to some pre-existent feminist or revolutionary standard is not productive. It is actual cultural practices around texts that can help produce readings that are fruitful according to the circumstances in which they are made:

Value is not something which the text has or possesses. It is not an attribute of the text; it is rather something that is produced for the text. To neglect this, to rely on the text as the source of its own value, is to run together two quite distinct problems: the explanation of the text as the production of a particular practice of writing and the production of a text as a valued text.

(Bennett, 1979, p.173)

ii. The 'Canopus in Argos' Sequence.

a) Narrative Stance

The basic formal device of narrative stance varies considerably between the four volumes of the Canopus in Argos sequence. Each narrator occupies a specific location that is created through the narrative s/he tells, and each location commands an implied range of knowledge and perception; none, that is to say, is an omniscient narrator, although Johor in Shikasta comes in some respects close to it.

It is because of these implied knowledges that I consider narrative stance and wholeness of account (Williams, p.16 above) together, finding the two to be so mutually determining as to be inseparable. In these ways the claims for the reality or truth of the narrative is different from that claimed by the magisterial, all-knowing author. It is simultaneously more obviously fictitious, given the alien nature of the narrators of these four books, yet also more objective, more 'true', the alien standpoint being productive of a less subjective truth than that open to mere human beings. Since it is also, of course, a story that in many ways represents recognisable human beings in identifiable situations, it cannot wholly close off the readers' sense of reality, which remains available as a grounds for

challenge to the views of the narrator. That, however, is not part of the logic of the construction of Johor as carrier of the narrative.

The cover of Shikasta structures at least two obvious messages. One is iconic, the deliberate signalling by the lay-out of an official document, preserved in archives among many implied others of variable types. The numbering, too, Planet 5, Grade 9, 87th of the Last Period, implies a multiplicity of other planets, grades and emissaries, a vast record of accumulated knowledge by a variety of modes; here it is personal, psychological, historical, there, elsewhere, it may be chemical, geological, biological.

The other message is semantic, created through the meanings of words within a system. The dominant names here are unfamiliar: Canopus, Argos, Shikasta, Johor, but they occupy positions in which they can acquire meaning despite the fact that the reader will probably assume that they have no factual referent. The format of official document has already helped to structure the likely meanings which are carried in the words: Archives, colonised, emissary. The contents of the book are, therefore, an account of events on a planet by a visiting representative of a colonial power from somewhere else. By definition the universe of meanings and determinations s/he inhabits is not the same as that of the colonised natives of the planet. The bracketed name (George Sherban) provides the clue that Planet 5 can be read as Planet Earth. In this way, the familiar SF convention of presenting the narrative through the 'authentic' documentation of aliens, sets up the expectation, common to SF that the events, the characters, the relationships within the novel will not accord with those of realism or naturalism. 'Form depends...on its perception as well as its creation'. (Williams, 1977, p.187).

The implied promise that the narrative of Shikasta will be about 'a very general picture of Shikasta' is no longer one that could be made or fulfilled within the realist tradition. Johor is an extra-terrestrial narrator, and compiler of the documents not authored by him. The first page and a half indicate that his narrative stance is a strange mediation between the omniscient, anonymous narrator and the first-person narrator who claims to have observed or participated in the events of the narrative.

Explicitly s/he disclaims omniscience:

In these notes I shall be trying to make things clear...It is not possible to know when you make a note of an event, or a state of mind, how this may strike someone perhaps

ten thousand years later.

Things change. That is all we may be sure of...I, for one, did not 'keep myself in touch', 'informed', - no. Once I had filed my report that was that.

(Lessing, 1981a, pp.13-14)

On the other hand the text constructs his knowledge of Shikasta and its relations to the rest of the universe as governed by perceptions of connections and relationships that are different from those commonly recognised.

This opening also presents the issue of Lessing's use of the word 'colonised' in the title. The usual accentuation for this word is, for any faintly liberal reader so replete with associations of exploitation, aggression, hypocrisy and oppression, that its appearance in the title carries some significance. It signals one of the 'what if' axioms of Shikasta; that Canopus just might be a colonising power whose purposes are not self-seeking, whose 'Invisible unwritten, uncoded rules...amount to...love'. p.13.

The difficulty in even entertaining such a reading of any version of colonisation is, from a radical standpoint, immense. Nevertheless, the themes of the books are a densely worked set of transformations of assumptions about the nature of authority/superiority that are usually faithfully reproduced within the realistic novel and its descendants, including SF. The accumulating patterns of meanings offer a radical challenge to the accepted definitions of humanity's project through the representation of an apocalyptic future.

Johor is a Canopean agent, not without his own conflicts, contradictions and limitations, but also possessed of a perspective which far exceeds that of human beings; so the text constructs him. It is this perspective which allows Lessing to recast historical and future events into a new set of relationships; as she herself remarks, this narrative structure gave her:

...the exhilaration that comes from being set free into a larger scope, with more capacious possibilities and themes... a realm where the petty fates of planets let alone individuals, are only aspects of cosmic evolution of great galactic Empires.

(Lessing, 1981a, 'Some Remarks', unnumbered)

The rise and fall of galactic empires is, of course, the very stuff of much SF, and their defence and demise can rarely be claimed to create new structures of meaning, usually because they reproduce existing ideologies

of dominance, in which moral value remains an empty categorisation. In Shikasta, Lessing uses the device of Johor as narrator to create a radical refocussing of an enormous range of events, characters, and their social and economic relationships, and through this they are made to acquire new meanings, and new evaluations.

Similarly, in The Sirian Experiments, the narrator is a very high-ranking bureaucrat, Ambien II, who gives her account of the Sirian Empire's colonisation of Rohanda/Shikasta/Earth. The audience addressed in her text is the people of Sirius and in particular the remaining members of the ruling Five of whom she was one. Her version of colonialism is a familiar one, the exploitation of native populations for the benefit of empire, whatever the claims for benevolence made by the administrators of the system.

As in Johor's narration, the time span is that of millenia. But where Johor's narrative claims to create an objective account, the underlying structure of Ambien II's account is that of the process of her encounters with Canopus, in the person of Klorathy, another Ganopean emissary. The dynamic of the novel is the change in Ambien II's narrative *stance* itself, the shift from assurance to her realisation that there is knowledge that is not contained within the Sirian modes of thought. The themes of colonisation, of knowledge, authority, and responsibility are represented in different situations where they acquire re-accentuations of meaning.

The themes of power and authority and how they are wielded are also evident in other SF by women. The construction of societies without hierarchical power is almost a commonplace in feminist SF:

...these utopian societies can often be anarchistic. There are no governments and no laws...Order is kept in such societies not by use of force, but by persuasion. And the enforcers are not kings and legislators, but mothers.

(Pearson, 1977, p.54)

In the respect that Lessing seeks to re-assert a non-metaphysical and genuinely natural authority, she shares something with other women writers, although she also diverges from them in her representation of an essential hierarchy, or evolutionary progression.

Ambien II has her own versions of each of these categories, which are implicitly challenged by Klorathy's understanding. Incarnated as Rhodia, s/he asks Ambien:

'When you run about this city gazing at the people at victims and the abandoned - who is it that has abandoned them and what is it that governs their good and their evil? To rebel against an Empire - Sirius, you punish that quickly enough, do you not?' And she held my eyes with hers, insistent, till I nodded. 'Yes, you do, and very harshly! There is little pity in you, but when you, or I, rebel, protesting against what rules us all, and must rule us all, no one imprisons us or kills us in the name of order and authority. Yet order and authority there are. We are subject to the Necessity, Sirius, always and everywhere.'

