**“Poor people. Armies. Not enough to eat”: Food Wars in the Dystopian Present in Doris Lessing’s *Canopus in Argos: Archives*.**

# Introduction

In *The Sirian Experiments*, the third novel in the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* quintet, its narrator Ambien II at one point reflects on the precepts of the Adalantalands, people she has recently encountered: “I was thinking, as I went, about their third precept, that they must not take more than they could use, for it seemed to me to go to the heart of the Sirian dilemma...who should use what and how much and when and what for? Above all what for!” (Lessing “The Sirian experiments” 81).

Doris Lessing in her writings often asked this question of the production and distribution of food. Sizemore, writing in a recent edition of *Food, Culture and Society* alerted me to this thread in Lessing’s work. She writes, “[Doris Lessing’s] comments about food and critiques of global food distribution echo through her whole canon” (630). Sizemore examines this through three of Lessing’s works: *In Pursuit of the English* where Lessing depicts rationing post World War 2; *The Summer Before Dark* in which satirises the globalisation of food, international food agencies and food deserts; and *Alfred and Emily* “where she makes an impassioned plea for an ecological approach to the land and the ethical distribution of food” (638).

Lessing’s space fiction quintet *Canopus in Argos: Archives* also touches on these food issues. But the subject of my paper is her concern in the quintet with food wars “situations of organised armed political violence, where combatants on one or both sides use hunger as a weapon, and where destruction of farming populations, infrastructure, waterworks, and markets result in disruptions to agricultural production, food markets, health services and human nutrition long after formal fighting had (sic) ceased” (Messer 210).

The quintet is five novels written between 1979 and 1983 describing the actions of three galactic colonial powers – Canopus, Sirius and Shammat-Puttoria in conflict with each other over various planets. I will deal mainly with *Shikasta* the first in the series, and *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire*, the last in the series. I will touch on the *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, the second novel in the series and will also discuss her post new ice age novel *Mara and Dann*, written in 2000.

In her series of essays *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside* Lessing writes:

“Look at all those utopias written through the centuries...These of course are all criticisms of current, societies, for you can’t write a utopia in a vacuum” (Lessing “Prisons” 7).

Arguably the same can be said about a dystopia. Human society in the latter half of the 20th century as it is depicted in different guises in the quintet is a dystopia. So, in this paper I also want fill the vacuum out of which Lessing creates her dystopian vision and out of which comes her anger with food wars. To do this I turn to the two volumes of her autobiography *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade*. Disappointingly for the purposes of this paper, the second volume ends at 1962, seventeen years before she embarked on the quintet, but I will show how much of her life till then informs her concern with food security.

**The Century of Destruction**

Lessing’s father was crippled in World War 1 and while recovering in hospital met her mother, a nurse. She recalls as a child in Southern Rhodesia a house full of “those voices [that] went on and on, about the Trenches, bombs, star shells, shrapnel, shell holes, men drowning in shell holes and the mud that could swallow horses, let alone me. The wounded in the Royal Free, the men with their lungs full of gas, the death by drowning of my mother’s young doctor, No-man’s-land ,the Angels of Mons, the field hospitals, the men shot for ‘cowardice’, on and on and on, my father’s voice, my mother’s, and, too, the voices of many of our visitors” (Lessing “Under My Skin” 83). She “wandered about the bush or sat on an ant heap, angry to the point of being crazy myself, seeing my parents as they were now and what they should have been – and from here it is only a step to the thought. If we make war impossible the world will be full of whole and healthy and sane and marvellous people who...in my mind I lived in utopias, part from literature and part the obverse of what I actual lived in” (Lessing “Under My Skin” 156).

Lessing ascribes the development of her sense of social justice to this immersion “...particularly from my father’s voice murmuring though my days and through my sleep, too, of the war, the betrayal of the soldiers, the wicked stupidities and corruption of government, just expectation and faith betrayed” (Lessing “Under My Skin” 85).

