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Sufism in Lessing's Work

People ask, "How can you, a feminist, have anything to do with an Islam-based study?" First, the real Sufis will say that Sufism is not more Muslim than Christian, that it predated Islam and Christianity because it has always been in the world under one name or another or none and cannot be equated with the temporary phase of any culture, though it found a home within conventional Islam for a time. Secondly, it is not enough for us to be concerned with the situation of women; it is the situation of humankind that should be our concern.

—Doris Lessing,
"Learning How to Learn"

This chapter first defines Sufism as represented in nonacademic circles in the West. Second, it exemplifies the distinction between *tasawwuf* and Sufism by studying a poem by the thirteenth-century Persian *tasawwuf* poet and master of the Whirling Dervishes (the Mawlawiyyah), Mawlânâ Jalâluddîn Rûmî (1207–73), and a popularized, Westernized version of the same poem translated today, seven centuries later. Third, the chapter compares and contrasts the ecstatic message in Rûmî's original, longer poem with the optimistic message in Lessing's fiction.

For proponents of the Sufi Way in the West, Sufism falls somewhere between philosophy and religion—it is more a way

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of seeing. It stresses attuning oneself to the needs of the human race and of the cosmos. A practicing Sufi in a Muslim society might say that a Sufi is a particularly good Muslim. A practicing Sufi in the West might say that a Sufi is a Sufi and that Sufism supercedes the lines of religion. In either case, it goes against the Sufis' grain to be pigeonholed. Just as nothing that we might be told about a rose can give us the smell of the rose, Sufis believe that "it is only those who taste who can know" (Lessing, *Writer's Encounter*, audiocassette). Mystical experience, like taste or smell, is something that is intimately inside us and can only be felt, not defined or explained. It "is as incommunicable to those insensitive to it as is musical experience to those deaf from birth" (Hodgson 1: 395). In this particular sense, Sufis share much with Jewish or Christian mystics.¹ As Arberry defines it, mysticism is "a constant and unvarying phenomenon of the universal yearning of the human spirit for personal communion with God" (11). Hodgson compares classic instances of the mystical experience to moments of apoplectic anger or climactic orgasm but says they are "more overpowering and intense . . . yet at the same time much calmer and deeper" (1: 396). He adds,

the whole range of mystical experience, both ecstatic and everyday, is the commonplace experience of arriving at relative personal clarity: the clarity that comes when the elements of a problem finally fit together, or when one has shaken away the haziness after waking suddenly, or perhaps most especially, when a surge of anger has died down and one can look at the situation realistically and with a measure of generosity. . . . At best, in such moments (as many have discovered), one can face the loss of anything one has most desired, and even recognize one's worst traits, without either anxiety or self-pity, and can find the courage to try to be the best one can imagine being. (397-98)

Such serenity approximates what a Sufi may experience on the mystical path.

The word *Sufi* has many meanings. We do not know the word's total etymology, but in Arabic, *soof* means "wool," which could refer to the coarse woolen garments which the wandering mendicants or dervishes wore. *Sufi* also may have been derived from *ashab-i Suffa* in Arabic, meaning "the People of the Bench," referring to the inner circle of worshippers who gathered around Muhammad's mosque. The word *suffa* in this case refers to the *sofa* or bench on which the worshippers sat. Or *Sufi* may have been derived from the Arabic root *sfw*, meaning "to be pure." This root also constitutes the word *tasawwuf*, meaning "purity" (Arberry, *Sufism* 78). Sufis believe: "He that is purified by love is *safi*, or 'pure,' and he who is purified by the Beloved is a *Sufi*" (Bennett, *Gurdjieff* 47).

Idries Shah teaches that the Sufi Path is called "the Path of Love," referring to the search for God or one's Higher Self, with whom the Sufi mystic enters a love relationship. A passage from the Qur'ân, "He loveth them and they love Him" (5.59), supports the Sufi doctrine of love and authorizes "the idea of a trinity of Lover, Loved, and Love" (Arberry, *Sufism* 21). This is the reason why most classical Sufi poetry is written in the form of love poetry in which the poet addresses, beseeches, and longs for the Beloved (God), which is depicted as an ecstatic, even erotic love, not a Platonic liaison. In the case of the Sufis throughout history, the Christian term *agape* is supplanted by a less abstract, more direct desire for the Beloved Allah.