(Lessing, 1981c, p.195)

This is a challenge not only to Ambien of Sirius, but to the whole secular project descending from the Enlightenment, which declares humankind to be the sole originator of value, the source of moral meaning. The narrative constructs another 'what if?' axiom of Canopus in Argos: the universe is not ethically neutral, but governed by moral laws, which, however limited our representations of them may be, continue to function inexorably whatever humankind may say or do:

Canopus did not invent these laws. Have you not observed for yourself that if one disengages oneself from a process arbitrarily, then all kinds of connections and links and growths are broken - and that you yourself suffer for it?

(p.240)

This sentiment re-echoes one from Le Guin's The Dispossessed:

The thing about working with time instead of against it, is that it is not wasted. Every pain counts.

(Le Guin, p.269)

The primacy given to personal experience, the long-term nature of emotional investments and the intractability of deep feelings are themes common also to such SF writers as Marion Zimmer Bradley, Dorothy Bryant and Marge Piercy.

The second volume of the series, The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five has a completely different narrative structure. The cover of the paperback edition, like that of Shikasta, carries the heading: Canopus in Argos: Archives, in yellow print. Beneath, under a thin white line, it says, in smaller letters, As Narrated by the Chroniclers of Zone Three. If Shikasta disrupts easy identification with the narrative, through changes in narrator, signalled by interruptions in the form of headings, changing typeface, changing timescales, Marriages unrolls a unified narrative within which assumed polarities are first constructed and then questioned.

Set in Zone Three, Four and Five, this text exemplifies Ursula le Guin's description of the power of what is generally called 'style':

A world where no voice has ever spoken before; where the act of speech is the act of creation. The only voice that speaks there is the creator's voice. And every word counts.

(le Guin, 1982, p.85)

Language in this sense not only constructs meaning but also excludes unwanted meanings. Through its powers of producing specific meanings the discourse of any book also has the power of enforcing silence in other areas. The more unified the tone of a novel, the more effective it is in keeping at a distance contradictory discourses, or other discourse positions that a reader might inhabit. To take another example from le Guin, once the reader has begun to construct the meanings of The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien, by accepting the horizons of Middle Earth, the powerful 'voice' of the book, its specific range of vocabulary and syntax, effectively excludes her 'mad vision of founding a Hobbit Socialist Party'. (le Guin, 1982, p.163). It is, of course, only those individuals who can make for themselves a comfortable reading, without too much effort, who will actually persevere with a text that is seen as 'for pleasure'. This is one of the ways in which texts themselves actually construct readerships.

The coherence of Marriages derives at least in part from its unified narrative stance, the same constant voice that narrates the whole story. It is not that the novel is constructed according to a naturalised or unexamined convention. Its narrator(s) constantly reflect on the truth, the reality of their representation compared with other versions of 'what really happened'. On the first page the supposed narrators declare their interest:

What was being said and sung in the camps and barracks of Zone Four we do not choose to record. It is not that we are mealy-mouthed. Rather that every chronicle has its appropriate tone.

I am saying that each despised the other? No, we are not permitted actively to criticize the dispensations of the Providers...

(Lessing, 1981b, p.11)

The interrogative note in both narrative and reported speech appears with very great frequency. Unlike the Emissary Johor, the Chroniclers construct their judgements through the structure of their story, not by pronouncement but by drawing attention to the choices they make from among alternatives; and by questioning their choices:

Our Chroniclers and artists have made a great thing of this exchange between Al-Ith and the soldiers. Some of the tales begin at this point...Often these pictures are titled 'Al-Ith's Animals'. Some tales tell how the soldiers try to catch the birds and the deer, and are rebuked by Al-Ith.

I take the liberty of doubting whether the actual occasion impressed itself so dramatically on the soldiers, or even on Al-Ith.

(Lessing, 1981b, p.19)

The reality claims of this narrative stance are very different from those implicit in Shikasta. There is no sense of the absolutism of official records, or of the events constructed having a claim to represent real events on planet Earth. In Zone Three, it is implied, the essential facts and histories are recorded in what seems like legend, in which historical processes are compacted into individuals. Legend, however, usually excludes what might well be read as description of individual psychology:

And so he became confused, and diminished inwardly--because this emotion of doing-down, of superiority, was the fuel for his energy, which was formidable...And why was this? He had not known it, but he did now: because at such times it was as if he ground some enemy into dirt with his heel. Was he really willing to feel such a thing for Al-Ith and her people?

(Lessing, 1981b, p.194)

Where Shikasta's narrator is authoritative, that of Marriage's is tentative and exploratory. In each of the three quotations already used there is either a question or the intimation of one. It is hard to open the book and not find a question on the open pages, ambiguously either from the narrator or one of the characters. Taking examples at arbitrary fifty page intervals, I found:

But there was nothing there remotely like her. Like his mother? Certainly not!

p.53

And yet she knew that the words actually heard by any casual person listening, soldier or uninitiated soldier's wife, would not have been these - the initiated women would hear them, and she with Ben Ata had heard them - but had he?

p.102

If she did belong anywhere now - but how could she know? If she was guilty then of what was she guilty, and why was this punishment the fit one for her?

p.152

But where was Ben Ata? Where was Ben Ata? Where was he? How could he leave her and betray her thus?

p.202

How was he going to live, a half-man, not a soldier, not a man of peace, not a husband since he was bereft of her, not properly even a father...these messages from the providers... it was not that they were ambiguous, but that you had to wait for events to interpret them.
Who was he? What was he going to do?

p.253

These questionings constantly disturb the narrative, which in this novel is otherwise delivered by a strong although unidentified authorial voice, who disarmingly discusses his intentions as the story unfolds:

One of the motives for this chronicle is an attempt to revive in the hearts and memories of our people another idea of Al-Ith. To reinstate her...it is not enough that a minority of us seek her out, when such a large majority think of her only as we do those who represent places in ourselves we find it dangerous to approach.

(Lessing, 1981b, p.177)

In other words each narrative constructs, not only a narrator, but also an audience and a reason for the narration of the information given within each book. At the same time both Marriages and The Making question whether any story ever has a single author; whether individuality itself is not an illusion:

And here I must raise my voice, say something - not on my own behalf of course, for there is no 'I' here, can only be the 'we' of equals and colleagues...What are any of us when we call ourselves Chronicler or song-maker, queen or farmer, lover, tender of children, friend of animals? We are the visible and evident aspects of a whole we all share, that we all go to form.

(Lessing, 1981b, p.242)

A similar approach to the essential fluidity of legend is expressed in The Kin of Ata are waiting for You, where the male narrator/protagonist labours for years to record dreams and myths, only to discover that the same task has been achieved and abandoned centuries before, since its futility had then been realised:

...disputes arose as to which were the best versions of the dreams, and as to whether the mark gave the correct meaning...

But even more serious was the effect that writing had upon the words of the story. It froze them.

(Bryant, 1981, p.201)

So the dreams of the Kin of Ata are analogous to the chronicles of the Zones, 'visible and evident aspects of a whole we all share', but which

constantly changes.

The fourth book in the series, The Making of the Representative for Planet 8, is in one sense the project of construction the identity of its (fictional) narrator. It begins:

You ask how the Canopean Agents seemed to us in the times of The Ice?

(Lessing, 1982, p.3)

The subsequent book answers not this question, but another: who is the 'us' who asks this question? In this way, the formal convention of narrator is also a choice about the representation of knowledge: exactly who it is who knows the answer to the initial question. In this way it is yet another re-working of the theme indicated in the last quotation from Marriages.

