

# The Four Levels of Detachment in Doris Lessing's *Shikasta*

PHYLLIS STERNBERG PERRAKIS

## *Abstract*

This paper begins by discussing the concept of detachment in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, particularly in the Tablet, Words of Wisdom. It then applies this concept to Doris Lessing's Sufi-inspired novel, *Shikasta*, which uses the genre of space fiction to defamiliarize the reader's response to the coming of a new prophet to a troubled late twentieth-century planet—a dystopian version of Earth. Using four characters in the novel, whom I correlate to the four levels of detachment found in Words of Wisdom, the paper traces the struggles of the characters to gain various levels of detachment. In the process, the paper explores the barriers that stand in their way and analyzes the reciprocal relation between detachment and attachment and service to the new prophet.

## *Résumé*

L'article examine tout d'abord le concept de détachement dans les écrits de Bahá'u'lláh, en particulier la tablette Paroles de sagesse, et applique ce concept au roman de Doris Lessing, *Shikasta*, d'inspiration soufie. La fiction de l'espace est le genre littéraire employé par Lessing dans cet ouvrage pour défamiliariser le lecteur dans sa réaction envers la venue d'un nouveau prophète sur une planète en proie à une instabilité de fin du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle — une version dystopienne de la Terre. Puis, à partir de quatre personnages tirés du roman, mis ici en corrélation avec les quatre degrés de détachement présentés dans les Paroles de sagesse, l'article relate le combat mené par les personnages pour parvenir à divers degrés de détachement. L'article explore ce faisant les obstacles qui entravent leur cheminement et analyse le rapport de réciprocité entre le détachement et l'attachement, d'une part, et le service à la cause du nouveau prophète, d'autre part.

*Resumen*

Este escrito comienza discutiendo el concepto de desprendimiento en los Escritos de Bahá'u'lláh, particularmente en la Tabla titulada Palabras de Sabiduría. Procede entonces a aplicar este concepto a la novela *Shikasta* de Doris Lessing, inspirada por el Sufismo, que usa el género de ficción espacial para desfamiliarizar la reacción del lector al advenimiento de un profeta nuevo en la postrera parte del siglo veinte a un planeta embrollado, es decir, una visión distópica de la Tierra. Usando cuatro protagonistas en la novela, quienes se relacionan a los cuatro niveles de desprendimiento que se hallan en las Palabras de Sabiduría, el escrito traza los esfuerzos de los protagonistas de lograr varios niveles de desprendimiento. En el proceso, el escrito explora las barreras que se interponen en su camino, y analiza la relación recíproca entre desapego y apego y servicio al nuevo profeta.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is twofold. First, I want to explore the meaning and significance of the principle of detachment as discussed in the Bahá'í Writings. In particular I want to examine the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's definition of detachment in His Tablet, Words of Wisdom, and relate the four stages of detachment given in the Tablet, to other Writings discussing stages or levels of nearness to the Divine. Further, I want to examine some of the barriers that act like veils preventing detachment. In doing this, I will explore the link between detachment and the purified heart. Second, I want to apply the understanding of detachment gained from the above examination to Doris Lessing's great, Sufi-inspired space-fiction novel, *Re: Colonised Planet 5: Shikasta*, which is the symbolic rendering of the coming of a new prophet to an earthlike planet.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, I want to correlate the four stages of detachment in Words of Wisdom to the responses of four characters to the new prophet. The four stages in the Tablet will help clarify in what ways the four characters demonstrate increasingly powerful levels of detachment from their egos and material reality, and how their detachment allows them to progress to increasingly greater levels of recognition, attachment, and service to the new prophet.

First let me address the fundamental question, why apply Bahá'u'lláh's

spiritual vision to a set of fictional characters in a novel by a non-Bahá'í writer? From the beginning, Bahá'u'lláh tells us, the power of His Revelation has infused a new capacity in all created things (*Gleanings* XLIII). Artists, in general, and creative writers, in particular, are often those who are most sensitive to the new spiritual powers at work in the universe, and Lessing is such an artist. As a young girl growing up in racially divided Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), she instinctively felt racism was wrong and turned first to books and ideas and later to left-wing politics in her search for justice (*Under My Skin* [1994]). However, when she first wrote about these experiences in her autobiographical novel *Martha Quest* (1952), she also described her protagonist Martha as having a powerful mystical experience. One evening while watching the magical beauty of the play of light on the veld, Martha slowly felt her individual identity begin to merge with that of the world around her until she felt at one with the cosmos (*Martha Quest* 73–75). At the time, neither Martha nor her author knew how to fit this vision into the rest of their thinking. It was not until some years and many books later that Lessing, now a Sufi, began to place such mystical experiences in a fictional universe where they were indications of the character's intuitive connection to other spiritual realities. In *Shikasta* (1979), which is perhaps her most monumental spiritual vision, she portrays these other spiritual realities as embodied in other planets.

While Lessing is not specifically attempting to portray Bahá'í principles in *Shikasta*, her vision captures both her own spiritual struggles and something of the universal nature of humankind's attempts to overcome attachment to one's ego and attributes, and to respond to spiritual reality. In her autobiography, *Walking in the Shade: 1949–62*, Lessing has described her struggles in going from a committed left-wing activist to a Sufi believer, and she is well aware of the tests and challenges involved in this process. But she chooses to universalize her experience in *Shikasta*, using a mythic form that places individual transformation in the context of humankind's spiritual evolution from the beginning of the species. While she uses a space-fiction structure, placing her prophets and angelic messengers on a separate star (Canopus), her inspiration for the novel came from her reading in

succession the Old and New Testaments and the Qur'án and being struck by "how common many of the tales were to all the religions and cultures." She concludes in an interview that *Shikasta* is "a very regurgitated book because it all comes out of the sacred books" ("A Conversation" 23). Given Lessing's spiritual awareness and her explicit use of earlier sacred books as her source, I feel it is appropriate and useful to apply Bahá'í Writings on detachment to the spiritual vision in *Shikasta*. By helping readers to understand better the complex nature of the spiritual forces that Lessing is symbolically portraying, they enhance the reader's understanding and appreciation of the novel.