As understood in the West, Sufism loosely covers a wide range of ideas and practices that, when followed and carried out with careful attention to all of one's self, can lead to the transformation of individuals and to the betterment of humankind. This is at the heart of Lessing's Sufi message: for Sufis the child's slow progress into adulthood figures as only a developmental stage, "for which the dynamic force is love, not either asceticism or the intellect" ("Ancient" 76). According to Sufis, all of humanity can be induced to grow harmoniously in this fashion if individuals take upon themselves the task of

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following the Sufi Path while remaining in life and at work, in the world, but not of it.

According to Shah, Sufis have taught and led in varying manners that were appropriate to their times, circumstances, and geography. Shah quotes Ahmad al-Badawî: "Sufi schools are like waves which break upon rocks: [they are] from the same sea, in different forms, for the same purpose" (*Way* 269). Sufis characterize fake cults or imitations as a fur coat that one wears only in winter and has no need for in warm weather or good times. In contrast, they encourage a way of living and a way of interpreting the world that one maintains always and everywhere. Dervishes have been "kings, soldiers, poets, astronomers, educators, advisers, and sages" in the past. And today, a "Sufi can be a scientist, a politician, a poet, a housewife, the usherette in the cinema, and may never be known as one, since Sufism may have nothing to do with outward appearance and behavior. It is in operation all the time, all over the world, in every country, sometimes openly, sometimes not. The people offering it can be well known, as it were, beating a drum to say, 'We are here.' Or they may teach secretly" (Lessing, "Ancient" 75). In short, Sufis and their activities are only as supernatural and out of the ordinary as our lives are.

The Sufi approach to knowledge is a practical one. Sufis feel that although books have their place in one's development, true knowledge cannot be attained through books. They are more interested in immediate knowledge that comes from experience. Sufi education favors a holistic approach to learning in which the seeker is asked to see and understand with the heart and with all of one's being, not the mind alone, or the body alone. Rûmî says, "If you grasp knowledge through the heart, it is a friend. If you limit it to the 'body' alone, it is a snake" (Friedlander 58). Similarly, Sufis shun a purely academic approach to learning. The paradox, however, is that Sufis in history who have condemned book learning have been at the same time the most productive, prolific writers of theoretical books in Islamic history.²

Shah does not advocate that Sufis abandon their worldly duties. On the contrary, he argues that the treasure which a would-be disciple seeks should derive from one's work in the world. He calls for a commitment to the evolution of all of humankind through the struggles that an everyday living provides. Practical work is considered to be the means through which the seeker can do self-"work," whereby one becomes perfected. In Lessing's *Four-Gated City*, we see an instance of this self-"work" in what goes on in the basement apartment, which Lessing calls "work," also. Throughout history, too, Sufis have followed ordinary professions to earn their livelihoods through which they "worked" on themselves. Their surnames point to these professions: *saqatî* (huckster), *hallâj* (cotton carder), *nassâj* (weaver), *warrâq* (bookseller or copyist), *qawârîrî* (glassmaker), *haddâd* (blacksmith), and *bannâ'* (mason) (Schimmel 84).

Rûmî warns both the academician and the theologian: "When will you cease to worship and to love the pitcher? When will you begin to look for the water? . . . Know the difference between the color of the wine and the color of the glass" (Shah, *Sufis* 138). In other words, if confused and incomplete people make money or become professional successes by worshipping the pitcher, they still remain incomplete. Life merely has happened to them, their behavior continually changing with their mood, state of health, the weather, or other external stimuli. Lessing speaks of an old Sufi, the Lord of the Skies, who said that Sufis find strange the belief that one can progress only by improvement, for they realize that "man is just as much in need of stripping off rigid accretions to reveal the knowing essence as he is of adding anything. Those who are really the wise know that the teaching may be carried out also by exclusion of those things which make man blind and deaf" ("Ancient" 81).