The narrative is an account of the consequences for Planet 8 of a cosmic accident which rapidly changes its climate, until it becomes uninhabitable, completely covered in ice. The planet is part of the Canopean Empire and one of the Canopean agents is again, Johor. The timescale is that of one inhabitant's life-time, but what that is in 'real' time is impossible to judge: this is not planet Earth, but another. The truth the narrative creates cannot be fidelity to the reality of this planet. The claim of the narrative is that truths also exist in what is often understood as mythical form, but is here represented as reality, understandable because individuals only exist as part of larger wholes, as representatives of the whole.

This is a radical departure from the norms of realism:

In naturalistic fiction, the basic rule is that man's (sic) destiny is other humans and manmade (sic) institutions.

(Suvin, 1979, p.18)

Much SF, despite its departures from a portrayal of reality still adheres to this 'basic rule'. Lessing is unusual among women SF writers in challenging these secular assumptions in this particular way and in speculating about the functions of humanity as a biological species among others, about individuals as representatives of that species.

As the later examinations of the conventions Lessing uses to handle time and place also indicate, SF seems to provide the space for such speculation, which would normally be categorised as metaphysical, on a level which at least claims not to be so.

More evidently in this fourth volume Lessing makes overt references to scientific ideas that challenge the comfortable sense of objective reality that informs most sociological thought. As she says in the preface to The Sirian Experiments:

If I were a physicist there would be no trouble at all! They can talk nonchalantly about black holes swallowing stars, black holes that we might learn to use as mechanisms for achieving time and space warps, sliding through them by way of mathematical legerdemain to find ourselves in realms where the laws of our universe do not apply. They nonchalantly suggest parallel universes, universes that lie intermeshed with ours but are invisible to us, universes where time runs backwards, or that mirror ours.

(un-numbered)

The position of science which Lessing represents here is also ambivalent; it can be read in at least two quite different ways. The first accepts entirely the legitimacy of science and thus assumes the inviolability of scientists' claims which, originating from other sources, might appear wholly untenable. The second acknowledges the power relations characteristic of knowledge production and suggests that such claims could justifiably be seen as crazy. Here it is the social position of scientists, rather than the objective status of their alleged knowledge, that protects their claims. So she uses her alien narrators to cast their grid of meaning onto human history and human endeavour in a way which entertains while it disturbs the assumed nature of consciousness and of identity.

However, such writers as le Guin, Bryant, and Russ do all challenge the patriarchal belief that human beings are separate from the physical world and other species and that it is possible for humanity indefinitely to maintain a posture of control over the non-human. Similarly, although I know of no other SF novel which constructs quite the same implicit claims about the nature of identity as The Making, there is a recognisable and continuing concern within women's SF to question at least some of the assumptions about individuality.

Thus, Octavia Butler's Mind of My Mind creates an individual psyche which endures across 4,000 years and finally learns how to incorporate other individuals into itself. Pamela Sargent's Cloned Lives and Kate Wilhelm's Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang, both take up the themes of identity and its relationship to genetic differences and to the possibility of cloning human beings. Naomi Mitchison in Memoirs of a Spacewoman,

initially published in 1962, raises the question of how human consciousness is itself structured by physical constraints. The woman protagonist enters into communication with a five-limbed species:

One is so used to two-sided brain, two eyes, two ears, and so on that one takes the whole thing and all that stems from it for granted. Incorrectly, but inevitably. My radiates had an entirely different outlook...They never thought in terms of either/or. It began to seem to me very peculiar that I should do so myself.

...As I got to know my radiates as individuals...the thing got more difficult. They did not name themselves as we Terrans do, and as we are apt to imagine most other worlds do. There were, however, group names, shading into one another. Slowly I began to forget my own name.

(Mitchison, 1977, p.27)

Finally the sense of the narrators of both Marriages and The Making being not discrete biological individuals as we are accustomed to think of them, but somehow manifestations of a wider identity is echoed in the dedication to The Wander-Ground by Sally Miller Gearhart:

...From the beginning, though, these stories were inspired and supported by hundreds of women and in the deepest sense they come from all of us.

(Gearhart, 1979)

b) Temporal Sequence

Narrative stance is also mediated through the temporal sequence of the events represented in these books. The representation of the passing of time is a key to the structures of these narratives. One difficulty in discussing conventions and meanings in this area, however, is that the identifying of events within the narratives is always subject to some sort of reading of the implied causality. What follows, therefore, is inevitably only one version of readings that can be made from these texts, although at the same time I try to uncover the different (non-realistic) assumptions that must underlie the texts in order for such readings to be made.

The time-span represented in Shikasta is explicitly thousands of years long, no less than the emergence of the human species on earth. The events reported are given unity by their narrator, Johor, or by his selection of other documents according to his understanding of the significance implicit in them. This also gives a changing focus, ranging from the first person narrative of Rachel Sherban, limited to her understanding and perceptions of Johor in his incarnation as George Sherban, to notes from the archivists or

references to extraneous other texts; as in this passage about the cost to the Canopean emissaries of their duties on Shikasta:

There was no question of his refusing: we did not refuse such requests. Or some of us did not! (See History of Canopus, VOL.1, 752, 357, Disagreement re. policy for Shikasta, formerly Rohanda. SUMMARY CHAPTER). But it was as if he had been asked to allow himself to be made lunatic, mad, deranged, and then put into a den of murdering savages.

(Lessing, 1981a, p.107)

These changes are signalled by changes in typeface, from the standard print used in Johor's reports, to the italic script used for Rachel Sherban's diary. Headings also disrupt the narrative flow, switching the reader's focus from one perspective of time to another, demanding an effort of comparison and interpretation. Excerpts from the History of Canopus provide the space for authoritative historical statements about Shikasta and therefore about the nature of human social formations. In this instance, the role of religion in amplifying or excluding the Canopean influence is discussed:

During the entire period under review, religions of any kind flourished. Those that concern us most here took their shape from the lives or verbal formulations of our envoys. This happened more often than not... Very often the grip a 'religion' had on a culture, or even a whole continent, was so pervasive that our agents could make no impact there at all, but had to work elsewhere on Shikasta where conditions were less monolithic, perhaps even - according to current ideas - more primitive.

(Lessing, 1981a, p.145)

These changes of timescale and therefore of perspective allow for differently accented uses of such categories as religion, or the advanced/primitive dichotomy within the different narrative modes. These formal devices are the means by which Lessing creates an arena in which to challenge available responses to such categories and polarities. The documentary sections, Rachel Sherban's diaries, and other structures all deny the validity of the constructions which equate 'advanced' with high-technology, masculinist, westernised society, and 'primitive' with societies having a subsistence life-style. On the other hand one of the themes of the whole sequence is an exploration of the ways in which such meanings could be given substance. Part of the project is to show that they in fact have such a significant purchase on reality that their use is crucially needed

in an adequate account of events.

The time span of Marriages is much more unified, and the majority of the events take place within the period just before the birth of Al-Ith and Ben Ata's son and during his childhood, although the actual narrative extends by implication until his adulthood. The subjective experiences of change are some of the issues explored in this novel, and also the ways in which change spreads. At first Al-Ith and Ben Ata feel themselves inimical; individuals not merely produced by, but representative of their zones:

They were both considering, with fortitude, the uncertain term that they faced during which they would have to sustain their incompatibility.

(Lessing, 1981b, p.118)

For both of them the time they have together accelerates change in a way that makes them unfit for their societies. Ironically, Al-Ith, from the responsive, responsible, egalitarian, feminine Zone Three, can no longer find a place there after her marriage with Ben Ata has changed her; whereas Ben Ata, from the narrow, militaristic, authoritarian Zone Four, is able to stay and effect change there and in Zone Five, too.