Furthermore, great works of art reflect back a culture's unstated values and attitudes; they capture the feel of the times.<sup>2</sup> *Shikasta's* detailed exploration of its characters' fears and efforts as they try to come to terms with a world that seems to be falling into chaos is a symbolic expression of the challenges of our own world. As her characters are forced to face unimaginable catastrophes, Lessing portrays their slow and painful awakening to another level of reality and their gradual attraction to the figure in their midst embodying that other, nonmaterial reality. We can understand our own trials and the trials of those around us better by seeing how these struggles are portrayed in Lessing's imaginative vision. And this vision takes on a new depth and poignancy when it is seen in light of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words on detachment and attachment. Their Writings provide a standard for this age for understanding concepts like detachment, a standard that is true for various aspects of reality, including human imaginative and cultural production (Saiedi 157). This divine standard applies to all aspects of human production, not just psychologically but also descriptively, providing a benchmark by which to measure spiritual, symbolic, and other kinds of truth. Thus fiction, which provides a kind of symbolic truth about human experience, can at times be illuminated by interpreting the world it portrays with the help of these Writings. Hence using the Bahá'í Writings as a hermeneutic tool with which to interpret Lessing's novel helps us better appreciate the relevance of Lessing's vision for our time.

Moreover, in their mimetic function works of art are both more selective

and more symbolic than real life. For example, out of the complicated and confused welter of feelings, thoughts, and actions that makes up an individual's life, the creative writer selects those particular events, emotions, and thoughts that portray a pattern or clarify a tendency or hint at a hidden potential. The details represented can suggest the meaning or lack thereof in a character's life. Thus a novel, for instance, can enable us at times to see more clearly than in real life the existence and effect of certain kinds of psychological and spiritual patterns. As a result we can recognize these patterns more easily in our own lives and the lives of those around us. Both in terms of our own spiritual advancement and in terms of sharing our understanding with others, a better understanding of the obstructions that stand in the way of spiritual vision can be richly rewarding.

In *Shikasta* we are granted such a vision. For example, we see the barriers preventing a sensitive and intelligent adolescent girl from fully grasping, or acting on her understanding of, her brother's spiritual station while her seemingly less perceptive older brother makes greater progress in personal growth and service. A mentally fragile woman who never meets the prophet but hears his words in her mind and a rather plain, highly determined young woman from a deprived background who loves, marries, and devotes herself to him and his cause both offer examples of unlikely characters who are able to move closer to the new spiritual reality.

### EXPLORING DETACHMENT

I want to begin my exploration of detachment by looking at Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "He hath known God who hath known himself" (*Kitáb-i-Iqán* 182). But what does Bahá'u'lláh mean by knowing the self? And what is meant by *self*? Modern psychologists often trace the development of the physical, emotional, and intellectual capacities of the self, showing the different stages at which these different capacities are acquired and relating them to the self's interaction with others. The Bahá'í psychiatrist H. B. Danesh broadens the discussion of self, explaining that although we are

aware of ourselves as two entities, the body and the mind, “we also experience ourselves as a *self*, undivided, whole, and complete.” When we speak of the self, Danesh explains, “we are talking about our being as we experience it and as it is perceived by others.” It includes “the conscious and unconscious parts of the psyche; the physical, mental, and emotional dimensions of our personality; and both the egoistical and the universal aspects of our behaviour. . . . It is towards this integrated and whole [concept of our being] . . . that we are all attracted” (45).

To achieve this broader sense of self, we need to understand the forces that bring out the more egoistical (concerned with the ego) or the more universal aspects of our behavior. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá helps us by defining a dimension of the self not usually mentioned in psychological literature: the soul. He distinguishes between the intellectual capacities of the soul and its deeper spiritual resources. The intellect, or the “rational soul” as He names it, is the part of the mind that we are most familiar with. It is the rational soul that allows us to make new discoveries, to find medical cures, and to develop new software programs. In short, it is the rational soul that allows us to discover the secrets of the material universe. When this rational soul is “assisted by the spirit of faith,” it is able to turn its power of discovery toward the spiritual realm and to become “acquainted with the divine secrets and heavenly realities” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 208).

To realize our full human potential we need to balance the rational and spiritual powers of the soul. One power, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “connect[s] us with the material world, and by it [we are] capable of material advancement. The other power is spiritual, and through its development [our] inner, potential nature is awakened. These powers are like two wings. Both must be developed, for flight is impossible with one wing” (*Promulgation* 60). Our civilization is fully aware of, and expends a great deal of time and energy developing, the powers of the rational soul, but how are we to understand and develop the spiritual capacities of the soul, those powers that open us to spiritual realities and help us to become responsive to the guidance of God?