In the 1971 introduction that she wrote to *The Golden Notebook* Lessing calls the present system of education in the West "indoctrination," and she believes that "[w]e have not yet

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evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination" (xvii). She feels that we still teach the current prejudices of our particular time and culture, and we mold and pattern people to fit the needs of our particular society. She adds, "I am sure that the manifold talents, creativity, inventiveness of young children—who can sing and dance and draw and tell tales and make verses and whose view of life is so very clear and direct—could go into adult life and not disappear, as tends to happen in our system of education" ("Ancient" 78). The Sufi aim, therefore, is to encourage balanced and creative beings with properly working minds, hearts, and bodies. Ultimately, as Lessing said in an interview, what she "would like to be able to say . . . is that someone who has just read a book of mine is incited to ask questions" (Rousseau 154).

An important aspect of Sufism that especially disturbs the individualist westerner is the idea that in order to follow the difficult Sufi Path, one must have a guide (*shaikh* or *murshid*), and must have absolute trust in that guide. Without a guide, one can read all the books of instruction for a thousand years, but can achieve nothing (Schimmel 103).³ Lessing says, "Every person comes to a point when the need is felt for further inner growth. Then it is wise to look for the guide, the teacher, the exemplar, that figure central to Sufism who shows others what is possible. This person, the product of a certain kind of varied and intensive education, will be master not of one trade but of a dozen, learned through pressures of necessity, created by the people by whom he has been surrounded from birth, people whose duty it is to see that he fulfills all his capacities" ("Ancient" 79).

The image of the guide or master in *tasawwuf* has been identified by Sufis with the true Beloved who cures the lover's heart (Schimmel 104).⁴ The master's task is to open the eyes of the adept (*murid*) to act as a physician of the soul. Shah promotes himself as such a guide to members of his institute in London, among whom Lessing figures as an active participant. About the role of the teacher Lessing says, "God is love

can be the highest experience one can have, or it can just be some words scrawled on a poster carried by some poor old tramp. In between these two are a thousand levels of experience. How to guide the student from one level to the next is the knowledge of a [Sufi] teacher" (Lessing, *Writer's Encounter*, audiocassette). Lessing adds in her preface to Shah's *Seekers after Truth* that the Sufi teacher is far from "the father figure (the priest) of tradition" (631). She recommends, "if you want to study Sufism, then what a Teacher is *not*, is what you first of all have to study" (631).

A primary technique that Sufi teachers use is to cause discomfort in students by challenging their patience and sense of reality. They do this in order to eliminate curiosity seekers who will quit after a brief frustration and to reveal to their adherents that different people have different and everchanging perspectives of the truth. Mulla Nasrudin (or Nasreddin Hodja) makes fun of the gatekeeper's conception of truth in the following tale: A king orders that any liar passing through the city gates be executed. After several victims, it is Nasrudin's turn. Like the others, he is asked where he is going, and what his business is. Nasrudin answers, "I am on my way to be hanged." And when the guards challenge his statement he replies, "Then hang me if I'm lying!" (Shah, *Sufis* 68).

Concepts of wholeness and indeterminacy are among the building blocks of Sufism.⁵ Students on the Path know that they are infinitesimal though still significant parts of the whole universe and that when they approach a Sufi master they can make no provisions to determine the outcome of their discipleship. There are an infinite number of Sufi stories that illustrate this lesson. In the case involving Mulla Nasrudin, "A woman brought her small son to the Mulla's school. 'Please frighten him a little,' she said, 'because he is rather beyond my control.' Nasrudin turned up his eyeballs, started to puff and pant, danced up and down and beat his fists on the table until the horrified woman fainted. Then he rushed out of the room. When he returned and the woman had recovered consciousness, she said

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to him, 'I asked you to frighten the boy, not me!' 'Madam,' said the Mulla, 'danger has no favorites. I even frightened myself, as you saw. When danger threatens, it threatens all equally'" (Shah, *Sufis* 85). As Shah explains this tale, "the Sufi teacher cannot supply his disciple with only a small quantity of Sufism. Sufism is the whole, and carries with it the implications of completeness" (85).⁶ These concepts are so much a reality in Sufism that recognizing their parallels in Lessing can help us to understand her better. Her cosmologies in the various space-fiction novels depict different manifestations of Sufi teaching environments—from the plains in *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four, and Five* to the ice in *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*.

