

Discovering Doris Lessing: Convergences between Islam and Her Thoughts

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Abstract

The 2007 Nobel literature laureate Doris Lessing (1919-2013) is one of the twentieth century's most prolific and versatile British writers. Her literary career is marked by the robustness and diversity of her ideas. The plurality of voices in her work makes room for discovering a very different Lessing from how she is usually construed and for discussing some of her views in a new and somewhat unusual light. In this study, I intend to look at her thoughts on education, literature, racism, and women's rights and locate possible commonalities between them and certain facets of Islamic thought. As she is considered a humanist, a secular writer of great stature, the "grande dame" of British writing of her time, and handles explicit sexual relationships, a sense of remoteness and incomprehension is perhaps palpable in any attempt to discover an "Islamic Doris Lessing." However, given that she is known for her courage and outspokenness, as well as for making unconventional moves and iconoclastic statements sometimes at the expense of her literary reputation, it will be interesting to see her ideas from an Islamic perspective.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, Islamic feminism, women and Islam, anti-feminism, *The Golden Notebook*, Islamization and integration of knowledge, Lessing and racism, Lessing and misogyny

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Introduction

Born in the Kermanshah Province of Iran, brought up in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and later ensconced in Britain, the country of her parents' origin, Doris Lessing (1919-2013) contains plurality not only in respect of a sense of belonging to divergent geographical locations, but also in terms of ranging across diverse eclectic ideological and political concerns. Her abundant sustained literary output spans a number of literary traditions and almost all major genres. Lessing's writing career is marked by consistent and multiple shifts of intellectual and conceptual affiliations and values, extending from communism, socialism, and feminism to antifeminism, radical psychiatry (Laingianism), and Sufism (Islamic or non-Islamic) as well as by continual shuttling between literature and politics.

While multiple transitional allegiances and sequential loyalties, as well as cross-cultural experiences, were a positive force and may have boosted her enthusiasm and heightened her motivation to write, they also bred controversies among literary scholars and media commentators. Critical appreciation of her standing as a novelist is sharply polarized. While some consider her "one of the half-dozen most interesting minds to have chosen to write fiction in English"¹ in the twentieth century, "one of our greatest ... writers ... capable of producing superb work"² and "one of the great visionary novelists of our time,"³ her critics regard her as someone "living on planet Zog"⁴ and a writer whose later work is "quite unreadable ... fourth-rate science fiction."⁵ Although Lessing identified herself mainly as a writer and storyteller and continuously refused to be pigeonholed by predetermined tags or wholesale categorizations, she received "every conceivable label."⁶

Given such a reputation and the divergent reception of her work, this essay will investigate how her ideas, especially those relating to education, literature, racism, and gender issues, can be approached from an Islamic perspective. Such an academic endeavor is in line with the broader project of looking at English literary texts from the viewpoint of Islam.⁷ It is widely believed that, among the humanities and social sciences disciplines, English literature is relatively more saturated in western values and thought patterns. Hence, evaluating English writers' ideas in the light of Islamic teachings carries a wider significance, as such a vibrant intellectual exercise helps its practitioners and students become familiar with western ideas and bring Islamic perspectives into their academic culture. When discussing English literature in an Islamic setting, it is perhaps important for its academics to integrate knowledge and bring in Islamic perspectives when dealing with the thoughts and ideas of such western writers as Lessing.

In this spirit, I intend to locate commonalities between Islam and some of her ideas, which I believe has the potential to breed new controversies and unexpected findings, and thus generate fresh insights and new interpretations that may trigger further research. Undoubtedly, branding Lessing as a writer with Islamic leanings will be rejected by many and, even retrospectively and posthumously, by herself. Considering her reputation as a secular writer with no obvious religious affiliation, it may seem inconceivable to regard her as having Islamic sensibilities or to establish profound affinities that may link her with Islam.

As a sign of respect to Lessing's perception of academic work, in this paper I may not give the usual importance to what "the authorities" have said about her life and work. I will put predominantly what I "think, testing it against [my] ... own experience"⁸ with her work and thought. In looking at her ideas from Islamic perspectives, my own appraisal and understanding of her writings and ideas, with reference to Islamic teachings, will take center stage and may not necessarily be overshadowed by what others may have said about them. It is true that Lessing's diverse interests and versatility of ideas aroused much critical interest and that there has been a continuous flow of academic research on the huge corpus of her writing, but no work has yet assessed the possible convergences between certain aspects of Islamic teachings and some of her overarching ideas. This is despite the fact that "she introduced her contemporary western audience to ideas and literatures from the Muslim world when these were far less familiar even than today"⁹ and even though "she displayed a canny ability to adopt selectively any new theories or beliefs."¹⁰ Hence, this research attempt has great significance and can potentially generate new interests in Lessing studies.

Lessing, Education, and the Islamization of Knowledge

One of the most prominent features of Lessing's life is that she is perhaps the only Nobel laureate in literature who is a high school dropout by choice. More remarkably, she is possibly one of the few individuals who have no regret for not receiving a formal education. She "remained immensely pleased with her lack of education"¹¹ and considered her premature withdrawal from formal schooling at age fourteen "a lucky escape."¹² This does not necessarily prove her disregard for formal knowledge and training; rather, it exhibits her dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of the mainstream institutional education system and of the prevailing pedagogical practices that have largely failed to develop a person's abilities and learning potentials

fully or to harness their “available faculties”¹³ more extensively. She believes that a harmonious, balanced development of the population’s abilities can help the world “evade catastrophe” and that conventional education is not very helpful in this regard.

