

Doris Lessing: the Sufi connection

By Müge Galin,
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What a pleasure it is to learn that Doris Lessing is finally awarded the 2007 Nobel prize for literature! The honour, announced two weeks before her 88th birthday, comes after repeated nominations and short-listings for the prize over the last forty years. It is indeed well-deserved: for a lifetime's work of unmatched range and surprise, and especially for her pathbreaking treatment of women's inner lives and sexual identity in *The Golden Notebook* (1962).

This novel established Lessing's renown as a pioneering "feminist" writer, a designation echoed in the Swedish Academy's [description](#) [3] of her in granting the award on 11 October 2007 as "that epicist of the female experience". Yet Lessing has consistently refused to be a feminist cult figure, stating of *The Golden Notebook* that "this novel was not a trumpet for women's liberation". She went on, after all, equally to explore - and in bold and serious terms - an astonishingly wide range of themes: among them racial injustice, love, the politics of the body and intimacy, Marxism, psychoanalysis, political activism, terrorism, ageing, the "new physics", spirituality, and Sufi mysticism. In this sense the marvellous, [formative](#) [4] *The Golden Notebook* was the launch-pad of her journey, not its destination.

The mysticist current

It is a relatively neglected theme in [Doris Lessing's](#) [5] work - mysticism - that I would like to highlight amid the torrent of tributes that have followed the Nobel award.

Lessing never kept secret her commitment to the mystical branch in Islam known in the west as [Sufism](#) [6]. From the 1960s, she persistently and enthusiastically made known her mystical proclivities at every opportunity; she made use of Sufi tenets - especially those drawn from the writings of [Idries Shah](#) [7], whom she regarded as her teacher - to enhance her own perception of human beings on earth and of lives she imagined on other planets. As she once said: "I had an inclination towards mysticism (not religion) even when being political. It is not an uncommon combination." 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.

The diverse locations of Lessing's early [life](#) [8] - she was born in Iran to English parents and raised in Southern Rhodesia - made it natural for her to become a sort of spiritual ambassador between east and west. As a working resident of London for most of her adult life, she introduced her contemporary western audience to ideas and literatures from the Muslim world when these were far less familiar even than today; and she courageously challenged her

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Among her works is [Between East and West : Sufism in the Novels of Doris Lessing](#) [2] (SUNY Press, 1997)

Also in **openDemocracy** on Doris Lessing's Nobel award:

Susan Watkins, "[Doris Lessing: writing against and for](#) [2]" (12 October 2007)

readers to travel the road not taken and consider Sufi teaching as a possible alternative to western conditioning.

The Sufi aspect of Lessing's work might be thought of as didactic as much as literary. In transmitting the Sufi wisdom that she received from Idries Shah, Doris Lessing profoundly influenced the way her readers think.

A fundamental concept in Sufism is the idea of the seeker having direct access to God, with no intermediary; that is, inner transformation can only be experienced, not discussed. An equally central notion is the idea of developing a person's potential (as Lessing stated in a lecture on Sufism: "Man is woefully underused and undervalued, and he doesn't know his own capacities.")

These and other Sufi tenets informed such works as *The Four-Gated City* (1969), *The Memoirs of a Survivor* [9] (1974), and the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* [10] series (1979-83), among others; Lessing applied them to the lives of her characters, holding out the possibility of individual and global transformation and amelioration. Sufism was the resource that enabled her both to develop her vision of the earth and (in her experimentation with space fiction) to extend it to the universe. Here, by adapting traditional narrative methods (such as tales and fables) to modern fiction, Lessing discovered a creative vehicle to examine the layers of the human soul and to warn humanity that it is running out of time unless we "work" to develop ourselves.

The human touch

The core of Doris Lessing's work evokes the raw, shared human experience of protagonists who embrace life with gusto, even heroism. Her later writings address themes of time and ageing, the invisibility and detachment that come with maturity, and the satisfactions (or more commonly, disappointments) of intergenerational communication.

These preoccupations are evident in Lessing's autobiographical [11] works, *Under my Skin* (1994) and *Walking in the Shade* (1997), which chart a life's struggle that is both biological and spiritual. In *The Summer before the Dark* (1973), *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983), *Love, Again* (1995), *The Sweetest Dream* [12] (2002), and her novella-collection *The Grandmothers* [13] (2003), she explores her ageing protagonists' still-unfolding identities in their relation to each other; in particular, their ability to give and receive love - sexual, romantic, emotional, or spiritual - as they negotiate their capacity to hold themselves together amid the ravages of time, and live meaningful lives. In these as everywhere, Lessing is tangibly present in all her work, all her characters.

In this sense, Lessing fulfils a complex role which combines the discipline of the novelist with the the more ancient one of a message-bearer. This requires her to infuse her story-telling with a

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demand that both her fictional characters and her readers "surrender" to a higher will than their own, in a process that entails uncompromising independence (as in her oft-quoted injunction [14]: "Think wrongly, if you please, but in all cases think for yourself").

There is rigour and risk here as well as compassion. Lessing's understanding of humans [15] and their life-force - especially the belief that humans evolve through stress - means that she regards even war and natural calamity, even threats of nuclear catastrophe or a new ice age, as the raw material of human survival and growth. This deep commitment to human evolution in the broadest sense is as much biological as spiritual. It has enabled her to remain detached - to think for herself - the better to connect, and thus to illuminate [16] the world and inspire her readers to undertake the difficult task of engaging in the "work" to develop their own capacities. The Nobel award is a just recognition of Doris Lessing's unconfined, protean achievement.

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