One way is to recognize the role of the heart—the metaphorical seat of

the soul's capacity to feel love and attraction toward its objects, according to Adib Taherzadeh (2:216). Nader Saiedi further explains that "the 'heart' represents the throne of God and the place where all the divine attributes are revealed. . . . The purification of the heart, therefore, is the indispensable first step on the journey toward spiritual truth" (141). Thus in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán Bahá'u'lláh* instructs the "true seeker" that before he can begin the spiritual search he must "cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 192). Like the intellect, the heart also can be turned toward the spiritual world and the realm of God or it can concentrate all its love on the material world, acquired knowledge, and the self. But Bahá'u'lláh warns us that if the heart is filled with love for the world and the self, there will be no room for the love of God. In one of the Hidden Words, He admonishes the individual to cast out the "stranger" from his or her heart so "that the Friend may enter His home" (No. 26 Persian).

To assist in our efforts to direct our hearts toward spiritual objects, we need to recognize that we possess within us the attributes of God. Taherzadeh notes that "God's light is reflected in" human reality, but the individual "is veiled from these bounties" and must "make an effort to purify his [or her] heart" in order for these qualities and attributes to be manifested" (2:31). Indeed, as I mentioned above, Saiedi explains that the heart signifies "the place where all the divine attributes are revealed" (141). Thus it is the intellect assisted by faith and enriched by the purified heart that puts us in touch with our spiritual potential. Through determined efforts one's heart can become so polished (that is, purified) that it is able to reflect fully the spiritual attributes latent within the individual. Then the intellect assisted by such a purified heart is able to penetrate what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls the veil "covering the eye of inner vision . . . that we may behold the manifestations of the signs of God, discern His mysterious graces and realize that material blessings as compared with spiritual bounties are as nothing" (*Promulgation* 90).

I want to examine some of the barriers that act like veils covering the

eye of inner vision. In particular, I want to examine how the heart is blocked off from receptivity to sources of spiritual guidance and deep self-understanding by becoming focused on the world and the ego. We are all aware of how at some times we are more in touch with our spiritual attributes and more in tune with the teachings of the Manifestation of God than at others. At these times we look at the world differently, able to see the spiritual potential in those around us, for example, and able to imagine sharing with them our own spiritual understanding. At other times the people around us seem totally engrossed in the material world, and we feel estranged from their spirits and from our own. Even when we have been touched by what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls "the spirit of faith," we can still fail to be fully receptive to spiritual bounties and unable to achieve our full human potential if we allow our worldly, confused, or self-centered desires to usurp the heart's attention so that the soul receives only a trickle of the spiritual energy that is available to it. Taherzadeh, commenting on Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet Lawḥ-i-Naṣír, puts it this way: while all believers have been given potentially all the powers and attributes of physical creation, "some are unaware of this bounty. They have deprived themselves of His grace through unworthy deeds and are shut out as by a veil from beholding its great glory" (2:255).

To gain some control over how our desires affect our ability to be in touch with our deepest self is to acquire detachment. Detachment is not an easy concept to understand. To begin with, there is some discrepancy between how the word is used in a spiritual context and how it is used in everyday life. Webster's dictionary defines detachment as "indifference to worldly concerns or partisan opinion: absence of emotional bias: neutrality of feeling: unworldliness." In psychology the term denotes lack of any sense of connectedness. In the spiritual context in which I use it, detachment is much more positive. It is a necessary step in acquiring attachment to the Divine. It clears the dust from the surface of the heart so that it can reflect divine attributes more fully. Taherzadeh puts it this way: "the soul can acquire faith and progress towards God to the degree of its detachment from this world" (2:34-35). Bahá'u'lláh begins the Kitáb-i-Íqán by stating that "No man shall attain the shores of the ocean of true



understanding except he be detached from all that is in heaven and on earth" (3). The process of gaining detachment involves more than being neutral to our desires; it involves gaining knowledge and perspective about them, so that we can discover toward what goals our emotions and attention are directed. Then we can choose to direct our newly freed energy and interests toward the investigation of the claims of our deeper self and of the Divine.

As we noted above, the heart cannot hold within it two contrary lovers. We cannot serve a god of our own imagination and making—for example, the god of success or power or excessive concern with being liked—and at the same time be open to the Divine. Detachment is necessary if we are to avoid inadvertently serving false gods and if we are to become capable of responding fully to divine guidance. It is detachment that allows the true seeker to “cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge . . . from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 192). Thus it is detachment that allows us to turn our hearts fully toward God.

One of the most devious types of obscuring, ephemeral attachment to the world is to be attached to what Bahá'u'lláh calls “the kingdom of Names,” the attributes of God found in the world, specifically the human world.<sup>3</sup> We mentioned already that realizing and reflecting our spiritual attributes is one of the glories of the soul enlightened by faith. However, as Taherzadeh explains, it is very easy to become too attached to these Names, for example to pride oneself on one's knowledge or helpfulness, or to love to hear praise for these qualities and to feel deprived if one is not praised and one's learning or helpfulness is not recognized (2:40). As an academic I am particularly aware of how easy it is to become attached to the idea of oneself as knowledgeable or scholarly and to want others to recognize this quality and to praise one for it—to have one's papers admired, for example. Thus one can become overly proud of one's accomplishments.

Perhaps even more dangerous in a spiritual context is to become overly attached to being recognized as pure hearted or a good person. Taherzadeh

notes that becoming thus attached is very easy to do because our society puts so much emphasis on achievements and one is encouraged from childhood on to seek to exalt oneself above others, even in spiritual qualities (2:40). However, we will see that such attachment to one's own accomplishments or virtues can easily become a veil, blocking us from access to a deeper level of self and to the Manifestation of God—skewing the direction of our heart's desire. We need to seek excellence and to develop our full potential, but not to become so attached and proud of these qualities in our selves that we use them to exalt our egos. Taherzadeh points out that these attributes are in some sense not one's own accomplishments but manifestations, in the individual, of divine attributes (2:40). We need to acknowledge the power of God acting within us, without taking full credit for it.