Lessing’s view of the modern education system shows her frustration with the content and methods of the prevalent knowledge tradition. Harvard professor Harry Lewis’ downbeat observation on the moral decrepitude of conventional education and of many of the educated vindicate her reservations and frustrations: “Society is going to hell in a hand basket, and the great universities are going to get there first.”¹⁴ What is obvious about both of their views is that universities are not producing morally responsible and ethically grounded graduates – a crisis that is compounded by the proliferation of western materialistic cultural influences as well as relativistic and positivistic views through education in non-western, Muslim societies.

In fact, a similar perception led some scholars to undertake the intellectual venture of the Islamization of Knowledge (IoK) during the 1970s. This movement represents a quest for educational and intellectual reform from an Islamic perspective in the context of decadence in the contemporary knowledge system. It emphasizes that the ongoing epistemological crisis of knowledge is the main cause of the moral and intellectual depravity that pervades all spheres of human life, and hence seeks to reform education in the light of Islamic thought and moral values.

Commonalities between Lessing and the proponents of IoK include their shared concern for the holistic development of the human personality and potential. According to the University of Chicago professor of Islamic thought Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), the deficiency of the modern education system is largely due to the “discrepancy between the power of knowledge which man has, and his failure to live up to the moral responsibility arising from that knowledge.”¹⁵ In other words, every knowledgeable person bears ethical and moral responsibilities to them and to society, and failure to render these makes their institutional learning less meaningful.

Qur’an 80:23 also attests to this: “No! Man has not yet accomplished what He [God] commanded him.”¹⁶ The Qur’an acknowledges and celebrates each person’s immense potential and emphasizes the correct and productive use of them, for this is where a person’s success in both this life and the life hereafter lies. The crux of the problem is that while human beings have accomplished near miracles in science and technology and their material life, their moral and ethical foundation is perhaps at an all-time low. This is because “while the presence of the desire for novelty and discovery of some-

thing new is ever present, the urge to solve problems ethically does not keep pace.”¹⁷ Ultimately, what is needed to address the contemporary world’s educational decadence is to employ “time, energy and money in the creation of ... minds” and of “thinkers, those who have the capacity to think constructively and positively.”¹⁸

As is the case with the IoK undertaking, the main thrust of Lessing’s critique of conventional education also points out its inadequacy and inability to create such enlightened individuals and thinking creatures. Thus the ideas of both Lessing and the IoK scholars have converged in their concern for the current faulty knowledge system and in their urge to rectify it.

They fear the moral decadence and loose values fed by the westernization of education, which can bring catastrophic consequences to human life and to Earth. One important aspect of the IoK undertaking is its resistance to the Eurocentric notion of knowledge and to western cultural domination. Hence, the movement’s scholars seek to look at conventional western knowledge from Islamic perspectives. Similarly, Lessing is highly critical of the West’s cultural and educational domination through subjects like “literature and history and philosophy” that, according to her, “is the single biggest hang-up Europe has got”¹⁹ and that helps sustain the western power structure and its cultural hegemony. Her denigration of nonsensical imitation and uncritical reception of western culture is more evident in the following anecdote.

Once Lessing visited Shanghai and saw some local people celebrating a birthday party and singing a western song. She reminisces:

One evening I heard a Chinese family singing “Happy Birthday.” It was weird. You would have thought that they’d have their own happy birthday song. Every dominant society in the world – whether it’s French or British or American – imposes its culture on less developed societies.²⁰

Lessing did not like what she saw, for she expected them to have their own birthday song. In other words, every culture has its own way of celebrating special days, and Lessing believes that people should preserve and revive their own cultural expressions for such events. This particular incident shows that she is strongly against western cultural hegemony and is critical of those non-westerners who imitate and adapt western standards and manners.

In the field of education, the humanities and social sciences are the main tools for spreading western philosophies and cultural values. In this respect also, the IoK proponents and Lessing seem to reach a common understanding. Interestingly, her critique and denunciation of education is mainly concerned with those humanities that are heavily infused with western values and cultural

assumptions. This leads to a significant convergence between her focus and that of the IoK. Although other branches are gradually receiving attention from IoK scholars, they focus mainly on those humanities and social sciences that are considered the principal bearers of western ideas and influences.

As Taha Jabir al-Alwani states: “The dominant western cultural paradigm has cast the social sciences and humanities in a positivistic mold that excludes the axiological verities of revelation.”²¹ He also singles out the social sciences and humanities when discussing the required qualifications of those who would bring this project about: “The Islamization of Knowledge undertaking may be pursued only by those endowed with a vast knowledge of the Qur’an and a firm grounding in the social sciences and humanities.”²² Hence, these scholars’ primary focus is the area of social sciences and humanities, which also draw Lessing’s critical attention. After discussing striking similarities between Lessing’s notion of education and the concerns of the IoK scholars, I will explicate her approach to a specific branch of knowledge – literature – in relation to how Islam views literary practices.