By the time she wrote the quintet, Lessing had witnessed the impact also of World War II (her brother survived the sinking of a ship during the war), the Cold War, the revolutionary wars in the former African colonies including Southern Rhodesia, the militarised expansion of the USSR across half of Europe after World War II, the war between the Kuomintang and Mao’s Communist Party of China and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. In an interview in 2003 she said the wars in her life, she said “sit on me more and more as a kind of horror. I still can't believe that we're so stupid as to... Anyway, it's no good going into it. Either you feel that way or you don't. I'm so appalled by those wars” (Mullan).

Unsurprisingly, war is everywhere in the quintet. Lessing’s sketch of her lifetime of wars appears in the Shikasta as the archive document *History of Shikasta, Vol, 3012 The Century of Destruction. Excerpt from a summary Chapter* (Lessing “Shikasta” 108 – 122). The Century begins for Shikasta “as a quarrel between the Northwest fringers [Lessing’s Western Europeans] over colonial spoils” (Lessing 1981(1) 110). It is this war that lays the basis for Wold War II and for the rise of two great Dictatorships, not named but clearly Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s USSR. Post World War II sees the rise of a third Dictatorship, Mao’s China; revolutions break out in the former colonies of the Northwest fringers in the Southern Continent 1, Africa; and as the century draws to a close the rise of the arms and nuclear industry. Ultimately “A mechanism went wrong, and major cities were blasted into death-giving dust ... In a short time, nearly the whole of the northern hemisphere was in ruins. Very different, these, form the ruins of the second war, cities which were rapidly rebuilt. No, these ruins were uninhabitable, the earth around them poisoned.... Within a couple of decades, of the billions upon billions of Shikasta perhaps 1 percent remained.” (Lessing “Shikasta”) 121-122).

*The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Seven* deals largely with the enforced alliance between Al \* Ith, the ruler of the peaceful Zone Three and Ben Ata, warlord of Zone Four. While the novel’s main concerns are gender relations, Lessing along the way decries the economic, social and spiritual impact of war. She returns to themes of war in the last of the quintet *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire* which charts the sway of warring powers in the Volyen system.

In *Mara and Dann*, Lessing is still writing about war, this time driven by drought and food scarcity. Towards the end of the novel is her most depressing assessment of the now 80 years she has been observing the human condition. Mara wanders through the buildings of the Centre, a museum where “The end of the story in every building was war, and the ways of war became crueler and more terrible” (Lessing “Mara and Dann” 381)

It’s to Lessing’s observations on these wars as food wars that I now turn.

**The children on the train**

Lessing was born in Persia where her father had settled after World War I as a bank manager. Five years into the job, in 1924, when his leave came up he decided to take the family back to England for a holiday. Lessing’s mother decided they would go via Moscow “because she did not want to expose her little children to the heat of the Red Sea...She did not know that we would be the first foreign family to travel in an ordinary way since the Revolution” (Lessing “Under My Skin” 40). At some point before Moscow the trains comes to a stop.

“Children with sharp hungry faces jumped at the train windows, and peered in, or help up their hands begging. ..My parents talked about them, and their voices were low and anxious and there were words I did not know, so I kept saying, what does that mean, what does that mean? The Great War. The Revolution. The Civil War. Famine. The Bolsheviks. But why, Mummy, but why, Daddy? Because we had been told that the besprozorniki – the gangs of children without families – attacked trains when they stopped at stations, as soon as my mother got out to buy food, the compartment door was locked and the windows pushed up...(Lessing “Under My Skin” 42).

This is Lessing’s first encounter with the impact of war on food security, food shortages caused by the direct impact of war on land use and food distribution. Collison and McBeth in the Introduction to their collection of papers Food in Zones of Conflict, write:

The ability of people to grow or procure their own food is often one of the first activities to undermined by warfare, because of disruption to the daily lives of a community, because those involve in the fighting require food for themselves, or because the fields or factories that produce food are destroyed or rendered too dangerous to work in....Food security is determined by a combination of the availability of, access to and use of food. The relationship between food insecurity and conflict is, of course, one of mutual reinforcement (1 -2).