#### THE FOUR LEVELS OF DETACHMENT

In the Words of Wisdom (Aṣl-i-Kullu'l-Khayr), a Tablet written after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh provides what John Hatcher calls a “catalogue of axiomatic statements of spiritual insights and moral commands” (121). Of the twenty-two definitions of spiritual qualities that are listed in this Tablet, one concerns detachment, which is described by Bahá'u'lláh in four stages or levels as follows: “The essence of detachment is for man to turn his face towards the courts of the Lord, to enter His Presence, behold His Countenance, and stand as witness before Him” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 155). These four stages seem to suggest a hierarchical movement toward ever greater nearness to God. Turning one's face toward the Lord suggests recognizing the Manifestation of God, which is the beginning of the journey towards Him. Elsewhere Bahá'u'lláh tells us that the purpose of our creation is to know God and to serve Him (*Prayers and Meditations* 314); therefore, the second stage of the definition of detachment, “to enter His Presence,” may correspond to beginning to understand and serve the Manifestation. The third stage of detachment, “beholding His Countenance,” suggests the deeper level of closeness that recognition and

service brings, the love and personal transformation that develops as a result of efforts made to overcome difficulties in the path of spiritual growth and service.<sup>4</sup> The fourth stage of detachment, “to stand as witness before Him,” suggests the maturation achieved after living a life which bears witness to the individual’s achievement of his or her potential. To stand as witness before the Lord suggests a life which is fully open to examination, one that, like a polished mirror, reflects and bears witness to divine attributes.

These four stages of detachment roughly correspond to the Four Valleys in the Tablet of that name, in which, according to Saiedi, a hierarchical but ultimately harmonious and united order is developed, comprising the stages of “will, reason, and love as approaches to divine reality” (80). In the First Valley, according to Saiedi, the “wayfarer,” using his or her will, embarks on a journey toward the mansion of the loved one who is the object and destination of the journey and who is still far away (80). This wayfaring seems suggestive of the first stage in the definition of detachment—turning one’s face toward the Lord. In the Second Valley, the reason-based wayfarer is within the mansion, in the antechamber of the beloved, who is now the focused center of admiration (81). The second stage of the definition of detachment also suggests the greater nearness of entering His presence. In the Third Valley, what Saiedi calls the “love-based seeker” is allowed “to enter the very home of the beloved” and “face the beloved one” (82). The third stage of detachment also consists of “beholding His Countenance.” The Fourth Valley, which Saiedi characterizes as “the approach of the heart,” implies a union of the other three types of approaches—of will, reason, and love—as the seeker achieves “union with the countenance of the beloved” (82). In this stage the seeker has achieved the “secret of maturation,” which Saiedi describes as “the fruition of all human potentialities” (82). Likewise, the fourth stage of detachment, “to stand as witness before Him,” also suggests the achievement of maturation.

In correlating Bahá’u’lláh’s metaphorical definition of detachment to the stages of closeness to the Beloved found in the Four Valleys, I am

emphasizing that the acquisition of detachment also occurs in stages which lead the seeker to become progressively closer to the Manifestation, in effect, to become more like Him and thus more able to reflect His light and guidance. In one of the prayers for the Fast, Bahá'u'lláh again suggests stages or steps in closeness to His Presence, this time revealing some of the barriers that prevent believers from traversing these stages. He notes that

Some were ensnared by the infidels in Thy land, and were hindered by them from having near access to Thee and from attaining the court of Thy glory. Others were able to approach Thee, but were kept back from beholding Thy face. Still others were permitted, in their eagerness to look upon Thee, to enter the precincts of Thy court, but they allowed the veils of the imaginations of Thy creatures and the wrongs inflicted by the oppressors among Thy people to come in between them and Thee. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 145–46)

In these examples it is primarily the doings of the oppressors that interfered with the ability of believers to attain closeness. However, in Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys, where seven stages of closeness to God are defined, it is primarily the believer's own inner state and efforts that prevent or facilitate advancement to the next stage of closeness. For example, in the First Valley, that of Search, one of the barriers preventing the seeker from advancing is "imitation, which is following the traces of their forefathers and sires" (5). In the second stage, the Valley of Love, it is "the veils of the satanic self" that bar the way to advancement and must be burned away (11). In the third stage, the Valley of Knowledge, the lover must initially endure great pain and anguish because the end of his suffering is veiled from him. Only after undergoing a great trial is he able to see "the end in the beginning" (15).

Further, in the Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh, the Manifestation explains some of the spiritual attitudes that are associated with closeness to His Presence. In this context the emphasis is on finding God within the

self, that is, experiencing His love and attributes within the self. For example, He writes: “If thou lovest Me, turn away from thyself; and if thou seekest My pleasure, regard not thine own; that thou mayest die in Me and I may eternally live in thee” (No. 7 Arabic). Here the ultimate detachment from the self (dying away from the self) is closely connected with attachment to God, in particular with so purifying the heart that God’s attributes flourish within the self. In another Hidden Word Bahá’u’lláh declares, “My love is in thee, know it, that thou mayest find Me near unto thee” (No. 10 Arabic). Again, so purifying the heart that one is receptive to God’s love leads to the discovery of God near the self. Finally, as a summing up of the relationship between detachment and attachment, Saiedi comments on the attention that Bahá’u’lláh gives in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* to “the dialectic of detachment and attachment” as “preconditions of the spiritual journey.” Saiedi enumerates the qualities involved in this dialectic. Detachment from the self and the world includes “detachment from all presuppositions, from imitation of others, from reliance on the authority of tradition, from the apparent meanings of the Holy Scriptures, from rituals and symbols, and from selfish desire and pride”; whereas attachment to God “implies an encompassing love of all created things, humility, selflessness, fairness and justice, and reliance on the standards given by God Himself” (140).