The Islamic Conception of Literature and Lessing’s Idea of Committedness

Perhaps the greatest convergence between specific Islamic concepts and Lessing’s ideas lies in the notion of literature. Away from the “art for art’s sake” dictum, Islam maintains a utilitarian view of literature by promoting *‘ilm nāfi’* (useful and beneficial knowledge). This concept is foregrounded in the following well-known hadith of Prophet Muhammad: “O Allah! I seek refuge in You from the inability (to do good), indolence, cowardice, miserliness, decrepitude and torment of the grave. ... *O Allah! I seek refuge in You from knowledge which is not beneficial*, and from a heart which does not fear (You)...”²³ Since literature is a branch of knowledge, its usefulness must be analyzed from an Islamic perspective. Another prophetic tradition states: “There is magic in eloquence, ignorance in knowledge, wisdom in poetry (literature), and heaviness in speech.”²⁴

As these hadiths suggest, Islam may not regard a well-structured academic discipline with scholarly credentials and pedagogical roots and embellishment as true knowledge if it does not benefit human beings. In today’s world, various branches of knowledge and their practitioners are perhaps well-equipped with information about their respective fields, but “most of them do not seem to have developed an internally set moral compass that could function as their guide and help them distinguish what is right and what is wrong and act ac-

cordingly.”²⁵ Due to the knowledge system’s weak ethical foundation, possessors of conventional education may not have a greater claim on “moral and ethical armour capable of withstanding the blandishments of greed.”²⁶ Knowledge and scholarship devoid of practical, ethical benefits for its practitioners and the wider society may be regarded as a futile exercise. As Qur’an 18:103-04 states: “Say: Shall We inform you of the greatest losers in (their) deeds? (These are) they whose labor is misdirected and lost in worldly life, even though they think that they are doing well in work.” Impressive intellectual efforts and excellence may not be worthwhile if their practitioners are not ethically sound and if it benefits no one, not even its possessors.

Based on this fundamental premise, it can be inferred that in Islam the usefulness of literary practices in a broad and generic sense is what counts and is an essential criterion to differentiate between good and bad literature.²⁷ As Hasan states: “For Muslims, a work of art should either benefit them materially or spiritually. . . . If this is not the case, then artistic or literary practices will be deemed a waste of God-given talents.”²⁸ In order to describe Islam’s approach to literature, the British writer and translator of the Qur’an Marmaduke Pickthall states: “The whole of Islam’s great work in science, art and literature is included under these two heads: aid and refreshment. Some of it, such as the finest poetry and architecture, falls under both.”²⁹

If we analyze Lessing’s view of literature, then we will see that she, along with Islam, emphasizes the usefulness and ethical considerations of creative production. Being a great realist, Lessing believes that literature should be “committed” and must have edifying and instructive functions. As she states: “I see no reason why good writers should not, if they have a bent that way, write angry protest novels about economic injustice. Many good writers have. Dickens, for instance, was often inspired by poverty and injustice.”³⁰ According to her, writers have the potential to render a simple moral instruction and exhortation “much more powerful” by using their creative talents. She argues that “propagandist literature, religious or political, is as old as literature itself.” However, she deplores the fact that “the idea of committedness is in disrepute” in literary discussions mainly because of the poor quality or misuse of such literary practices. She highly appreciates the nineteenth-century literary tradition, which was marked by “a climate of ethical judgment.”³¹ As opposed to that literature, Lessing laments, subsequent literary practices have become divorced from moral judgment and the ultimate concepts of good and evil, and are conspicuous by “a confusion of standards and uncertainty of values.”³² This resonates with what the literary critic and educationalist Ali Ashraf observes:

The difficulty that twentieth century writers are faced with is the difficulty brought about by the lack of faith in anything spiritual. Man stands disintegrated; that is why some important writers have tried to re-integrate man by reformulating his concepts and by establishing man's nature in a new context. This is what Ezra Pound or Yeats or D. H. Lawrence have tried to do. But the difficulty lies in the esotericism of these writers and their inability to see that they are trying to create various kinds of disconnected concepts. Their partial realizations are marred by their claim to have realized the whole.³³

In manifest opposition to the core thesis of "art for art's sake," Lessing proposes that a writer be a "humanist" and "an architect of the soul" who has "a feeling of responsibility, as a human being, for the other human beings he influences ... and must feel himself as an instrument of change for good or for bad."³⁴ She abhors the isolationist notion of literature that places a writer "in the ivory tower" with no necessary effect in, or relation to, the practical world of experience. Emphasizing writers' important task of guiding their fellow human beings, she says that all of us

are living 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 or to read them. It is a question of life and death for all of us; and we are haunted, all of us, by the threat that even if some madman does not destroy us, our children may be born deformed or mad.³⁵

Therefore, writers cannot turn their "backs on [their] chosen responsibilities" of instructing and guiding people to find peace and meaning in life and of "preventing an evil" and "strengthening a vision of a good which may defeat the evil."³⁶ If we compare her view of literature and Islam's view of knowledge in a generic sense, we find a strong commonality between them, as both stress using knowledge (or, for that matter, literature) for the good and progress of humanity. After touching on the harmony and convergence between the Islamic concept of "beneficial knowledge" and Lessing's notion of "committedness," in the following section I will highlight another striking point of confluence: the outright rejection of racism.