When she migrates to England in 1949, she socialises with “ high-minded refugees from everywhere [who] lived their precarious lives in cold shabby flats and scarcely knew where their next meal was coming from” (Lessing “Walking in the Shade” 41). Gottfried Lessing, her second husband who she had left in Rhodesia, was himself a refugee from Communism.

This was also the England of rationing, but Lessing writes not about the hardship, but about resilience.

“Nothing I experienced in that household matched what I had expected to find, which was rationing, a dour self-sufficiency, even semi-starvation. I had sent food parcels to Britain. The woman of the house, Italian, was one of the world’s great cooks. I don’t think she have ever seen a recipe book. She too six ration books to a shop in Westbourne Grove, then a slummy road. But she always got three or four times the rationed amounts of butter, eggs, bacon, cooking fat, cheese. How did she manage it? She was scornful when I asked. It’s time you knew your way around, she said. There were a couple of bent policeman, always dropping in and out, who were given butter and eggs from her spoils, in return for turning a blind eye. Did I share in this lawlessness? Yes, I did: our two ration books were given to her to manage. To make little shows of morality in that atmosphere would have seemed not only absurd but would have been incomprehensible to these amiable crooks.

”(Lessing “Walking in the Shade 11).

Lessing doesn’t deal with the creation of food insecurity as a weapon of war in the volumes of her autobiography though she must have know about the German blockading of food exports to England and of the Holdomor, Stalin’s creation of famine in the Ukraine responsible for the death of between 2.4m and 7.5m. When she does address it in *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside* it is of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during which “crops are deliberately destroyed by napalm, villages ruined, children crippled by the use of explosives hidden in toys. It has been described as deliberate genocide in certain areas. A million civilians have been murdered. People die as I write of starvation” (Lessing “Prisons” 41).

During the years of The Century of Destruction on Shikasta “…the earth was being despoiled. The minerals were being ripped out, the fuels wasted, the soils depleted by improvident and short-sighted agriculture the animals and plants slaughtered and destroyed, the seas being filled with filth and poison, the atmosphere corrupted”(Lessing “Shikasta” 119). Post third world war Shikasta is a planet of “Poor people. Armies. Not enough to eat” (Lessing “Shikasta” 274).

But Shikastan’s have contrasting responses to these conditions. In the north western fringes, a woman “...stands as she has one for millennia, cutting bread, setting out sliced vegetables on a plate, with a bottle of wine, and thinks that nothing in this meal is safe, that the poisons of their civilization are in every mouthful, and that they are about to fill their mouths with deaths of all kinds. In an instinctive gesture of safety, renewal, she hands a piece of bread to her child, but the gesture has lost its faith as she makes it, because of what she may be handing the child (Lessing *Shikasta* 252).

In the Sahel where famine and hunger have been constants “When Shireen has nothing in her rooms but two or three tomatoes and onions and a handful of lentils and has no idea what she is going to fee her family that day, she will still make a little rissole of lentils for a special friend across the court. And this woman puts some sugar on a bit of yoghurt and gives it to Shireen. It is always a feast, even with a spoon of yoghurt and seven grains of sugar” (Lessing “Shikasta” 297).

In *Mara and Dann*, the eponymous brother and sister are travelling north across the continent of Ifrik, escaping both drought and small civil wars resulting from it. At one stage they join a large group of fellow refugees. Hunger is a constant on this trek. They have a little flat bread and a handful of a yellow tuber Mara has knowledge of but others in the group don’t. They like the others hoard and guard what food they have. Mara wants to share the bread, roots and water they are carrying, but Dann won’t allow it. At nights as the refugees camp “A dozen small fires burned...and around each huddled a few people, guarding their food and water containers” (Lessing *Mara and Dann* 117).

Hunger leads to desperation and inhuman behaviour. One day a skimmer, an airborne passenger vehicle, crashes and Mara and Dann watch as ‘At once all the [refugees] rushed up, peered in, reached in. Some of the [passengers] were dead, but not all; there were groans and cries and blood, but what the travelers were after were the provisions they carried. What food there was soon found itself distributed among the travelers – kept by whoever had grabbed it” (Lessing *Mara and Dann* 121).