While I have tried to explore Bahá’u’lláh’s brief definition of detachment in *Words of Wisdom* by correlating it with some other examples from His Writings that suggest stages of closeness and relate detachment to attachment to God, the definition remains highly metaphorical and abstract. We have, of course, the examples of detachment in the lives of not only the Central Figures Themselves, but in the lives of Their followers, to help us understand the application of the definition. Why then turn to a work of art by a non-Bahá’í writer both to see what it tells us about detachment and to examine what light Bahá’u’lláh’s definition throws on a fictional work? As I mentioned, we can often see patterns of reality more clearly in works of art than in ordinary life, and Lessing is a particularly spiritually aware writer. Hence we can gain insight into the meaning of detachment both in terms of our own behavior and in regard

to our assumptions about others through analyzing Lessing's portrayal of stages of detachment. Finally we gain greater understanding of the significance of Lessing's spiritual vision through the use of this definition as a hermeneutic aid.

#### SHIKASTA: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, Doris Lessing is the daughter of British parents, born in Persia, raised in Southern Rhodesia, and currently living in London. She has written a series of space fiction novels that metaphorically capture modes of spiritual understanding. In particular they show the way that the emotions and intellect interact with the spirit, portraying how they all must work together if the individual is to acquire the detachment necessary to be open to spiritual knowledge—to acquire a purified heart and intellect attuned to the teachings of God.

In *Shikasta*, which means “broken” in Persian, Lessing places the planet Shikasta in a spiritual universe in which the star Canopus is the spiritual sun in whose orbit Shikasta belongs. Canopus symbolizes a spiritually more evolved realm that periodically sends envoys to Shikasta to bring it guidance and aid its development. Canopus seeks to educate those under its guidance in the laws of the Necessity, the laws of an unknowable, invisible divine essence. Thus Canopus corresponds to the realm of the prophets, and Canopean messengers seem very close to Bahá'u'lláh's explanation of the role of the Manifestations of God and lesser prophets. Furthermore, the manner in which Canopean envoys reveal progressively more sophisticated spiritual understandings to the evolving Shikastans over the ages closely corresponds to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the progressive nature of religious truth and the relationship among all the world religions.

While the first half of the novel is told from the perspective of Canopus, in the second half of the novel Lessing situates her narrative in the confused world of Shikasta, very much a defamiliarized version of our world; that is, Shikasta is similar enough to our world to be recognizable, but different enough to upset our traditional assumptions. We see Shikasta as it

starts to fall apart in the last days before a catastrophic third world war. This is also the time when the Canopean messenger Johor is sent to bring the necessary spiritual knowledge that will allow some Shikastans to survive the catastrophe and rebuild the world in harmony with Canopus. Born into Shikasta's midst as George Sherban, Johor now has the physical needs and limitations of any other Shikastan and no direct memory of his Canopean past. However, as we follow his maturation, we see that he has an innate spiritual knowledge that allows him to see and address the spiritual needs of Shikasta at this desperate time in its history. Lessing seems to deliberately defamiliarize her presentation of her prophet figure. We do not see George speak of God or the spirit, for example, as Lessing is very uncomfortable with the way religious language has been debased and rendered meaningless. But we do see George as a child wake up at night and spend hours gazing out the window communing with the stars that represent other levels of spiritual reality. As an adult George begins to demonstrate spiritual virtues and principles, in his own behavior. Above all, he seems to be attuned to the unifying nature of the spiritual forces represented by Canopus and to helping Shikastans realize these forces in their own difficult lives. He does this in part by attracting their hearts and encouraging them on the path to detachment.

I will examine four characters in *Shikasta* that embody four stages of detachment which I think roughly correspond to Bahá'u'lláh's four stages of detachment in the passage from the Words of Wisdom. The first example depicts the struggle by Rachel Sherban, George's younger sister, to recognize the special spiritual qualities of her brother George. Much of the second half of *Shikasta* is narrated by Rachel through her diary and concentrates on the forces within and without that aid or prevent Rachel and a few others from beginning the process of scrubbing away the dust of egotism from their hearts and becoming able to recognize and respond to George's guidance. Her story seems to illustrate Bahá'u'lláh's first stage when one turns one's "face towards the courts of the Lord." Her efforts provide a parable for our own efforts to overcome the obstacles that prevent our attuning ourselves more fully to the will and teachings of the Manifestation of God.

Influenced by their exposure to Canopean values in the first half of the novel, readers see Rachel, and indeed all Shikastans, both from the Shikastan perspective and, simultaneously, from that of the Canopeans. Holding in mind these two perspectives, readers empathize with Rachel's struggles while being detached enough to understand her spiritual failure to overcome the egotism and self-pity of the lower self and to attune herself fully to George's guidance. Lessing also briefly sketches how other, seemingly less suitable, people around Rachel attain greater degrees of closeness to the prophet and fulfill the capacities of their souls. The stories of George's nonidentical twin brother Benjamin; a mentally fragile woman named Lynda Coldridge who contacts George through telepathy; and George's earthy, over-eager girlfriend and then wife Suzannah not only help us to understand greater degrees of detachment but also highlight the kinds of obstructions that often blind us to the spiritual reality of others.