In the Sufi experience, it is natural for a teacher to cloak his teaching intentionally under various disguises as the need arises. This is called *taqiyyah*, which in Arabic refers to the "pious dissimulation of one's true opinions" (Hodgson 1: 381). The reasons behind concealment are many. The truth must be protected from the ignorant. It is unsuitable to expose it to those who cannot yet understand it. Those who are not properly prepared to receive the truth must be protected until they can absorb it. And the bearers of truth must be protected against persecution. Scientists as well as spiritual and political leaders have been persecuted for publicly sharing their discoveries or insights at various points in time, and one need only look at history to see cases in which the practice of *taqiyyah* has been justified. One of the most popular cases in the history of *tasawwuf* is that of Mansur al-Hallâj, who neglected practicing *taqiyyah* or dissimulation, and who publicly declared himself to be one with God. His ecstatic exclamation, "I am the Absolute Truth," or "I am God," was so threatening to the 'Abbâsid caliphate that he was tortured and put to death in 922 C.E. He was stoned, his hands and feet were cut off, and he was left hanging on the gallows overnight before he was decapitated and burned. In his agony he is said to have "expressed his delight that he was suffering

so for God's sake, but acknowledged that his judges were as right to condemn him, so as to safeguard the community life, as he was right to express paradoxes so as to proclaim the love of God" (Hodgson 1: 409).

Figures in the West with similar fates include Socrates, Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., to name only a few. Persecution was never limited directly to the spiritual realm. Others, such as Leonardo da Vinci or Galileo, were not executed but were severely opposed. A paranoid da Vinci resorted to writing the results of his multifarious inventions in great detail on pages no larger than a man's hand, in mirror image so as not to be read by his contemporaries. As a result, although he observed that the pendulum might be used to make a clock keep equal time, today we credit Galileo for "discovering" the pendulum one hundred years after da Vinci. Galileo himself threatened the religious authorities of his time with his declaration that the earth revolves around the sun. The following Mulla Nasrudin anecdote illustrates the human tendency to persecute the bearers of truth: "Nasrudin entered the Land of Fools. 'O people,' he cried, 'sin and evil are hateful!' He did the same thing every day for some weeks. One day as he was about to start his lecture, he saw a group of Foolslanders standing with folded arms. 'What are you doing?' 'We have just decided what to do about all this sin and evil you have been talking about all the time.' 'So you have decided to shun it?' 'No, we have decided to shun you'" (Shah, *Subtleties* 90).

In response to persecution, coupled by the outlawing of Sufi activities in some countries at the end of the nineteenth century, some Sufi groups have operated underground and they intentionally have obscured their teachings. However, "hidden" does not mean "extinct." Shah quotes Saa'di of Shiraz, the thirteenth-century Persian Sufi poet:

If a gem falls into mud it is still valuable.
[But if] dust ascends to heaven, it remains
valueless. (*Way* 83)

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According to Shah, the truth is kept within because Sufis believe that it is not right to explain the experiences of the heart with words formulated by the intellect. The only proper form of communicating anything real is carried out from heart to heart, without words. This is why the Sufi Path is called “the Path of Love” and the aspirant a “lover” for whom explanations and apologies not only are considered unnecessary but are to be avoided lest they interfere with the exercising of true communion with the Beloved. If judged by the Sufi principle of *taqiyyah*, this book will prove to represent just what Sufis conclude one must avoid doing. Nonetheless, an analysis and clarification of Sufi tendencies in Lessing’s novels may facilitate an understanding of Sufism as a vital and natural force in Lessing’s work.

Following is a popularized translation of a *tasawwuf* poem by Rûmî. It takes advantage of the subject matter of the original poem, which addresses God the Beloved. As is typical of *tasawwuf* literature, the Beloved, or Allah, is depicted, incarnated, and cloaked in the language, form, and garb of a romantic lover. This depiction is foregrounded in the following poem at the expense of the original poem’s spiritual message.

I want to say words that flame
as I say them, but I keep quiet and don’t try
to make both worlds fit in one mouthful.

I keep secret in myself an Egypt
that doesn’t exist. [*Mesr-e ‘adam*]
Is that good or bad? I don’t know.