The Making is similarly confined to a unified narrative time in which events follow each other in what would appear a relatively realistic sequence of implied cause and consequence. What the time sequence of this narrative strongly implies, however, is the relativity of time: Doeg, the chronicler, appears initially as one individual, but it is an individual who is not limited to one life time or to one discrete biological entity. Some of the events described, such as the building of the wall, the transformation of the agricultural and economic system to one of subsistence based on a hardy, ox-like creature, and the dissemination of knowledge of the microscopic and atomic processes of natural life, are related as if they happened within one individual's experience. For the purpose of Doeg's narrative stance, of course, that is the case. All the points of reference by which we establish the passing of time are absent: this is Planet 8, not Earth and so there are no dates, no significant political or historical events outside the narrative but recreated within it, or even the clear milestones of birth and death that signal to the reader the period or the dates of the fictional events. Rather the significant changes in the history of a planet and its people are compressed into a first person narrative, and thus construct the individual who narrates them.

The measured flow of the narrative thus conceals, while it constructs, this telescoping of 'normal' time. At a first reading, for pleasure, The Making appeared a rather short and artless story, with strong didactic elements. It was only a more systematic reading that suggested that a key formal element is this non-realistic use of time, which enables the project of the title to be realised: the making of the representative for Planet 8. If the choice of formal conventions is indeed significantly related to social location and to the perception of an individual's capacity to affect society as well as be affected by it, this choice of time-scale and the category of individuality constructed by the total narrative, both affirms and denies the agency of an individual human being. In a radical way the dislocations available through the genre of SF permit the construct of a new version of the category of an individual.

The Sirian Experiments is, like Shikasta, an account of events that take place over millenia; this signals the protracted nature of the change demanded of Ambien II in her contacts with Canopus. Once again the meaning of time is questioned and the ways in which it is used; for the rewriting of history, for the calibrations of science, for subjective measurements. Ambien II ponders

...the implications of the fact that a short period of time, twenty thousand years, may turn out to be of more importance than epochs lasting millions of years.

(Lessing, 1981c, p.13)

The space created by the construction of this immense time-span also allows the creation of possible histories that seem to explain the origin of certain features of reality; for example, the myth of the home beyond the skies, and the founding of the Navajo and Hopi indian nations are recast as the results of the experimental transportation of the Lombis to Rohanda by Sirius, and the escape of a few of them with two Sirian technicians called Navah and Hoppe. (Lessing, 1981c, pp.19-34)

It is perhaps necessary to emphasise what Lessing herself says: that this cosmology is an invention, a fiction, but that its construction allows for the raising of questions in forms excluded from the realistic project. Hegemonic definitions are necessarily incomplete, in that they can value certain experiences only at the cost of excluding others. So any system of thought, dominant or oppositional, must set up meaning through the construction of differences. What Lessing seeks to do is to re-infect

some of the most entrenched dichotomies of Western society including those of feminists and radicals: individual/society; culture/nature; value-free science/moral evaluation. This fictional overthrowing of established semantic chains is also common in other women's SF, where, however, it is more often used to subvert the dominant meanings associated with masculinity/femininity.

c) Human and Non-Human Worlds

Both Suvin and Williams identify as crucial the representation of the relationship between human beings and the physical processes of the non-human world. In Canopus, Lessing creates a spectrum of relationships between individuals and structures within society, and the total physical environment. In doing so she does not represent the relationship as given or as neutral, but as parts of a dynamic process. The significance of the representations of the natural world and the physical environment in structuring the meaning of fictions has been described in this way:

In naturalistic fiction, as in the zero (real) world, physics stands in no significant relation to ethics...
In the tragic myth ethics compensates the physics...the failure is...ethically exalted and put to religious use.

(Suvin, 1979, p.19)

It would be quite plausible to make a religious reading of Canopus, if it were not for its explicit attacks on religious ideologies, and its insistence, in various ways that the determining forces it represents are not to be differentiated by a material/spiritual dualism. A form of this claim is also to be found in a piece Lessing wrote in 1972, 'In The World, Not of it', about Sufism, a view of the world to which she is evidently drawn. As she describes it, Sufism's project is to combine the mystic and the practical:

Sufism believes itself to be the substance of that current which can develop man (sic) to a higher stage in his evolution. It is not contemptuous of the world.

(Lessing, September 1975, p.133)

It might also be possible to trace connections with the work of Teilhard de Chardin, which also sees the spiritual transformation of humanity in evolutionary terms. This is an area also explored by other women SF writers:

Feminist utopias are not only ecologically conscious they assume a partnership between the natural and social world ...the elimination of all hierarchies, and the ability to see even the natural world as profoundly equal and similar to the human world, changes and spatial metaphors used to aid people in understanding the world.

(Pearson, 1977, p.58)

In one of the Canopean commentaries in Shikasta the phenomena of powerful affiliations to nationalisms, politics and science are categorised as 'each one...a drug, a prop, a pacifier for children'; a compensation, in other words, for the failure of the Canopean influence, which has turned the beautiful planet of Rohanda into a tormented Shikasta. Last in this list of comforters, these alliances individuals can build with something larger than themselves, are the cycles of natural life: the seasons, the weather, decay and rebirth, so that the last refuge is that:

...stripped of certainties, there is no Shikasta who will not let his eyes rest on a patch of earth, perhaps no more than a patch of littered and soured soil...and think: Yes, but will come to life, there is enough power there to tear down this dreadfulness and heal all our ugliness.

(Lessing, 1981a, p.250)

The regenerative power of nature is a frequent theme in literature. SF has produced scenarios of its dramatic destruction in drought, bacterial mutation, over-population and so on. What remains relatively unexplored in both areas are the contemporary consequences for individuals of the knowledge gained through ecology. In the nineteenth century the consequences for individuals, especially as members of the working class, of the processes of the industrial revolution and the advance of capitalism only gradually became represented in fiction. In an analogous way the consequences for individuals, as members of a biological species, of the processes of ecological disruption, also part of the practices of industrial capitalism, have also remained less than wholly represented. The Canopean commentator observes of humanity:

They are weaned from everything but the knowledge that the universe is a roaring engine of creativity, and they are only temporary manifestations of it.

(Lessing, 1981a, pp.256-7)

Where such large cosmic views have been constructed in SF they have all too often involved new worlds to conquer in distinctly old-fashioned style. Occasional representations of the human species as part of a wider evolutionary framework do exist, such as the mutant children off to seed the

universe like spores from a mushroom in Arthur Clarke's Childhood's End. Neither form seriously represents the radical challenge of such constructions to settled cultural patterns about the eternal natural verities: the unending regeneration of the natural cycles which have been the explicit consolation of so much literature.

It is, of course, common for the physical environment to be used as a metaphor within novels. The fog in Charles Dickens' Bleak House, for example, clearly carries other meanings besides the meteorological. It is generally understood to be a metaphor for the proceedings of the Court of Chancery, but no more than that: part of a set of fictional conventions that function together to further the project of a given work, not any sort of realist statement about the determinations of nature of physical environment on an individual. In Canopus this convention is itself challenged.

In Shikasta the squalor of the cities, pollution, the destruction of the species, the dislocation of the environment so that it becomes ever less nurturant, is an active factor in all the interlocking narratives. The corruption of nature on Shikasta is constructed through the fictional device of the failure of the Canopean Lock; the impoverishment of the cities, the barrenness of the refugee camps are all manifestations of the same inescapable insufficiency, and all determine human perceptions and human activity; only in the beginning and in the end, after the holocaust, are human habitation and nature in a different relationship:

Each city, then was a perfect artefact, with nothing in it uncontrolled; considered, with its inhabitants, as a functioning whole. p.41

and then, the survivors of the last days find:

Suddenly we all knew quite clearly where the city should be. We knew it all at once. Then we found a spring, in the middle of the place. That was how this city was begun. It is going to be a star city, five points. p.446

In both instances the polarity between natural/civilised is over-riden, so that ideas emerge in which some fundamental differences, through which meaning is commonly constructed, no longer exist.