Racism

Islam's unequivocal stance against racism demolishes the very foundation of racist ideology and assumptions by reasserting the undifferentiated and common origin of all humans.

O humanity, be conscious of your Sustainer, Who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand [your rights] from one another, and of these ties of kinship. Verily, God is ever watchful over you. (Q. 4:1)

This verse declares that members of different human communities are basically an outgrowth of one family unit and that Islam rejects social Darwinism and biological “superiority” in terms of races. According to the Qur’an, humanity’s various skin colors and languages are signs of God’s power and wonders: “And among His wonders is the creation of the heavens and Earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colors: for in this, behold, there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of [innate] knowledge” (Q. 30:22).

In fact, superiority depends solely upon the degree of one’s *taqwā* (piety or righteousness): “O people, behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware” (Q. 49:13). This verse both reaffirms humanity’s common origin and recognizes ethnic plurality; however, it does not make that a basis for superiority or inferiority.

Importantly, during his Farewell Sermon the Prophet explicitly rejected all forms of racism: “All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a White has no superiority over a Black nor a Black has any superiority over a White except by piety and good action.”³⁷ Another tradition of the Prophet reads: “Allah has taken away your pride of *Jāhiliyah* and your boasting about your forefathers. One is only a righteous believer of a doomed evil-doer. You are the sons [progenies] of Adam, and Adam was created from dust.”³⁸

One vicious form of racism, European imperialism, is a result of “an obsessive political belief that Europeans were superior in their intellect, ethnicity, race, color and human configuration than the other people of the globe.”³⁹ Needless to say, because of imperialism’s racist ideological foundation and oppressive and exploitative nature, Islam totally rejects and prohibits it. Moreover, all Muslim anti-colonial struggles were hugely inspired by Islam’s emphasis on fighting injustice. As Fanon states, “the struggle for national liberty [in the Arab World] has been accompanied by a cultural phenomenon known by the name of awakening Islam.”⁴⁰

The core message of *tawhīd* (monotheism) also encompasses the unity and essential equality of all humanity as one *ummah* (human community). Appreciating this innate message, the American civil rights leader Malcolm X made this salient comment upon performing hajj: “I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in reality the Oneness of Man and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their ‘differences’ in color.”⁴¹

Given the abovementioned discussion, an analysis of Lessing’s stance on race relations reveals her conformity with Islamic teachings. Lessing had the courage to stand up to racism and colonialism in Rhodesia at a time when both of these discriminatory practices and structures of oppression and prejudice were taken for granted in the region. As a result, she was banned from the country from 1957 until 1980, when white minority rule ended. Upon learning of her prohibition, she felt extremely let down by the apartheid regime and vented her sadness thus: “‘My’ people, that is, the whites, with whom after all I had grown up, were coming to escort me out of the country, while to ‘my’ people, the blacks, amiable multitudes, I was invisible.”⁴² At a time of heightened racial tension, her usage of inclusive terms – ‘my people’ – in reference to both races suggests that she had transcended the racial divide and was big-hearted enough to embrace both groups as fellow human beings, as it was a snub to the white, racist minority rulers.

Lessing’s strong stance against southern Africa’s racist ethnocentrism and white privilege was extremely radical. She did not hesitate to vex even her parents with “her outspoken dislike of Rhodesia’s colour bar.”⁴³ Her involvement in communist politics was mainly inspired by this stance, as she found her Rhodesian comrades “the only people [she] had ever met who fought the color bar in their lives.”⁴⁴ She gradually became disillusioned with and detached from communist ideologies, but her abiding dislike and hatred for racism remained strong. Actually, her rejection of racism and urge to create a society of human equality was what attracted her to communism in the first place, for

It [communism] was a vision of a society where every individual was immensely important, where there was no emphasis on colour, class or creed, there was no hurting [of] each other. Every person had a chance and the right to develop himself. This was the dream, and it’s why people are socialists, why I was.⁴⁵

While Lessing’s anti-racist ideas and struggle were more pronounced during her stay in Rhodesia, in post-9/11 Britain she became particularly vocal against Islamophobia, which “has recently become one of the main forms of

racism in the world.”⁴⁶ While western establishments and media were pointing fingers at Muslims, especially Arabs, after 9/11, Lessing made a characteristically iconoclastic statement: “It was neither as terrible nor as extraordinary as the Americans think.”⁴⁷ This statement does not necessarily suggest her condoning of the vicious attack on the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York, but rather her refusal to toe the line with the dominant post-9/11 discourse and her indirect rejection of the continuous, master narrative of Muslim wrongdoing. While, according to Lessing, writers like Martin Amis and Christopher Hitchens “go on and on about”⁴⁸ the Muslim presence in Europe, she remained unconcerned about such issues and refused to appropriate the 9/11 tragedy for Islam-bashing purposes.

Having been born a year after World War I and living through a long period of both regional and global wars and catastrophes, Lessing emerged as a strong anti-war commentator in the post-9/11 West. She made reference to the military-industrial complex of such powerful countries as the United States and was highly critical of those arms manufacturers who “quietly foment wars” in order to make profits.⁴⁹ Her criticism is mainly directed against the rulers and media moguls who do not tell the public the truth about the nation’s underlying war motivations during the preparatory phase of conflict, in the run-up to military campaigns, or during hostilities. People come to know “the true story” only after the war ends.