Lessing is aware, too, of the mutual reinforcement of food security and conflict. As the aftermath of the nuclear war continues, multitudes of people, nearly all young, who had no prospect of any kind of work, who had never worked, and whose education fitted them only for idleness...At some point their numbers had to increase to the point where much more than occasional and haphazard violence, casual vandalization, could be expected...Hordes, or small armies, or bands, or even smallish groups, would rage through countrysides, killing animals, overturning machinery, burning crops, working havoc...They had the misfortune to be young in a world where ever-increasing multitudes competed for what little food there was, where there was no prospect of betterment save through the deaths of many and where war could be expected with absolute certainty” (Lessing “Shikasta” 291, 295).

The solution to this problem, Lessing writes, was clear. “Numbers of these potential arsonists and destroyers were taken into various military organisations that had civilian designations...” (Lessing “Shikasta” 291).

**Provisioning an army**

But maintaining military organisations themselves can reinforce food scarcity as provisioning them takes precedence over feeding others. Lessing has seen what this means, at least within the army ranks themselves.

“The physical results of the Depression in Britain were evident to anyone who had watched the RAF arrive in the Colony: the officers were a good foot or more taller than the Other Ranks, who were the product of a diet of bread and margarine and jam and strong tea” (Lessing “Under My Skin” 283)

In Shikasta the armies of youths “were fed, were kept warm, were cared for, but outside the armies the populations were fed increasingly badly, and there were fewer and fewer goods to go around” (Lessing “Shikasta” 291).

Soon after their first meeting, Al \* Ith, the ruler of Zone Three in *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* rebukes Ben Ata, warlord of Ben Ata.

“Nine-tenths of your country’s wealth goes into the preparations for war. Apart from the actual growers of food, and the merchants of food and household goods, everyone is in the employ of the army, in some capacity’ ” (Lessing “The Marriages” 96).

Ben Ata mulls this over.

“Suppose he sent home – let’s say – half these men? All over his poor meagre land would flow strength, locked up now in the armies. Strength would flow into the arts and crafts of Zone Four. Roofs would be mended, ditches dug, fields properly ploughed. Harvests would fill barns and women would make preserves and pickles...and there would no longer be pinched unhappy faces to see when he rode through his country” (Lessing 1982(2):204).

It is the same argument Mara will put to a group of Generals by whom she is captured during her journey, that soldiers could be better occupied “‘Building towns. Improving farms. Clearing rivers. Making children. Growing food” (Lessing Mara and Dann 268). But the Generals’ respond “We all get all the food we need. We raid them and get food, and besides our civilian populations grow food and we take what we need from them”.

**A food war reversal**

The tables are turned on the military in the last novel in the Canopus quintet, *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire*. Volyenadna is one of three planets in the Volyen system. At the time the story is set it has been colonised by Volyen for its rich mineral deposits, its population given over to mining under slave conditions. and is described by Klorathy, a Canopean agent, as a slave planet. It is now under imminent threat of being colonised by Sirius which has recently taken an interest in extending its empire into the Volyen system. Until recently, much of the planet was covered by ice sheets whose retreat has left the land harsh, dry with meagre and dull vegetation. There is little indigenous to eat, so all their food is imported which increases their servitude.

Canopus wants to help Volyenadna secure and keep its independence from both Volyen and Sirius. The plan is to give Volyenadna Rocknosh, “a form of food that would make [it] independent. It is a kind of plant, like one of you lichens. It grows on rock. A few spores scattered on the rocks of this valley, and, they would all be covered with it very quickly. You can eat it raw. You can cook it as a vegetable. It can be fermented in various ways, which will change its nature. With this plant you could be self-sufficient on Volyenadna” (Lessing “The Volyen Empire” 110). More importantly, Klorathy tells Calder, the Volyenadan Canopus has chosen to support as leader of the recovery, “without this plant I am offering you, you are helpless. Whether it is Volyen or Sirius, with the plant you can feed yourselves. You can bargain” (Lessing “The Volyen Empire” 117).