This desire to transcend given dualities is a recurrent theme of women's SF, and includes the superceding, in some utopian fictions, that of the basic female/male difference. Such works as The Kin of Ata are Waiting for You by Dorothy Bryant explore:

the dualism of value that destroys us, the dualism of superior/inferior, ruler/ruled, owner/owned, user/used (which) might give way to what seems to me, from here, a much healthier, sounder, more promising modality of integration and integrity.

(le Guin, 1982, p.159)

By using the space made available through the conventions of SF, Lessing has been able to represent world history, individuals' relations to each other, to society and to nature in a way that is still recognisably about what we know, but which is also radically restructured.

A wish to build a different categorisation of the relationship between human beings and the non-human is also evident in, for example, The Wander-Ground, by Sally Miller Gearhart, in which the hill women experience themselves as part of, and in communication with the non-human world:

...Around her, fallen branches, deep moss, damp grass, red-brown mus, dormant brambles, layer on layer of thicket... Less intense sounds and smells now, but more of them. By swift montage she listened to and felt one at a time, every thing, every oxygen-breathing thing, every other breathing thing, every non-breathing thing. They felt her attention and told her all was well.

(Gearhart; 1979, p.13)

Similarly, active relations between physical environment and human society are constructed in Marriages. The women of the masculinist, low-lying Zone Four are represented as maintaining a crucial rapport between human individuals and the natural world. Against edict and punishment they practice looking up at the mountains. The resonance for the reader is, in cultural terms, religious: the biblical 'I will lift up mine eyes to the hills...' but in the novel the women derive not a spiritual but actual material change and benefit from it.

The Zones are also inimical in that the inhabitants of one cannot, without preparation, breathe in the atmosphere of the other. As Dabeeb and the other women from Zone Four realise, rashly visiting Zone Three, after coming to know Al-Ith, the differences in physical environment mean more than just physical differences:

The gap between this and what Zone Four could even hope for was - hundreds of years. Was - time, but time that beat a higher finer measure...They could learn to make the dishes on their tables speak through designs and patterns that were like a new language, they could clothe their servants in garments that had these languages of patterns woven into them.

But as for the real differences, they would have to learn to feed from this other dimension that they had only just begun to think of...how long would it take for Zone Four to learn this absolute equality...when...servility had been stamped so long into its deepest substance?

(Lessing, 1981b, p.273)

The relationship between individuality and place is less implicit in The Sirian Experiments, in that Ambien II is a galactic creature, almost immortal thanks to the intervention of technology. Instead of the mutually determining effect of physical place and individuality being slowly structured through the narrative, the Sirian Experiments contains a range of explicit comments about some phenomena that are normally taken for granted. As her narrative tone is dry and bureaucratic ('I could like Ambien II better than I do', remarks Lessing in the Preface) such comments do not appear as gratuitous in context as they do in isolation:

...instability of feeling was a concomitant of seasons - so Klorathy's brief summary had warned me.

(Lessing, 1981c, p.110)

and

It was not a small room, but was oppressive because of its dimensions. I will say here that while Sirius even then was familiar with ideas to do with the relations between the dimensions of buildings and the psychological state of their inhabitants, we had - dare I say have?- not approached the understanding of Canopus.

(Lessing, 1981c, p.94)

Finally, in The Making, it is a fundamental assumption of the narrative that on Planet 8, unlike Shikasta, the normal state of affairs is for people, and their buildings and activities to work with, not against their environment:

...our old life, how fluid it was, how adaptable, houses and streets and towns changed as plants do turning towards or away from the light.

(Lessing, 1982, p.94)

This is quite a different assumption from the secular realist project which assumes an indifferent nature, an ethically neutral physics, and environments which, although they may be the products of human activity, do not themselves affect individuals. They may, of course, be understood as standing for the social relations of which they are a product, but are not in a purely physical sense determining.

d) Gender Difference

Gender inequality and the construction of feminity as inferior are the central issue for investigation in some SF, but here women's oppression is assumed as an obvious, given fact: an axiomatic position but not a central project:

Of course, developed individuals with us are androgynous, to put it into the nearest Shikastan terminology possible: we do not have emotional or physical or psychological characteristics that are considered as appertaining to one sex rather than another, as is normal on the more backward planets.

(Lessing, 1981a, p.142)

and

...I should remember that a symptom of the general worsening and corruption was that females had been deprived of equality and dignity.

(Lessing, 1981c, p.106)

Nevertheless, in the overall sweep of the sequence, in which naturalised polarities are constantly made over, Marriages is, superficially at the least, about gender conflict. The two Zones, Three and Four, epitomise the stereotypic feminine and masculine virtues. As the constructions around the categories of coloniser/colonised, advanced/primitive, superior/inferior, in this work, undermine both poles of accentuation so the narrative structure of this book challenges the presumptions that the feminine world, on its own, is good, creative or even adequate; and that the strength and force of the masculine world are wholly undesirable. Al-Ith and Ben Ata are required of necessity, to marry. What this means is worked out in the representations of their sexual encounters where the ideological meanings that accrue to heterosexuality are reworked and transformed. Heterosexual practice is not represented as having a fixed significance, but rather as a process, both subjective and objective, through which it acquires its many meanings. In each of the following examples heterosexual intercourse acquires a different meaning.

...he could only complete the entry and the possession by taking a furtive glance at the bruises he had inflicted, and this itself now shamed him so that as he spurted he groaned and then lay still.

(Lessing, 1981b, p.62)

Here Ben Ata exemplifies the possibility of male heterosexuality being used solely as a channel of aggression and force, so that even the physical

pleasure is spoilt by the shame that Al-Ith makes him feel. It is penetration as rape, fuelled by the desire for domination.

It was quite shocking to him, because it laid him open to pleasures he had certainly not imagined with Elys...He was laid open not only to physical responses he had not imagined, but, worse, to emotions he had no desire at all to feel.

(Lessing, 1981b, p.88)

In this example Al-Ith makes love to Ben Ata according to her own customary experience in Zone Three, where sexual acts are playful, reflective, tender, reciprocal, and free of any driving need. Here sexuality is harnessed to the service of the partners' conscious and accepted intentions and feelings. It awakens Ben Ata to the possibility of mutual empathy which will radically affect the way in which he rules his land.

He ploughed into her, long, steady, on and on, while she groaned and died under him.

...Could this desperate and necessitous woman be...Al-Ith?

(Lessing, 1981b, p.223)

Despite its manifest shortcomings Zone Four has, by this point in the narrative, made Al-Ith aware of the limitations of her own beloved Zone Three. Her own life is no longer securely under her own control and neither is her sexuality. She is obliged to acknowledge the existence of aspirations and contradictions excluded from the well-ordered sensibilities of Zone Three. To Ben Ata's consternation, as much as her own, these ambiguities and newly discovered but unresolved desires take over her sexual identity as well. That sexuality can be an expression of subliminal desires and fantasies that women might consciously not wish to have is an issue yet to be satisfactorily resolved for feminists.

These representations of heterosexuality stand in an ambivalent relationship to feminist debates which characterise the institution of heterosexuality as part of women's oppression. One reading of the representation of Zone Four would support this view in that sexual relations between men and women in that country are explicitly shown to be constructed according to a dominant/exploited polarity, for example, Ben Ata assumes it his duty to rape women captives and there is shown to be no way to engage in sexual activity that constructs the partners as enjoying equal powers. Sexuality is constructed there as part of a society based on authority and servility. Another reading would, however, not interpret this particular state of affairs as being a straightforward representation of male power over women, but as something to be transcended as Al-Ith herself had to transcend the desirable feminine aspects

of Zone Three. Neither Zone Three nor Zone Four is adequate to the potentialities of women or of men. The representation of heterosexuality does not therefore suggest that is a pre-given or natural phenomenon but that it is a set of activities that can actually be transformed through various practices.