Again Lessing’s critique of war hypocrisy, greed, and political corruption resonates with Islam’s teachings of justice: “O you who believe. Be upright for God, bearers of witness with justice, and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably; act equitably, that is nearer to piety, and be careful of (your duty to) God; surely God is Aware of what you do” (Q. 5:8). Islam also urges Muslims to avoid war and hostility as long as a peaceful solution is feasible and attainable: “But if they [the enemy] incline to peace, you incline to it as well, and place your trust in God: verily, He alone is all-hearing, all-knowing” (Q. 8:61). However, Islam permits war in unavoidable circumstances mainly for self-defense and requires the believers to remain firm and steadfast in all such cases: “Permission (to fight) is given to those upon whom war is made because they are oppressed, and most surely God is well able to assist them” (Q. 22:39). Islam is not a pacifist religion that rules out war in pursuit of self-defense and justice; however, it advises believers to conduct war in an extremely noble and principled way. As Pickthall comments:

There is not one word in the Holy Qur’an to justify murder or massacre under any circumstances whatsoever. All there is [is] a command for open,

honourable warfare, under certain plain conditions, and with limitations which made Islamic warfare, by its mercy as compared with other warfare, a great factor in the success of Islam as a religion: for it surprised the people used to utter ruthlessness in war.⁵⁰

After locating commonalities between Islam's approach to and Lessing's views of education, literature, and racism, in what follows I analyze the broader issue of women's rights.

Women's Rights

The term *feminist* is the most prominent label attributed to Lessing and her masterpiece *The Golden Notebook* (1962). And yet she rejected it vehemently and considered this particular work an "albatross" "misunderstood by both its critics and admirers."⁵¹ Although refuting Lessing's apparently "anti-feminist" statement during her speech at the Edinburgh International Book Festival 2001 and expressing her shock over what Lessing had said, the feminist writer Natasha Walter still regards her as "one of the most striking of all feminist heroines" and as one who "occupies a supreme space in the British feminist pantheon."⁵² Despite Lessing's repeated denunciation of the term being attached to her, feminist scholars tend to "read her as a feminist" mainly for the fact that she emerged as a dominant figure "in the sexual confusion of the 1960s."⁵³ One commentator puts this love-hate relationship between Lessing and feminism thus: "And while she may have spent 50 years denying she is a feminist, for 50 years women have adored her" as one.⁵⁴

Although both her experiences as a mother and her relationship with her children were marked by unconventionality, and there is ambiguity and ambivalence about her decision to leave some of them in South Africa when she moved to Britain permanently in 1949, in her criticism of dominant trends of feminism Lessing shows genuine concern for the welfare of children and puts enormous emphasis on paying sufficient attention to their physical and psychological needs. As she says: "But real equality only comes when childcare is sorted out, and it hasn't been."⁵⁵ Accordingly, she criticizes mainstream feminism's emphasis on women becoming exclusively engaged in the world of work even at the expense of their children's wellbeing. While governments and other stakeholders are also responsible for ensuring good quality childcare, especially by introducing flexible and family-friendly working policies, the children's interests and needs at home must not be compromised.

Despite all the critical hype and media discourses that regard Lessing as a de facto feminist heroine and her *The Golden Notebook's* status as a bible

of the women's rights movement, she consistently refused to "become a feminist poster girl" or to regard the book as a "trumpet for women's liberation."⁵⁶ This is an extraordinary phenomenon because, in gender studies, feminists and antifeminists are generally clearly identified. This identification proceeds to such an extent that the feminist label is sometimes attributed to authors like Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) and George Sand (1804-76) who had written before the term was invented in the 1880s or before it started to be widely used. Ironically, Lessing actively wrote during the height of feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s and beyond, but refused to be associated with either the movement or the term.

One reason for this is that she did not want to be paradigmatically associated with a narrow, western view of women's issues and strategies. Lessing was rather concerned with more universal human welfare, one that definitely includes women's issues and their experiences of growing up in patriarchy and does not protect the interest of only a privileged group. Her resistance to the label is, in part, triggered by the preponderance of whiteness and classism in both the women's liberation and feminist movements, a fact that has undoubtedly kept the interests of many underprivileged and non-white women at bay. As she states: "There are many feminists who work in the media, and they think that feminism is very important. It is in their own lives, but mostly feminism has had an impact among privileged women in the advanced Western countries. For the most part, it hasn't begun to touch the lives of poor and working women in the Third World, and that distresses me."⁵⁷

Unlike many other writers who give excessive importance to second-wave feminism and tend to mark first-wave feminism as the beginning of the women's rights movement, Lessing believes that the woman question appeared as early as the fifteenth century and then, in recent history, among "communist circles in the 40s and 50s feminist issues were much discussed"⁵⁸ decades before second-wave feminism. Perhaps to locate earliest defenders of women, Lessing alluded to figures like French writer Christine de Pizan (1364-1430?),⁵⁹ widely regarded "as the first to hold modern feminist views,"⁶⁰ even though ascertaining the earliest feminist writer has remained a debatable issue. By mentioning two dates – the fifteenth century and the 1940s and 1950s – Lessing counteracts the conventional notion that limits feminist activism to two waves: the first wave, which arguably "began in the eighteenth century with the work of Mary Wollstonecraft and includes the work of feminists such as Olive Schreiner, Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Simone de Beauvoir,"⁶¹ and the second wave, which began in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁶²