#### DETACHMENT AND CHARACTER IN SHIKASTA

The beginning of self-knowledge is often precipitated by some kind of painful or disturbing incident. Very often what Bahá'u'lláh calls a test shakes the individual out of his or her pattern of living with complacency or superficiality—or purely at the material level of empirical reality—and begins the process of acquiring self-knowledge and detachment. Shikastans at the end of their twentieth century are undergoing such tests and difficulties. Their planet is faced with a series of social, economic, and political problems that seem to be an imaginative extension of the problems faced by our planet. In this time of worldwide crisis, fourteen-year-old Rachel Sherban is trying to come to terms with herself, her family, and the difficult world situation she is living in, through the process of writing a diary. In her initial pages she recounts that her family is living in Morocco where her parents work for international organizations and that she has nonidentical twin brothers, George and Benjamin, who are sixteen. It is Rachel's attempt to understand the unique qualities of her brother George that leads her to begin her diary. We, of course, know



from the first half of the novel that George is the embodiment in Shikasta reality of the Canopean messenger Johor.

Through Rachel's diary observations we watch George's development from a child attuned to the stars and visited by thoughtful strangers to a teenager active in a local youth group, who is able to attend a youth conference as the representative of a Jewish, a Moslem, and a Christian group. Soon the special power of George's words attracts youth from all over the world who come to listen to him. In fact, when George speaks, everyone around, including the parents, sits and listens. We watch Rachel's growing attraction to George and her gradual realization of his special power. However, hand in hand with Rachel's great perceptiveness, we see her continuing attachment to her own ego. For example, she is jealous of George's involvement with the youth group and his attention to her brother Benjamin. She also becomes deeply jealous of the fact that George now has a girlfriend, Suzannah, whom Rachel finds loud, flashy, and vulgar.

A few years later, when society in Shikasta has deteriorated to the point where huge children's camps are being set up for the thousands of orphans of the recurring wars and famines, George encourages Rachel to take over the running of the girls' camp. Under George's guidance Benjamin has already assumed control of the boys' camp and is successfully managing it. Although deeply attracted by George's words, Rachel says no. Appalled at the idea of raising children in camps of fifty thousand, she is unable to imagine herself serving as an administrator in such a situation. She can't "toughen up," as George is always advising her. In refusing, she allows her very perceptiveness and sensitivity to block her from meaningful action.

As the sociopolitical situation in Shikasta begins to spin out of control, old racial and ethnic resentments of the poorer, dark-skinned nations against the white rich who once colonized them come to the fore. George takes a trip with Benjamin around the world, setting in place the ties that will allow him to orchestrate a symbolic trial of the white race in the ancient theater in Athens, Greece. With the theater lit by candlelight looked after by the children from the camps, George creates a cathartic emotional experience in which one disadvantaged group after another

comes forward to state their grievances against the white race. However, just when the situation might have become explosive, George arranges for these attacks to give way to self-reflection on the part of representatives from various third-world countries who admit their own inhumanity in the treatment of their minorities. Thus George uses the trial to dissipate much of the anger of the have-nots, and a pogrom against the white race is avoided.

However, by this time Rachel is already dead, having disregarded George's instructions to stay home while he is away and to look after two special orphans who now live with them. She listens instead to a traveler who brings information that George is to be killed by the ruling elite. Although Suzannah pleads with her not to seek out George, and although George had given Rachel specific instructions to remain at home and had entrusted her with the task of educating the two orphans, she disregards both pleas and responsibilities. We learn only indirectly about her behavior after she leaves home and manages to get as far as Paris in her efforts to find George and warn him. Never managing to contact him, she instead attempts to impersonate him, possibly in order to sacrifice herself for him. Eventually Rachel is arrested and commits suicide (362–63).

#### RACHEL: TURNING ONE'S FACE TOWARD THE LORD

The circumstances surrounding fourteen-year-old Rachel's decision to keep a diary provide a case study of the early workings of detachment. Rachel begins her diary at the instigation of Hasan, one of the series of strange people who have come over the years to visit and instruct her older brother George. Readers surmise that these people are other Canopean envoys sent to aid George's development. Listening one afternoon to George talk with Hasan, Rachel is feeling miserably left out when she suddenly realizes that George is hearing things in what Hasan says that are quite beyond her. It is not that the words are too difficult but that somehow she is not ready to take in their significance. As if in response to her new awareness, Hasan turns to Rachel, asks her if she keeps a diary,

and suggests that she write an account of her childhood. Rachel feels resentment that this relative outsider should tell her what to do, while at the same time she wants his praise and attention. When she tries to impress him with one of her school essays, he ignores this manifestation of the lower self and continues talking to George. Rachel becomes furious and fails to hear anything else that Hasan is saying.

Thinking back on this incident some time later when, following Hasan's suggestion, she is writing her diary-account of her childhood, Rachel realizes that she was being shown why she could not hear what Hasan was saying. She was too full of distracting egotistic emotions, too attached to her own cleverness, too anxious to be praised. For the first time in her life she gains some awareness of how these emotions might be barriers blocking her from hearing something else. Thus she receives her first intimation of the need for detachment, her first vague awareness that there might be something more to her than the ego.