If Pearson is correct in saying that:

The most common plot structure of the feminist utopian novel is the conversion story in which a male narrator comes to see a feminist society as superior to a male-dominated one,

(Pearson, 1979, p.59)

then Marriages does not conform to this straightforward project. There is an unsettling double vision in Marriages, so that, although Al-Ith and Zone Three are shown to be more discriminating, more responsive, further-seeing than Ben Ata and the menfolk of Zone Four, yet the latter are all shown to have necessary virtues and the former, eventually, to be a place that it is necessary to transcend.

The further theme that the individual, however much a product of circumstance, is nevertheless the only location for change and that what Lessing unequivocally describes as moral failure will have material consequences is central to the whole project of the work. Writing in 1973 Lessing made the same point:

...it is here that Vonnegut is moral in an old-fashioned way. He does take the full weight of responsibility, while more and more people are shrugging off the we should have and we ought to have and we can if we want and coming to see history as a puppet show and our - humanity's - slide into chaos as beyond our prevention, our will, our choice.

(Lessing, September 1975, p.141)

This apocalyptic view of humanity's future is inherent in all four narratives including The Making which constructs a parallel narrative about the extermination of sentient life on Planet 8.

Given her assumption that it is the ideas that are the most naturalised that are therefore the most invisible and the most controlling, the openings available through SF permit the disruption of ideologies in ways that are excluded by secular realism, as well as old-fashioned humanism:

We see ourselves as autonomous creatures, our minds our own, our beliefs freely chosen, our ideas individual and unique... with billions and billions and billions of us on this planet, we are still prepared to believe that each of us is unique, or that if all the others are mere dots in a swarm, then at least I am this self-determined thing, my mind my own.

(Lessing, 1981c, un-numbered)

The individual may be the site for change, but that is only because s/he is part of a whole, subject to determining forces of which moral law is one, no different from the others of more obviously material nature. This is the source of the ineluctable judgements suggested by Rachel Sherban's story in Shikasta, by the painful but hopeless protraction of the struggle against the snow in The Making, by the obedience of Al-Ith and Ben Ata in Marriages. It is made momentarily explicit in The Sirian Experiments:

'Ambien has it not occurred to you that there are useful questions, and those that are not? '...' Perhaps I am not strong enough for that truth. ' ' Then so much the worse for you. And we none of us have any choice...or do you want to remain of those who make up any kind of solution or answer for themselves, and take refuge in it, because they are too weak for patience?'

(Lessing, 1981c, p.284)

This is an attempt by Lessing to construct meanings in which value judgments are grounded not in metaphysical or spiritual realities, but in material and identifiable laws at work:

I think there must be definite lifespans for ideas or sets... If we do not at least ask ourselves if this is in fact a process, if we do not make the attempt to treat the mechanisms of ideas as something we may study, which impartiality, what hope have we of controlling them?

(Lessing, 1982, p.129)

This inexorable law is therefore, like other material determinations, which, being revealed can be re-made, also the source of change and therefore of hope:

There was a continuous movement now, from Zone Five to Zone Four - and from us, up the pass. There was a lightness, a freshness, and a remaking - and an inspiration where there had only been stagnation and closed frontiers.

(Lessing, 1981b, p.299)

e) Reading the Sequence

In the readings of Canopus that I have made here, I have tried to explore the assumptions which are needed to make them make sense. This seems a minimum requirement. I was very aware that Canopus appears to be the site for the demolition rather than the construction of meanings that accord with either dominant or oppositional ideologies; feminists do not find confirmation that women's sexual oppression is their central problem; religious people find that spirituality is not a privileged level but a continuation of

material evolution; anti-colonialists are confronted by a non-oppressive coloniser; and everyone is invited to construct meanings around the forthcoming holocaust. In an interview in 1963, Lessing said:

I've been reading a lot of SF, and I think that SF writers have captured our cultures sense of the future. The Four Gated City, is a prophetic novel. I think it's a true prophecy. I think that the 'iron heel' is going to come down. I believe that the future is going to be cataclysmic.

(Lessing, September 1975, p.70)

In this way Canopus can be read as a number of ways in which to think the unthinkable - 'the human imagination rejects the implication of our situation' (ibid, p.76)

The 1970's saw the formation of consciousness raising groups for women, in which individual women found themselves able to articulate pre-emergent and buried experiences of their oppression. In the 1980's nuclear consciousness raising groups are beginning to form, in which individuals are able to find ways of articulating their existential terror about the prospect of nuclear war in order to produce in themselves a subjectivity that is not so paralysed as to be unable to organise against the holocaust.

Canopus can be read as part of this project, and also as consolation for its failure. Once again Lessing's texts articulate what still seems barely emergent experiences. The four novels were not, taken as a whole, easy for me to read. For an individual who does not already take seriously the idea that there exist ideologies which fairly systematically conceal the real relations within societies, the words must be very difficult indeed, perhaps to the point of being unreadable.

Women's SF Short Stories

Whatever the complex pleasure involved in reading Canopus, it is quite far removed from that of reading the women's short SF stories collected by Sargent. The themes of Canopus in Argos are constructed on many levels. The four novels so far published in this SF sequence obviously allow in length for great scope in the representation and transformation of issues by an already skilled practitioner. For these reasons alone, Canopus is a rich site for the construction of varied meanings. However, much SF is published in the form of short stories which comprise a different set of conventions. The kinds of resonance and polyvalence which can be derived from a reading of an extended group of narratives are not so likely to be produced in the short

story which is more circumscribed in length. Although less likely to structure readings that produce identification with characters within the narrative, short stories are well suited to the construction of quite polemical messages. In addition a number of short stories necessarily means a constant redispotion of attention.

This power of the short story to disrupt can be particularly aptly used by women writers, as a means of articulating the experiences they have as women, subordinated to the dominant masculine ideologies.

Women writers can count on these emergent experiences among women; the position needed to make sense of such representations is already congruent with those others occupied by women. This is not to deny that male readers cannot and do not temporarily occupy such a position, but it is less likely to come easily to them. I also suspect that they are still less likely to read stories written by women, as was certainly the case at one time, judged by the fact that masculine names were often insisted upon by publishers and editors. The short story form also provides opportunities for maverick insights that as yet have no particular resting place in theory.

In this final section I shall therefore look, in a highly selective and rather impressionistic way, at SF short stories by women, both for their formal qualities and for some themes and projects that repeatedly appear. Most of those I choose are drawn from Pamela Sargent's three selections, which are very widely available, and in themselves represent an interesting project of the construction of a female SF tradition, though I shall also refer to stories published elsewhere when that seems appropriate.

i) Domesticity

I shall begin this brief survey with domesticity and closely related studies. On the face of it this seems perhaps the most unlikely theme of all to find in SF. Nothing seems further away from the heroic conquest of galaxies or the elevated concerns of science. As a serious concern it is not exactly dominant in the literary tradition, either, but in SF short stories it is often there, usually in a grotesque transformation, and frequently articulated with parodies of the perfect mother and wife:

She had been working at being a housewife for years. She cleaned and cooked and went to PTA and bought every single new appliance advertised and just now she was a little sensitive about the whole thing because clean as she would, her husband had just left her, when there wasn't even an Other Woman to take the blame.