For years I gave away sexual love
with my eyes. Now I don’t.
I’m not in any one place. I don’t have a name
for what I give away. Whatever Shams⁷
gave, that you can have from me.

(trans. Barks, *Open Secret* 43)

In *Open Secret* translators Coleman Barks and John Moyne explain that this was a collaborative effort. It is a reworking by Barks of a more literally faithful English translation done by the late Orientalist A. J. Arberry. Furthermore, when we refer to Arberry's *Mystical Poems of Rûmî* we learn that Arberry's translation was completed when his health was failing and that his publication was prepared posthumously by Hasan Javadi and Ehsan Yarshater, who had to decipher Arberry's handwriting. Consequently the poem we have is not only twice removed but possibly three or four times removed from the original in the *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizî* by Rûmî. In the process it has lost quite a bit, not only in length but especially in depth.

More often, it is reworkings like this poem that circulate in the general populace in the West because they catch the reader's attention with their mystery and romantic lure, although they have very little to do with the original poem. Such popularizations are faithful to the flavor and spirit of the Sufi poem, but they unwittingly reduce to a secularized fancy the intensity of spiritual passion and the force of mystical insight that fueled the original poet's imagination more than seven hundred years ago. Many translators do disservice to the Sufi tradition by shifting the context of the poetry from the realm of God to the level of the mundane. The figurative lover who is really God in the Persian poem becomes a literal sexual lover in the translation that remains devoid of the smoldering spiritual core of the original.

One wants westerners to become interested in *tasawwuf* and its literature; however, the only access for people who cannot read the original languages is through translations of *tasawwuf* poetry. The dilemma of present-day Sufis in the East and West, who have direct access to *tasawwuf* literature in Arabic, Turkish, or Persian, is that they *want* to encourage westerners to tap the wealth of classical Sufi material, while they cannot help but bemoan the loss in translation of what they feel to be the authentic Sufi message. However, even popularized translations at least fulfill the role of attracting westerners to Sufism.

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Barks, in an introduction to a collection of his translations, sensitively distinguishes between Rûmî's originals and his own adaptations. He tells the story of an Ocean-Frog's visit to a pond-frog who lives in a pond three feet by four feet by two feet deep: "The pond-frog is very eager and proud to show off the dimensions of his habitat, which in the story signify the limits of mind and desire. He dives down two feet to the bottom and comes up and asks, 'Did you ever see water this deep? What is it like where you live?' [to which the Ocean-Frog's answer is,] 'One day I'll take you there, and you can swim in it.'" Barks admits, "I am very much the pond-frog before [Rûmî's poetry, which is] a sacred text that invites one to drown in it. I don't claim to have done that" (Rûmî, *Longing* ix). This is clear when the reader compares Barks's poem on page 46 to the literal translation from the Persian original, which comparison demonstrates the degree to which the authentic Sufi message is compromised in at least this instance. The Ocean in which Barks, Lessing, and I flounder is the limitless Ocean of Divine Wisdom, the flavor of which is preserved in the following literal translation by Dick Davis.⁸

I have a fire in my mouth for you [Shams]

But I have a hundred seals on my tongue.

These flames that I have in hiding

will make the two worlds into a fine morsel

[i.e., will burn the two worlds into something
edible].

If all the world should pass away

I have, without the world, the wealth of a
hundred worlds.

The caravans loaded with sugar

I have coming from the Egypt of extinction
[*Mesr-e 'adam*].

From the drunkenness of love I have become
ignorant

Whether I profit or lose from it.

The eyes of my body wept pearls for love
 Until now, when my soul weeps pearls.
I am not confined to the house [body or world], for
 like Jesus
 I have a home in the fourth heaven.⁹
Thanks be to Him whose soul gives up the body.
 If the soul goes I have the soul of the soul.
That which Shams-e Tabrîzî gave to me
 Seek that from me, for that's what I have [to offer
 you]. (trans. Davis)¹⁰

Although the work of a thirteenth-century *tasawwuf* poet is a far cry from twentieth-century British literature, the two versions of Rûmî (on pages 46 and 48–9) are apt examples with which to launch my discussion of the works of Lessing, because a comparison of the two poems illustrates the ways in which Western Sufism is both similar to and different from the practice of *tasawwuf*. Furthermore, the central image in both poems, “Egypt of extinction” (*Mesr-e ‘adam* or *Mesr-e fanâ’*), offers an ideal point of reference for the imagined spiritual spaces or the “Unreal Cities”¹¹ to which Lessing takes us in her novels, *The Four-Gated City*, *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, or the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series.