Her new awareness allows Rachel to become conscious of the power of George's words as he speaks to travelers from all over the world. Thus we could say that Rachel achieves the first stage of Bahá'u'lláh's definition of detachment. Through her diary writing, she is able "to turn [her] face towards the courts of the Lord," fulfilling the first duty prescribed by God, the recognition of His Messenger. But despite her recognition, she fails to detach herself enough from her jealousy, fears, and attachment to her own ego to follow George's suggestions and instructions and therefore misses the opportunity to truly serve him. The first instance occurs when she refuses the offer to take over the running of the girls' camp. In doing so she denies herself the opportunity to gain inner strength through service to George and the children. Instead of fighting against her tendency to fall into despair, she prides herself on her sensitivity and withdraws to the sidelines.

Without the strength and confirmation that service brings, Rachel is not strong enough to withstand the second test she encounters. Unable to obey George's final instructions to her to remain home when he goes on his trip, she gives in instead to what she experiences as a whirlpool-like

force that sucks her in.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere in the novel this force is associated with the pull of the lower self. Rachel's death is both needless and unhelpful. Her impersonation of George confuses his followers who now believe he can appear in two places at once, and her desire to warn George that his life is in danger was not necessary; as we later learn, he has survived nine attempts to kill him (363).

The contrast between Rachel's development and that of her brother Benjamin provides insight into both the spiritual journey and the nature of detachment. Suffering from the disadvantage of being George's twin and thus inevitably compared to his exceptional brother, Ben compensates by adopting the persona of the snob and the cynic, partly to cover his insecurity. However, through involvement with George in the local youth organizations, Ben witnesses George's unifying powers and soon begins following his guidance. In particular, he takes over the running of the camp for orphaned boys and is soon managing, with good will and efficiency but limited facilities and funds, the raising and schooling of fifty thousand young boys.

#### BENJAMIN: CONSCIOUS SERVICE

As a result of his obedience to George and service to the boys, Ben becomes more confident and resourceful, and hence less jealous and in need of attention. The clearest sign of his spiritual development comes when he withstands "reeducation" by the Chinese Overlords, the new rulers of Shikasta. Playing on Ben's old desire to be admired, they place Ben in a situation where he is promised authority, offered perks, and lavished with praise as part of a brainwashing technique to co-opt his authority as the leader and spokesperson for the children's camps and to place him under the Overlord's command. Assisted by George, who suddenly turns up to visit Ben at the beginning of his reeducation training, Ben is able to recognize the manipulation being applied to him and, along with George's other followers, is able to create an atmosphere of unity and spiritual attunement that the rulers cannot fathom or disrupt.

Benjamin thus can be seen as a representative of Bahá'u'lláh's second

stage of detachment—not just turning his face toward the Lord, but entering His presence. Benjamin also suggests the seeker in the second of the Four Valleys, who uses his reason to serve the Manifestation. Benjamin's ability to strengthen his spiritual potential through active service to the spiritual reality that George represents enables Benjamin to overcome a great deal of his earlier snobbishness, jealousy, and insecurity and powerfully strengthens his spiritual receptivity and attraction to the spiritual attributes embodied in George. He is thus enabled to play a major role in George's spiritual plans, helping at the trial to save the white race from being annihilated. Thus he is able to "turn his face towards the courts of the Lord" and "to enter His presence" (*Tablets* 155).

#### LYNDA: THE APPROACH OF THE HEART

Lynda Coleridge is a particularly interesting example of a highly developed spiritual detachment. A schizophrenic who has spent most of her life in mental hospitals, she also possesses the ability to tune in to the thoughts of other telepathics. As a young girl, her ability to hear voices was diagnosed as pathogenic, and the harsh treatment she has received over the years due to her voices has led to bouts of mental illness when she is out of touch with her own spirit. But beneath her loss of self-esteem and her outward degradation, she has maintained her trust in the authenticity of her experiences. Such experiences have "inured [her] to hardship, misunderstanding, uncertainty, and a capacity for suspending judgement" (*Shikasta* 433). When she is finally befriended by the sympathetic Dr. Hebert, she is able to use her capacities constructively, teaching the doctor to acquire some of her ability, and her purified heart is able to hear the voice of George. Her heart polished by long years of suffering, Lynda is able calmly to play her role in George's redemptive scheme despite her awareness of the catastrophic war to come, sending other useful telepathic people to safe places George has chosen. The serenity that she possesses is a genuine spiritual achievement, rooted in her selfless attunement to the spiritual attributes within her own soul, which in turn allow her to attune herself to George's voice—this despite the fact that she is called

“scornful of religion” (435). Nevertheless, she is content to follow George’s instructions and remain where she is in England to help train in her telepathic capacities the few followers of George who will survive. Knowing that she will not live long after what she calls the “wrath” (432), she is prepared to quietly serve until her death.

Lynda seems to represent Bahá’u’lláh’s third level of detachment. Besides being able “to turn [her] face towards the courts of the Lord” and enter His presence, she is able to behold “His countenance,” through hearing George’s voice. She also suggests the third valley of the Four Valleys—using love to approach the presence of the Divine Messenger. Her years of dealing with discouragement, abuse, and being seen as crazy, as well as enduring times when she is out of touch with her sense of self and her sanity, without giving up, give her a tremendous strength and courage that she is able to bring to her service to George. The final testament to her loyalty and purity of heart is her willingness to obey George and serve his followers to the end.