(Kit Reed, 1976, p.95-6)

The short story lends itself to this sort of satiric treatment when the target ideology can be completely overturned, yet the brevity of the form precludes the necessity of representing all the ensuing consequences. In this story the censorious, perfect housewife, Mrs. Brainerd, who

...fastened the neck of her house-dress with a Sweetheart pin.
'Something special', Mrs. Brainerd said... 'Got it with labels from the Right Kind of Margarine'.

(Reed, 1976, p.97)

is finally disposed of by a handy gadget which instantly immobilises living creatures, thus ending much household drudgery, as its manufacturers claim. This story dates from 1964 and is an indication of how early some themes, which later became central to feminist concerns, appeared in SF. In this story the ideology of a woman's place being in the home is satirised through the parody of some of the cultural institutions, such as advertising, that construct it. It also depicts the fact that housework actually is work.

A similarly deadpan representation of family life appears in 'The Heat Death of the Universe', first published in 1970, by Pamela Zoline. Once again the text parodies advertisements and images of domestic bliss and interleaves them with representations of both madness, decay, entropy, and also with exact itemising of domestic chores:

Washing the baby's diapers, Sarah Boyle writes notes to herself all over the house; a mazed wild script larded with arrows, diagrams, pictures; graffiti on every available surface in desperate/heroic attempt to index, record, bluff, invoke, order, and placate. On the fluted and flowered white plastic lid of the diaper bin she has written in Blushing Pink Nitetime lipstick. 'The nitrogen cycle is the vital round of organic inorganic exchange in earth'.

(ed. Sargent, 1978b, p.104)

Such stories as these are angry attacks on the ideologies of domesticity, exploiting the space SF provides outside realism to disrupt, or to extrapolate into the ludicrous, the logic of unpaid domestic labour as a labour of love. There is also, disconcertingly, what appears to me to be a sub-theme in women's SF that emerges from this matrix, the ultimate version of housewifely thrift: cannibalism.

ii) Cannibalism

It is there in Zoline's text already referred to:

All well-fed naked children appear edible. Sarah's teeth hum in her head with memory of bloody feasting, prehistory.

(ed. Sargent, 1978b, p.116)

Cannibalism also appears in a shadowy way in Lessing's Memoirs of a Survivor, (1974) and in Suzy McKee Charnas's Walk to the End of the World, when the totally oppressed 'fems' necessarily have to feed off each others' flesh:

The screw thread was gleaming sharp, and wedged into the hollows of its spiral were fragments of flesh, bone and fat... (p.62)

...and what more nutritious additive than the flesh of dead fems and of fem-cubs who did not survive the milkery?

(McKee Charnas, 1979, p.64)

The practice appears again in 'Dead in Irons', 1976, by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro:

The tiers had been raided, the cocoons pulled apart and the bodies harvested for the stewards.

(ed. Sargent, 1978b, p.269)

The irony in this story, which represents a brutalised society on a spaceship, is that the ship's imminent destruction has been indirectly caused by the female protagonist's refusal to be sexually used by one of the male characters. The bleak conclusion, and the cannibalism, are part of a reworking, a complete retransformation of the once defunct notion of chastity. Chastity is usually part of a set of constructions in which women are produced as answerable for their sexuality to their male protectors, who have the power to dictate to the women where they should dispose of their favours: in all other circumstances the women are chaste, sexually unavailable. Mallory, the protagonist of this story is offered and refuses male protection in exchange for her sexual availability. She declares herself sexually unavailable, outside the normal system of conventions that might have protected her; it is this act which sets off the train of actions that ends in the cannibalisation of the passengers in her care.

A most succinct version, however, of the ingenuity of motherly love and frugality comes in the one page story 'To Market, To Market' by Josephine Saxton. It narrates the actions of a mother, in a city, who

...kept her children as well as anyone...made soup from bones, and ground the boiled bones into meal which went into bread. There was no waste, she made an art of economy. Her domestic system had a kind of beauty.

(New Victoria Collective, 1981, p.75)

until, forced by poverty to buy a bargain pack, she tumbles the contents into the sink. The children discover the identity tag in the ear:

She let go, but gelid hairs had stuck to her palm. She touched the metal tag, his hunter's licence.

(ibid, p.75)

Against this even mother cannot find a way:

She turned from it all in disgust, with stony determination. But her timing was bad, for there were shadows across the floor, with laughter and knives.

(ibid, p.75)

That women writers should deal at all with such a topic, let alone with such determined materiality, is itself a challenge to the stereotype of women as in need of protection. It is not a denial of the values of nurturing, but an index of anger at the relationships produced by women's acceptance of their function as universal servicers. The horror component of these stories is, of course, thoroughly inimical to the cosy categories of domesticity, motherhood and thrift, and satisfactorily brings in all the pain such ideologies seek to exclude and deny.

iii) Women and Sexuality.

Women's position as sexual objects at the disposal of men is another feminist theme, exploited at an early stage by SF writers. Because of their length, short stories do not always need subtlety of representation to engage their readers' attention. 'In Behalf of the Product', (1973) by Kit Reed, in which a disingenuous beauty queen relates her rise to fame, ends:

...just as soon as I get down from here and they run the last commercial, they're going to take care of that. He says I'll be ready to begin my nationwide personal appearance tour in behalf of the product just as soon as they finish the lobotomy.

(Kit Reed, 1976, p.191)

There are also several SF novels which take as one of their themes the asymmetries of power in heterosexuality. Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's 'False Dawn' (ed. Sargent 1978a), later appearing in extended full-length form, has as a dynamic of the central relationship the rape of the female protagonist at the beginning of the narrative. Octavia Butler's Survivor deals with the adaptation of its heroine to the sexual mores of an apparently alien race. Kate Wilhelm's The Clewiston Test is, within its SF framework of the invention of a new pain-

killing drug and the possibly disastrous consequences of its use, about the power relations within a marriage, especially the man's prerogative to define the forms of sexual pleasure. The same author treats the subject of rape in Juniper Time in a way that attempts to deconstruct its titillating potential. In 1967 she published a short story called 'Baby, You were Great', now available in the first of Pamela Sargent's collections. (Sargent, 1978a).

This short story defines the sexual exploitation of women as taking place within a much wider field of oppression. The Anne Beaumont of the story is exploited not merely for her physical beauty and sexuality but for her emotional and sensuous reactions. She has, initially unknown to her, an implant in her brain which transmits to her world-wide TV audience her uncensored mental and bodily feelings. When the sexual thrills begin to pall, physical danger proves a money-spinning innovation for her male manager. Total manipulation is not long to follow:

Herb laughed. 'The story line will be something like this,' he said. Anne has fallen in love with a stranger, deeply, sincerely in love with him. Everyone knows how deep that love is; they've all felt it too, you know. She finds him raping a child, a lovely little girl in her early teens. Stuart tells her they're through. He loves the little nymph. In a passion she kills herself. You are broadcasting a real storm of passion, right now, aren't you, honey? Never mind when I run through this scene, I'll find out'.

(ed. Sargent, 1978a, p.179)

And with the possibility of Anne's death - will it be murder or suicide? - the search for her replacement must go on:

He was the girl, filled with unspeakable terror; his heart pounded, adrenalin pumped into his system; he wanted to scream but could not. From the dim unreachable depths of his psyche there came something else, in waves, so mixed with terror that the two merged and became one emotion that pulsed and throbbed and demanded. With a jerk he opened his eyes and stared at the window. The girl had been thrown down to one of the couches, and the man was kneeling on the floor beside her, his hands playing over her bare body, his face pressed against her skin.

'Cut!' Herb said. His voice was shaken. 'Hire her', he said.