The latter wave has remained the dominant trend in the women's rights movement and is generally associated with the sexual revolution, sexual politics, and the erosion of external controls on women's carnal interests and desires, for its main concerns were "the politics of the family, reproduction, and sexual liberation of women."⁶³ Hence, commentators readily interpret the graphic description of women's erotic behavior patterns in *The Golden Notebook* with a feminist slant. The novel "deals candidly with menstruation, the female orgasm and men's sexual shortcomings,"⁶⁴ which is a good fit with the recognition of women's sexual autonomy and self-determination and led critics to regard it as a feminist text. Moreover, Lessing's attitude to men in the book is condescending. In the novel, Anna finds it useless to protect Janet because she may have to grow up in a country (England) that is "full of men who are little boys and homosexuals and half-homosexuals."⁶⁵

Additionally, since second-wave feminism is characterized by an anti-male attitude and sexual revolution, such statements may also have contributed to branding Lessing as a feminist, which consequentially leads to some other epithets attached to her such as "man-hater" and "ball-breaker." Her 2001 speech at the Edinburgh International Book Festival more clearly manifested her strong stance against male-hating feminists, whom she branded as "most stupid, ill-educated and nasty" and as being involved in "unthinking and automatic rubbishing" of men.⁶⁶ This is because rivalry between men and women and women's adoption of an anti-male attitude are a significant cyclical trend pattern in dominant western feminism. However, Lessing regards male-hating dominant feminists as "horrible" and as "some of the smuggest, most unself-critical people the world has ever seen."⁶⁷ She abhors the notion of the feminist sex wars that started in the late 1970s and is mainly directed against men and rendered them "cowed." Lessing believes that feminists "make oversimplified statements about men and women" and tend to work for "the golden dawn where all those beastly men are no more."⁶⁸

While discussing Lessing's reservation about feminism's supposed anti-male orientation and illustrating possible commonalities between Islamic teachings and some of her ideas, it is pertinent to note that Islam does not provoke gender rivalry or entertain any sense of hostility between men and women. For instance, verse 9:71 of the Qur'an regards believing men and women as "friends and protectors of one another," while Qur'an 30:21 characterizes the relationship between husband and wife as one based on "love and tenderness."

One major theme of *The Golden Notebook* is women's freedom and how it is degraded because of its explicit references to sex. In other words, in this

novel Lessing critiques those feminists who have reduced women's rights to sexual autonomy, pleasure, and control over their bodies and goes on to show that such an exclusive emphasis on sexual self-determination does not necessarily benefit women. As Ella says to Julia, while pursuing freedom they are conditioned to live "in a sort of sexual mad house."⁶⁹ Julia replies that sexual autonomy outside of marriage may not give them freedom, because men are not free from the cultural notion of good (sexually pure) and bad (sexually promiscuous) women. She adds: "And what about us? Free, we say, yet the truth is they get erections when they're with a woman they don't give a damn about, but we don't have an orgasm unless we love him. What's free about that?"⁷⁰

Lessing, who detests the feminist tendency to put sex at the center of all preoccupations, recognizes the fundamental differences between men and women. Her idea about an erection and an orgasm suggests that, in its pursuit of gender equality, feminism can never bridge the enormous chasm between men and women. Nor can it erase the physical and biological distinction between the genders, or the cultural diversity among women of various societies. In other words, perhaps, Lessing acknowledges essential differences between men and women and may prefer Islam's gender "equity" instead of the West's gender "equality."

Despite all of her critical remarks about feminists, Lessing denies that she opposes women's liberation or has "abandoned feminist concerns."⁷¹ Rather, what she promotes is a balanced and harmonious growth of both genders and the belief that the liberation of one gender does not have to be through "pointless humiliation"⁷² of the other. She refuses to drive a wedge between men's and women's interests and is opposed to any "cultural divide between" them.⁷³ Perhaps Lessing's feminism resonates more with the ideas of the early women's rights campaign (i.e., widely known as first-wave feminism) and not so much with those of the gender rivalry and sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, first-wave feminists like Wollstonecraft blame both men and women for the latter's deplorable condition.

Equally, upon pointing to women's marginalized status in society, Lessing directs her criticism against women as well as men and wants the former to change in order for them to ameliorate their condition. Remarkably, Islam largely supports the first-wave concerns, which include breaking down "the barriers that had kept [women and girls] out of schools, jobs and political participation."⁷⁴ An extensive discussion on various aspects of first-wave feminism and how its concerns are mostly compatible with Islamic teachings is, however, beyond this paper's scope.⁷⁵

It may suffice here to say that Islam resolved fundamental issues involving women's rights in the seventh century. As Amina Wadud states:

Islam brought radical changes regarding women and society, despite the deeply entrenched patriarchy of seventh-century Arabia. The Qur'an provides women with explicit rights to inheritance, independent property, divorce and the right to testify in a court of law. It prohibits wanton violence towards women and girls and is against duress in marriage and community affairs. Women and men equally are required to fulfill all religious duties, and are equally eligible for punishment for misdemeanors.⁷⁶