At the meeting where the offer is made, Calder is sceptical and refuses the offer, but “At this point [his wife] came in from next door with her jug of the beverage, filled up our glasses, and stood three quietly, looking out the door at the sodden dark hillside, where rain was falling. ‘I am at my wit’s end to find food for the children,’ she remarked. ‘There is hardly anything in the shops. The rations have been cut again. And the last Volyen consignment was half the usual.’” (Lessing “The Volyen Empire” 117). When Calder leaves she asks Klorathy for some spores.

The strategy is a success. At the end of the novel Klorathy report to Canopus.

“ Except for the icecaps, all of this dour little planet now glows a soft red...The [invading] factory colonies felt themselves abandoned by Sirius and have since announced their independence of the Sirian empire, but in the meantime they had no food. Chaos – hunger – fighting between armies and factions of armies all over Volyenadna. Calder and his people watched all of this, and no one told the invaders of the supplies of rich food that filled underground storehouses everywhere. And when these aliens saw that a reddish crust was being scraped off the rocks, and were told this was a lichen used for dyeing and as part of the processes of mining, they believe it. The invading armies had nothing to eat.

Calder and his people bribed them to go away, offering enough food to carry all these polyglot armies back home to their various planets.

‘Food!’, scoffed the Alputs and the starving armies of the factory planets. ‘What food? Where are you going to get it?’

‘We’ll give you all the food we have stored against bad years – for we have bad years, you know, when the snow falls through the growing months. We have to stockpile food.’

They were shown some underground storehouses specially prepared to contain only a few of the infinite variety of foods and products that Rocknosh made. And these armies went away, the holds of their spaceships crammed with not very likable food, pitying and despising the Volyenadnans, and never suspecting the crammed storehouses everywhere under the surface. (Lessing “The Volyen Empire” 194 – 195)

**Last words**

So the quintet ends on a utopian note. But a sourer note has been struck.

At the end of *The Marriages* a group of women from the war-focussed Zone Four who have travelled to Lessing’s other space fiction utopia Zone Five sit despondently over breakfast. “And what they were thinking was that they could return home with news of what they were seeing, and even if they were believed, it would do no good, for they could do no more than explain, and say again, that if the fat and the fullness of a land were not continually poured away into war, then everything, everything would start to fill, and flower, and grow lovely and lavish with detail. In hands and in minds lived skills and cleverness that had only to be fed and given room...patience” (Lessing “The Marriages” 224).

At the end of Mara and Dann, Lessing gives us a picture of a more domestic scale utopia. The siblings have settled in the north of Ifrik with three other refugees on a farm.

“On the table was not much more than bread, vegetables and cheese…There was enough food in the storerooms to keep them going till harvest. There would be a time, not of hardship, but of being careful, till the farm could be brought back to what it had been. The fields grew maize and corn, barley and cotton, sunflowers, melons and squashes; grew, too, grapes; and there was a grove of ancient olive trees that supplied the oil that stood in a big jar on the table. There were goats, the manikin relatives of the enormous milk beasts of the south. Soon they would have fowls, for eggs and for the table, and when there was enough money, would but a couple of horses” (Lessing “Mara and Dann” 399).

But Dann tells Mara that he has been asked by a newcomer to the area to “Raise an army from the local youngsters…”

“And we would feed this army by stealing food from the farmers?”

“But they would benefit, because we would protect them.”

“Protect them from what? This place has a good government…So why do the farmers need protection?” (Lessing “Mara and Dann” 384)

But Mara knows the answer to her question. When they add another building to the Centre dedicated to the period she is living through, it will also end with war.

That this is more true of Lessing’s view of the question she has pursued thorough over 60 years of writing is clear from one of her last interviews in 2013: “Why do we allow wars still? Now we are bogged down in Iraq in an impossible situation. I'll be pleased when I'm dead. That will let me off worrying about all these wars” (Farndale).

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