(ed. Sargent, 1978a, p.169)

The scope within SF for creating exaggerated or extreme forms of domination, outside the realms of the strictly possible, also affords the opportunity of arousing extreme and focussed emotional responses. There is nothing muffled about the anger and outrage in these stories.

It would be possible to extend this review to include a very large number of short stories, grouping them in different ways according to theme.

My purpose, here however, is simply to indicate that the SF short story market has proved an area where women's voices have been heard in a wide range of registers: sardonic, angry, funny, sad, but nearly always raised against the ideological constructions around femininity. Those quoted here have mainly been chosen to contrast with Lessing's work, in order to demonstrate the range available in SF and to suggest that it does not, as a genre, address the reader in one particular mode.

Conclusion

Such journals as New Moon and collections, such as Aurora, Beyond Equality by McIntyre and Anderson, and Woman Space by the New Victoria Collective suggest that there exists a growing female audience for SF by women and for its increasingly feminist concerns. The attraction for women of SF has been well defined in the introduction to the New Victoria book:

As women, we are just beginning to explore our ways of seeing, our point of view, our voices and forms, our creativity and our space. But is this point of view; even our form and style of writing, our own, or only the result of our history? Who are we? What might be lost if we step out of our traditional roles? And what is the territory into which we may be moving? Is it, as some of us believe, entirely uncharted, unexperienced space? ...In this genre we can express our fears and make our preliminary explorations. Here we can express our hopes for the future as well as to search through a recreated past, or as an alternative existence.

(New Victoria Collective, 1981, p.1)

Here again is the interrogative note found in Lessing's narrative in Marriages. Once again it invites the reader to construct her own meanings.

It is not possible to assess exactly how much SF by women is read by the still predominantly male audience. Sargent claims:

There are more female writers now than ever before, though they are still outnumbered by men. Now it is commonplace to hear older SF writers and critics say that the most interesting new writers of SF are women.

(Sargent, 1978b, p.xxiii)

This would therefore suggest that at least a proportion of SF produced by women is reaching a male audience.

There is also the evidence that some texts articulating feminist interests have received SF awards. Such awards are certainly not determined by a predominantly feminist or even female group:

Joanna Russ's 'When It Changed', 1972, and James Tiptree Jr.'s 'Houston, Houston, Do you Read?', 1976, two strongly feminist stories about all female societies, have also won Nebula awards.

(Sargent, 1978b, p.xvi)

These facts, along with the stories and novels by male authors that explore gender identity, seem to suggest on the contrary, that there is a fraction of the male readership of SF that is at least receptive to representations that challenge naturalised assumptions about gender.

It seems substantially true that the incursion of women writers into SF has brought some effect on the work of male authors, in that it is now at least difficult to present a patriarchal society as a natural fact of life. This may not represent an enormous advance but it is open to question whether even this would have been achieved if women's SF had^{not} begun as a subdivision within the genre, with male authored works regarded as its main corpus. At least the issue of gender is now on the agenda of SF, and significantly so in the work of some male as well as female writers.

It also seems equally necessary that the space in SF occupied by women, whatever its size and however precarious their tenure, should not be lightly vacated. As a site for struggle it has been not too unrewarding. Differences in particular locations also need to be evaluated in making decisions about appropriate cultural practices. There is, for example, a whole area of debate to be raised as to the actual consequences of the teaching of SF, not to mention women's SF, in schools. There are considerable ambiguities as to what its appearance in the school curriculum might mean in terms of the subjectivities of school students which are also constructed there, as well as through their locations in other determining structures and institutions.

The internal space that SF offers to women for the construction of new meanings can be summed up like this: SF

...can show us women in entirely new or strange surroundings it can explore what we might become if and when the present restrictions on our lives vanish, or show us new problems and restrictions than might arise.

(Sargent, 1978a, p.48)

These might include:

Disch, Thomas M. (1974), 334, Avon, New York.
Haldeman, Joe (1974), The Forever War, St. Martin's Press, New York.
Leiber, Fritz (1953), Conjure Wife, Twayne, New York
Panshin, Alexei (1968), Rite of Passage, Ace Books, New York
Sturgeon, Theodore (1960), Venus Plus X, Gnome Press, New York
Wylie, Philip (1951), The Disappearance, Holt Rinehart, New York.

SF was able to provide this opening because of its original interest in scientific and technical change and therefore its ideology of being open to new futuristic ideas. The emergence of struggles completely outside its own cultural practices, over peace, ecology and women's oppression all provided determining influences on developments within the genre.

Such developments included the establishment of a limited acceptance of positive representations of The Other, the 'being who is different from yourself' (le Guin, 1982, p.87); different in this case from white middle-class males, who comprised the readership of SF. There were narratives which constructed alternatives to the dominant, authoritarian, patriarchy represented in SF in which:

The only social change presented...has been toward authoritarianism, the domination of ignorant masses by a powerful elite - sometimes presented as a warning, but often quite complacently. Socialism is never considered as an alternative...Military virtues are taken as ethical ones. Wealth is assumed to be a righteous goal and a personal virtue. Competitive free enterprise capitalism is the economic destiny of the entire galaxy ...SF has assumed a permanent hierarchy of superiors and inferiors, with rich, ambitious, aggressive males at the top, then a great gap, and then at the bottom the poor, the uneducated, the faceless masses, and all the women.

(le Guin, 1982, p.89)

It is therefore, nothing inherent in SF as a genre that produced le Guin's own feminist SF work, Lessing's radical transformations of world history or the subversive short stories of the kind discussed here.

Once again Williams helps identify the elements in the relationship between SF as a genre and women writers when he writes of:

...The defining importance of available forms on the one hand, and the crucial insistence on the active making of forms on the other...(and) the complex relation between these truths.

(Williams, 1977, p.186)

It is this dynamic relationship between SF, as constructed as a genre through specific cultural practices and the more general struggle by women to articulate their emergent experiences of oppression that produces the sort of texts discussed in this paper:

Genre...is neither an ideal type nor a traditional order nor a set of technical rules. It is...the practical and variable combination and even fusion of what are, in abstraction different levels of the social material process.

(Williams, 1977, p.185)

Realism could not, by definition, show the transformations or transcendence of existing gender and other social relations. The space in which this could be done was found in a reworking of the SF genre. The futuristic or satiric form of the SF short story, as well as its ready-made market, was also appropriate to the disruption of naturalised masculine assumptions.

Such emergent experiences as women were acknowledging through the women's movement found articulation here both because of the lack of women's access to more mainstream cultural production and also because the dominance of certain realist conventions prevented their fuller articulations elsewhere.

The last words on the capacity of SF to provide these new conventional forms shall go to a prominent woman writer of SF:

And what is science fiction at its best but just such a 'new tool' as Mrs. Woolf avowedly sought for fifty years ago, a crazy, protean, left-handed monkey wrench, which can be put to any use the craftsman has in mind - satire, extrapolation, prediction, absurdity, exactitude, exaggeration, warning, message-carrying, tale-telling, whatever you like - an infinitely expanding metaphor exactly suited to our expanding universe, a broken mirror, broken into numberless fragments, any one of which is capable of reflecting, for a moment, the left eye and the nose of the reader, and also the farthest stars shining in the depths of the remotest galaxy?

(le Guin, 1982, p.106)

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Note: Many of the American books do later appear in the U.K. American paperbacks can, in any case, often be found in shops specialising in second-hand SF books.

1. In the programme Words, broadcast on Radio 3, 30th May 1982
2. See 'Discontent in American Science Fiction', in Science Fiction Studies, iv, pt. i (March 1977, pp.3-17) cited by Parrinder, 1980, pp.33-35.
3. Cited by Parrinder, 1980, p.43.
4. These might include:
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