Conventional, sexual liberation feminists believe that women's extramarital affairs are a sign of confidence and emotional fulfillment, as well as their revenge for their husbands' perennial infidelity. Lessing, however, regards this as counterproductive and retrospectively imitative of men's earlier crime. It is also a regressive retraction of women's earlier demands for men's sexual purity. In this respect, she reminds readers that historically women have suffered from men's sexual infidelity and that this reality was behind the slogan of Britain's suffrage movement: "Votes for Women and Chastity for Men." As Mayhall puts it: "Until men adopted women's sexual standard of conduct, that is, until men embraced chastity and eschewed promiscuity, all women would remain in a state of slavery. Votes for women and chastity for men, then, were intertwined."⁷⁷ If women now want to have the liberty to enjoy sexual pleasure outside of marriage, that may mean that they desire to commit a crime for which they have suffered and against which they have demonstrated in the street in the past.

Lessing actually rejects the dominant feminist ideas of the 1970s that characterized all men as rapists, all sex as power, and marriage as a crime – all ideas that Jeanette Winterson regards as "the really damaging, batty stuff."⁷⁸ Lessing is opposed to any idea of essentializing men as belligerent or women as pacifists. Thus she contradicts certain ideas of feminist theorists like Virginia Woolf, who associated men with war and militarism, as depicted in *Three Guineas* (1938). While Lessing was very critical of men such as George W. Bush and Tony Blair who took their nations to wars, she refused to link this hostile tendency found within them and many other male rulers with biological determinism, that is, their sex or gender identity. As she once curtly said apparently in reference to Margaret Thatcher's rule in Britain: "I have not noticed that women, when they get to be prime ministers, are particularly peaceful." She adds: "We like to think we are motherly and kind and that we are not going to go to war, but it's not true, is it?"⁷⁹

Thus she took her stance against any essentialist notion of male and female, which is also compatible with the Islamic notion of *fiṭrah*, a person's natural disposition that is independent of any gender-specific categorization and inclined toward doing good. As opposed to the Christian concept of Original Sin, this Islamic belief states that every human being is born innocent, regardless of their gender.

While the idea of Eve's (woman's) role in Original Sin points to women's fallibility and culpability and tends to establish their supposed inferiority, *fiṭrah* refers to each gender's essential nature as original goodness and a pure state: "And so, set thy face steadfastly toward the [one ever-true] faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has instilled into human: [for,] not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created – this is the [purpose of the one] ever-true faith; but most people know it not" (Q. 30:30). A widely quoted hadith of the Prophet proclaims: "No child is born but in [a state of] *fiṭrah*."⁸⁰

Thus Islam testifies that each person's basic, original disposition inclines toward goodness, even though many of them eventually depart from it and ignore their internal moral standards or principles. Importantly, while Original Sin maintains an anti-woman bias, *fiṭrah* bears no gender inflection. So when Lessing refuses to associate warmongering and militarism with male identity, she perhaps refers to this original human disposition without any reference to gender.

The Islamic Lessing

Apart from the issues discussed above, Lessing's Islamic leanings are also evident in her perception of Sufism, in which she was interested "for more than 40 years – longer than she was involved in the Left."⁸¹ Although Sufism is generally associated with Islam, Lessing's perception of it echoes that of many western Sufi leaders: "Sufism transcends the boundaries between many or all religions to the point where it is argued that a person can be a Sufi without having an Islamic identity."⁸² However, the affinity between Sufism and Islam cannot be dismissed. According to Lessing, Sufism is "the substance of that current which can develop man to a higher stage in his evolution."⁸³ Equally, as Iqbal puts it, religion is "opposed to the limitations of human; it enlarges his claims and holds out the prospect of nothing less than a direct vision of Reality."⁸⁴ In other words, both religion and Sufism create an awareness of inner feelings and consciousness, a bond with a Higher Reality, and set up a higher goal. Hence the connection between them is neither remote nor tenuous.

Even though a predominant theory suggests that Sufism predates Islam and spans all religious denominations and sometimes non-religious philosophies, it “took shelter within [Islam] throughout the Middle East for many centuries.”⁸⁵ What is more, there is a strong convergence between Lessing’s Sufism and Islamic teachings: “It is not contemptuous of the world. ‘Be in the world and not of it’ is the aim.”⁸⁶ This goes very well with the basic tenets of Islam, which is neither this-worldly nor solely other-worldly, but is directed toward establishing a harmony between and a combination of the both.

Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, [the good of] the life to come, without forgetting, withal, your own [rightful] share in this world; and do good [unto others] as God has done good unto thee; and seek not to spread corruption on earth: for, verily, God does not love the spreaders of corruption. (Q. 28:77)⁸⁷

This Qur’anic verse tells Muslims to live a meaningful, fulfilling mundane life of productivity and vitality, but at the same time advises them to be like travelers and to not become so engrossed in worldly pleasures that they forget about God or forbid them to link their existence to a higher calling. So Lessing’s perception of Sufism resonates with an Islamic mysticism that is largely “inspired by the Quran, the religious practice of the Prophet, and that of the early Muslim community.”⁸⁸ It is also worth mentioning here that Sufism, like many other later Islamic practices, is somehow related to the early Islamic tradition but clearly draws upon other ideas and includes many innovations. Another convergence between Lessing’s idea of Sufism and Islam is her rejection of Sufi quietism, as her lifelong activism amply suggests. “Lessing’s move into Sufi studies, far from an abandonment of her earlier political, psychological or social stands, was a deepening of her interest in the human being as a seeker.”⁸⁹