In Rûmî’s poem whether Egypt has a physical locale or not, it is an ideal, abstract model of nothingness, or *fanâ’*, analogous to Nirvana in Buddhism, which is the Sufi’s ultimate goal: to burn his ego and his individual soul until they are extinguished, at which point they attain “the soul of the soul” and become one with God. When the word *fanâ’* is combined with the word *Mesr* (Egypt) which has a geographically concrete location and a historical connotation of prosperity and fertility, the “Egypt of *fanâ’*” represents a paradox, for it is both nonexistence and ultimate reality, both extinction and verdant fertility. It is a cultivated, immaterial place within, one that has no external locale. The literal translation of the whole line is, “I have caravans of sugar [or wonderful mystical

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insights] coming from the Egypt of extinction [or the place of the soul, the place of truth, the place of wealth]." Hence, this poem is about the interiorization of space, as are many of Lessing's novels. In the last stanza, "Shams" refers to the poet's beloved friend and teacher on the Sufi Path, Shams-e Tabrîzî, who guides Rûmî to his ultimate Beloved or God. The only things of value Rûmî feels he has are the words he received from Shams, which he in turn offers to us in the form of this poem.

Unlike Rûmî's narrator, who feels whole and able to offer his love, Lessing's narrators depict characters who feel spiritually disconnected from God, from Nature, from the universe, and from other humans. In Rûmî's poem the narrator speaks of one kind of an Unreal (or most real) City, that is, the heart in love and at peace. On the other hand, Lessing's novels are more akin to those of her British and American predecessors and contemporaries. The following passage from *Shikasta* has strong affinities with such well-known representations of the urban landscape as those in Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, Orwell's *1984*, or Burgess's *Clockwork Orange*. The ashheaps in Fitzgerald's Long Island or the desolate trash-strewn streets in Orwell's London resemble Eliot's Waste Land,¹² and Lessing has not fallen short of adopting the same subject matter: the barren and troubled heart:

All the old supports going, gone, this man reaches out a hand to steady himself on a ledge of rough brick that is warm in the sun: his hand feeds him messages of solidity, but his mind messages of destruction, for this breathing substance, made of earth, will be a dance of atoms, he knows it, his intelligence tells him so: there will soon be war, he is in the middle of war, where he stands will be a waste, mounds of rubble, and this solid earthy substance will be a film of dust on ruins. (198)

Lessing's London after the Blitz or Planet 8 during The Ice or Zone Four at war represents desolate corners of the heart suf-

fering an external apocalypse and internal annihilation that are already here, suggesting that modern "Unreal Cities" are not necessarily cities of the future but are the real spaces that we inhabit today. Gayle Greene sees direct similarities between *Landlocked* and *The Waste Land*: both works "[register] the aftershocks of a world war and the reduction of Western civilization to 'a heap of broken images'" (*Poetics* 60) and both are concerned with rebirth to varying degrees. Greene also studies the image of the ruined city in *Martha Quest* and *The Four-Gated City* and she traces the increase in "Lessing's sense of cataclysmic destruction" in succeeding novels (70).

In the movie *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy exclaims, "I have a feeling we're not in Kansas any more," and we watch her with delight, knowing that she is *not* in Kansas any more. In those works of modern and post-modern literature concerned with metaphorising contemporary society, when we encounter Oz and places that are even more outlandish and hallucinatory, we have to remind ourselves that we are unfortunately and unmistakably in "Kansas," which is always a wasted, surreal landscape, unlike Rûmî's hypothetical thirteenth-century Egypt of fluorescence, greenness, and prosperity. Only in Lessing's case, the standard pessimism of twentieth-century apocalyptic literature is mitigated, given her knowledge of Sufism. Greene, too, finds "Lessing's energy and feistiness, her passionate plea for imaginative sympathy and the unexamined life anything but depressing" (*Poetics* 33). Greene insists that Lessing's novels "allow the confidence that things make a kind of sense; they offer . . . a kind of faith" (33).