#### SUZANNAH: STANDING AS WITNESS BEFORE THE LORD

George’s girlfriend Suzannah also seems a most unlikely candidate for higher levels of spiritual development. A refugee who has never known her full name, she fought her way out of homelessness, ignorance, and poverty and now teaches physical culture, hygiene, and diet at the youth camps. Although to Rachel she initially seems “a loud, vulgar, stupid, flashy girl” (317–18), Suzannah slowly reveals the strength that comes from overcoming extreme hardships and polishing the mirror of her heart. She and Rachel make an interesting study in opposites. While Suzannah lacks Rachel’s beauty, refinement, and education, she possesses exactly those attributes that Rachel lacks: obedience, perseverance, and a heart totally enkindled and directed toward George. Because of the purity of her heart, she knows instinctively who is or is not genuine, and she immediately recognizes that Rachel should not act on the information brought her that the Overlords are planning to kill George.

By the time she moves in with Rachel after the death of Rachel's parents, Suzannah has already reached the earlier stages of detachment, completely trusting and loving George and serving Shikastans as he directs her. Suzannah's purity of heart allows her to face the test of Rachel's jealousy and unkindness and to continue to love her as George's sister. She never flinches when Rachel's ministrations show her as a "plain, middle-aged woman," but returns to her make-up and rigid curls with a stubborn air of self-respect. But her final development takes her one step further. Surviving the catastrophe and marrying George, she is like a rock, saving her energy to mother not only their own two children as well as several adopted children but also all the refugee children who find their way to her camp in the Andes. Steadfastly turning to George for guidance in her letters, admitting she is lonely with him far away and accepting that he is not lonely without her, Suzannah can be said to have acquired the fourth stage of detachment. Suzannah's complete love and service to George symbolize an individual's ability to channel all the energies of the heart and intellect to the needs of the spiritual self, so that she "can stand as witness before" God. Suzannah's life is witness to her love, service, and detachment. She lives to see the dawning of a new world and the coming of a new spiritual dispensation. The novel suggests that she will survive George's passing away and continue to help establish the new kingdom of God on earth, made possible because *Shikasta* is once again in tune with the spiritual energies of Canopus, the energies that were embodied in George.

#### CONCLUSION

The breadth of Lessing's spiritual panorama and the detailed anatomy of various psychological and spiritual types and barriers that she provides in *Shikasta* make her work a wonderful resource for studying detachment. Above all, Lessing's novel offers us a powerful example of the interrelationship between recognition and service and between detachment and attachment. Her novel portrays the heart's subtle movement as an individual's

spiritual sensibilities begin to be enkindled. The heart does not become purified and fully attached once and for all. It is a not static accomplishment. Rather, recognition must be followed by service, which inevitably involves risks and dealing with tests. It is only through the commitment that comes from service that the heart's purity is strengthened, its susceptibilities become more refined, and its attraction to the spiritual realm grows. At each step along the way, the individual barriers erected by the self and the world must be overcome. Thus we learn from Rachel that one cannot wait until one is totally prepared or has found the perfect vehicle for service. Rather, Benjamin shows that in the process of actively serving the cause of God one becomes stronger and more capable of evolving emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Lynda demonstrates the need to persevere and to detach oneself from all weaknesses, even at times from aspects of our own self that are beyond our control, like physical or mental disabilities. Finally, Suzannah shows us the power of love to integrate and channel all an individual's energies—physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Demonstrating that the integrating powers of the heart which lead to wholeness and integrity of self are possible no matter what one's early beginnings or social disadvantages, she becomes the epitome of spiritual detachment.

To return to the earlier discussion of how one develops one's fullest human potential, we can see the reciprocal relationship between the understandings of the intellect and the heart and their fusion in the fire of service. Each stage opens the door to deeper self-knowledge, more intense spiritual susceptibilities, and greater attraction to the Divine, culminating in greater service. And each stage brings new barriers to be overcome, new tests to face. As our own attachment grows, we need to open ourselves to the spiritual possibilities in others, striving to prevent our own limitations from leading us to make misjudgments and become barriers in the spiritual journeys of others. In this dialectic movement between detachment and attachment, between service and inner growth, between teaching and reflection, we will be able to draw closer to God because we will be closer to our truest selves.



## NOTES

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1. While there has been some discussion of Lessing's spiritual vision in *Shikasta*, there has not been a close look at the spiritual dynamics governing characters' abilities to recognize and respond to a new prophet. See, for example, "Doris Lessing's Prophetic Voice in *Shikasta*," by Jeannette Webber in *Spiritual Exploration in the Works of Doris Lessing*, and brief discussions of *Shikasta* in essays by Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis and Josna Rege in that same volume. Shadia Fahim gives a detailed Sufi reading of *Shikasta* in *Doris Lessing and Sufi Equilibrium* and Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis looks at its spiritual vision from a science fiction perspective in "The Marriage of Inner and Outer Space in Doris Lessing's *Shikasta*."

2. See Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*.

3. Taherzadeh explains that this is one of three barriers between the individual and God listed by Bahá'u'lláh in an untranslated Tablet. Taherzadeh notes that "Bahá'u'lláh exhorts the believers to pass beyond [these barriers] so that they may be enabled to attain His presence" (2:36).

4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes about "nearness to God" that it "is possible through devotion to Him, through entrance into the Kingdom and service to humanity; it is attained by unity with mankind and through loving-kindness to all; it is dependent upon investigation of truth, acquisition of praiseworthy virtues, service in the cause of universal peace and personal sanctification. . . . Nearness is likeness" (*Promulgation* 147–48).

5. In "The Marriage of Inner and Outer Space" I relate this whirlpool-like force to the power of the evil planet Shammat (the home of purely selfish beings, versions of the scriptures' devils and tempters) and discuss its earlier manifestations in the novel.