Similarly, the Islamic concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* (self-purification) is not a passive persuasion; it is very much proactive and is guided by wider, comprehensive Islamic teachings. Islam does not promote escapism from everyday life and its challenges. While it is true that the Qur’an and Sunnah contain statements denigrating senseless materialistic pursuits and the maximization of worldly pleasures, these should be interpreted in the light of Islam’s entire message. The Qur’an teaches believers to pray for good in both this life and in the afterlife. Also, the purpose of supplication is not to passively anticipate God’s intervention, but for people to play an active role while relying upon His mercy and help.⁹⁰ Islam does not allow an ascetic way of life that relinquishes community and social life; rather, it is a practical way of life.

So Lessing's idea of Sufism, if interpreted in the light of Islamic concept of life, may find resonance with Islamic teachings. Sometimes *zuhd*, often interpreted as Islamic asceticism, is misconstrued by various entirely other-worldly Sufi orders and is taken to mean aversion to worldly and material concerns. In this regard, Qur'anic statements – for example, “this life is nothing but the enjoyment of delusion” (Q. 28:77)⁹¹ – are sometimes used to substantiate this particular viewpoint. But *zuhd*, in fact, does not prohibit enjoying “the bounties that Allah put on Earth for the benefit of humans.” Rather, it signifies “belittling materialism and having a correct relation to material goods as things to be used by humans in the fulfillment of their duties to Allah and not as masters who control human behavior.”⁹² It is more concerned with the person's attitude and how he/she approaches this life. *Zuhd* requires Muslims to prioritize the eternal hereafter over this ephemeral worldly life. Human beings live here as travelers and should use this short life to prepare for the Hereafter. Considering the above discussion, *zuhd* obviously cannot be completely otherworldly and beyond the pale of earthly life or concerned exclusively with meditation, prayer, and other ritualistic practices and spiritual exercises.

Importantly, Lessing does not dissociate her Sufi guru Idries Shah (d. 1996) from Islam; rather, she regards him as an advocate of “moderate and liberal Islam.”⁹³ One can argue, at least for two reasons, that her Sufi inclinations were derived from Islamic traditions. First, according to her own admission, she was attracted to “Sufi living, learning, [and] thinking” after reading Shah's *The Sufis* (1964), which is decorated with Islamic calligraphy and celebrates the life and experiences of such prominent Islamic Sufi masters as Mulla Nasruddin (d. thirteenth century), Sheikh Saadi (d. 1291/92), Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273), Ibn Arabi (d. 1240), and al-Ghazali (d. 1111): “It is a cliché to say that such and such a book changed one's life, but that book changed mine.”⁹⁴ Second, she wrote an enthusiastic and wonderful introduction to the life of the Islamic Sufi master Rabia al-Adawiyya (d. 801), which is included in Widad El-Sakkakini's *First among Sufis: The Life and Thought of Rabia al-Adawiyya, the Woman Saint of Basra* (trans. Nabil Safwat, 1982).

Even if these do not suggest her leanings toward Islam, they do reveal her departure from the “secularized world-view of the twentieth-century West” and thus place “her somewhere between the Eastern and Western traditions.”⁹⁵ In other words, her strong connection to Sufism rendered her a common, shared cultural icon of both the West and East, or of both Islam and secularism.

Conclusion

Despite all of the polemics and controversy surrounding Lessing's beliefs and ideological stances, critics unanimously refer to her fearlessness and intellectual rigor. She is an author who "said the unsayable, thought the unthinkable, and ... managed to make sense of her material, but at enormous risk."⁹⁶ Her courage, which verged on audacity, is also manifested in her outspoken statements on Islam and its culture at a time when the Muslim presence as well as understanding of Islamic teachings and practices within the United Kingdom was not very deep. Her higher regard for classical Muslim scholars like al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi, compared to some of their European counterparts like Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), shows her admiration for and inclination toward Islamic philosophy. Such an impression about Islam and Muslims may complicate Lessing's ideological affiliation and may show her inclination toward particular Islamic values. Hence, this paper has made an attempt to see the extent of agreement between Islamic teachings and her thoughts and ideas on specific issues.

Lessing's feminism differs from the conventional western notion of women's rights. Mainstream feminists in western societies are highly privileged, compared to their disadvantaged counterparts in both the East and the West. They have largely been selective in raising their concerns on women's issues. For example, a huge degree of oppression has recently been placed on women due to foreign invasions, military attacks, and political turmoil instigated or facilitated either by local despots or by western powers. Women have been subjected to mass killings, murder, arson attacks, rape, unlawful incarceration, organized attacks, and other severe acts of aggression.

However, influential feminist organizations have largely been silent about such things. Instead of undertaking the important but difficult task of working for all women everywhere, feminists have pursued what Lessing calls the "lazy and insidious" culture of male-bashing and man-hating. In such a politico-cultural context, the primordial Islamic concept of justice is highly significant. This essay has argued that Lessing's ideas regarding gender issues largely comply with justice and gender equity, as her thoughts on education, literature, and racism largely do with Islam's views on these issues.

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