Although the resolutions in Lessing's novels may not be as positive or as satisfying as the messages in *tasawwuf* poetry written by devout Muslims who practiced the Sufi Way, the influence of Sufism has made Lessing's work more optimistic and more constructive than it might have been, and definitely more promising of a future than are the works of most other canonical modern Western poets and writers.¹³ Greene sees in

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Landlocked, for instance, both the bleakness of twentieth-century novels and the new light of hope shining through: "Imagery relating to landlock, on the one hand—desert landscapes, ruined cities, nightmare houses—and to the regenerative forces of water and light, on the other" (*Poetics* 58).¹⁴

Lessing shows us desolation in the guise of "Unreal Cities" in much the same way that we distance intimate corners of our hearts by casting them in foreign and surreal images in our dreams. She writes persistently of the collapse of the old society and of an apocalypse triggered by various catastrophes: freezing temperatures, pollution, bombs, radioactive spills, or nuclear war. Assuming the role of prophet in *Shikasta*, she writes in desperation about the ignorant inhabitants of the unreal planet:¹⁵ "But there the young are, in their hordes, their gangs, their groups, their cults, their political parties, their sects, shouting slogans, infinitely divided, antagonistic to each other, always in the right, jostling for command. There they are—the future, and it is self-condemned" (174).

Here the narrator expects no "caravans of sugar" to arrive from a spiritual Egypt, and the characters are not "drunk with love"¹⁶ but with egoism and its downfall. Likewise in *The Memoirs* the slow and mysterious disintegration of society as we know it is chronicled in an effort to frighten and awaken readers. *The Memoirs* reflects the breakdown of the old order on the level of government as well as on the level of society and individuals. People who undergo this breakdown revert to a primitive state of barbarism and terror. The narrator/protagonist refers to the immediate threat of destruction as "it" that cannot be averted: "'It' is a force, a power . . . pestilence, a war, the alteration of climate, a tyranny that twists men's minds" (153). She concludes that "'It', in short, is the word for helpless ignorance, or of helpless awareness" (154). She also observes how, as a result of "it," people are forced to move out of the city in tribes, and those who remain behind resort to stealing and killing, growing their own food, and building air filters.

Against this background Lessing introduces Emily, the fourteen-year-old from the world behind the wall who must be prepared [in the Sufi Way] for her future role as leader of the new and evolved society. Emily's case is at least more hopeful than the plight of her counterparts in apocalyptic literature by other twentieth-century writers, even if her destiny does not measure up to the joy of Rûmî's narrator, whose "mouth is on fire" to speak words of love and whose "soul weeps pearls" or poems full of wonderful mystical insights. As Emily develops, we witness the growth in her inner world. Her guardian describes the nonexistent place behind the wall, a "place" which is really an abstract spiritual state: "a few rotting planks lying about on earth [were] putting out shoots of green. I pulled the planks away, exposing clean earth and insects that were vigorously at their work of re-creation" (101). Emily is accompanied by her lover Gerald, the savage street-children, the cat-like dog Hugo, and a female presence as she transcends the destruction of civilization. She cannot quite say, like Rûmî's protagonist, "If all the world should pass away, I have, without the world, the wealth of a hundred worlds." However, she *is* transformed and she *does* survive the apocalypse in *The Memoirs*, even if the reality of her inner life lacks the richness and cultivation of the lush lower Nile valley that nourishes the land of Egypt—the physical place Rûmî uses as an external manifestation of a positive spiritual state.¹⁷

Lessing's *The Four-Gated City* also opens with a war-torn city, in this case London in the 1950s and the scenes of bomb-sites; and the novel closes with the end of civilization when a mysterious accident contaminates the atmosphere with toxic fumes. There are rumors that the pollution is caused by the wrecking of a submarine carrying radioactive missiles, or by the crashing of a plane carrying lethal nuclear devices. Survivors escape to different islands around England, and many years later, a new race of special children comes into being in the aftermath of the apocalypse, who are trained as