

# Paradise Regained: Spiritual Intuition in Lessing's *Shikasta*

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**Abstract:** The Noble Prize winning Doris Lessing created a flurry of discussion about her relevance to spiritualism, mysticism, and Sufism after her turn from realism to speculative fiction. It is the purpose of this study to show that Lessing's proclivity for portraying imagined worlds in her later speculative space fiction reflects a paradigm shift that sheds light on the contemporary apocalyptic climate of clashing moral certainties. In her space fiction novels, the most important of which is *Shikasta*, Lessing, like a prophet, captured a zeitgeist and unveiled the wounds of our time. By analyzing the narrative techniques that Lessing uses in *Shikasta* I try to prove that *Shikasta* is central in Lessing's prolific oeuvre because it so clearly sets forth the basic terms of her debate about universal identity and the way that it can be represented through fiction. My main discussion is that Lessing's epistemology and ontology can be embodied in her belief in the Utopian future of the earth; the narrative structure of *Shikasta* shows that such a Utopia or Paradise can be regained by practicing the spiritual practices of Sufism.

**Index Terms:** Mysticism, Narrative Technique, Collective Identity, Prophet, Utopia

## 1. Introduction

Take warning from the misfortunes of others, so that  
others need not have to take warning from your own.

- Saadi, *Rose Garden*<sup>1</sup>

Doris Lessing won the noble prize in literature in 2007; the year that marked the 800th birthday of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi<sup>2</sup> (1207-1273). Being honored with such a prize makes us curious about the reasons of such a selection. What kind of features made her to win the Noble prize? It is obvious that being a woman novelist was not the reason, because there are lots of other women that won the prize before Lessing. Also, writing about racism in Africa cannot be the real reason. Even her political activities had nothing to do with her selection. What that distinguished Lessing from other great writers was the prophetic role that she played in the age of chaos and atomic bombs.

Throughout her life, Doris Lessing witnessed wars between different countries. When she was born in 1919 in Iran, her parents were in a state of psychological and physical breakdown, since her father had lost a leg during World War I and her mother saw lots of war cruelties upon soldiers since she worked as a nurse; therefore, war is always depicted in a pessimistic mood in most of Lessing's novels, *Shikasta* included.

In *Shikasta* (1979), the first volume of the '*Canopus in Argos: Archive*' series (vol. 1-5, 1979-1984), Lessing identifies the universal problem: society's division into competitive and predatory groups, and places it outside the bounds of time and space, encouraging a social critique which takes into account our inherited blindness, our 'degenerative disease' in the 'century of destruction', which must be addressed before genuine progress can be made.

By drawing on Christian, Islamic, and other religious belief systems, Lessing in *Shikasta* forsakes the rank of a mere writer and acts like a prophet. Through *Shikasta*, Lessing first condemns the world, its politics, history, wars, calamities, and blind human actions, and then, with great narrative skill, proceeds to propose a utopian substitution. Lessing's repudiation of history and the present makes her to evoke strange new worlds in *Shikasta* which have their root in the contemporary reality; indeed, much of the appeal of *Shikasta* lies in Lessing's ability to fuse the religious and the fantastic. Apocalypse and utopia meld in Lessing's work: the former paves the way for the later. *Shikasta*'s content shares with other texts in the prophetic genre an approach at once fantastical and acrimonious.

In *Shikasta*, Lessing through the space fiction genre establishes the known and familiar earth in a fantastic way in order to critique it. Therefore, such kind of serious parody that Lessing uses in her space fiction like *Shikasta* installs a preexisting history, the result of which is, in Katherine Fishburn's (1985) analysis, subversive: "In short, Lessing's science fiction opens the doors of perception to a fantastic, shape-shifting, and utterly unexpected universe. In so doing, it functions to transform the very world itself." (p.17)

In this paper, by analyzing the narrative techniques in *Shikasta*, I try to prove that Lessing's retreat from her early social realistic and political novels into a Sufi realm in *Shikasta* is a retreat with artistic and religious implications. Because Lessing tries to play the role of a prophet for mankind she presumes to speak to us with divine or inspired guidance. Therefore, the reader is expected not only to interpret, understand, foretell, or engage sympathetically when reading *Shikasta*, but also to be convinced and be moved to convert to Lessing's religion, a religion that its aim is to get ride of all the differences and to get united. By depicting a utopian future without politics and minor controversies at the end of the novel, Lessing is trying to eliminate those cantankerous human beings who engage with and against one another in history. Through *Shikasta*, Lessing yearns for unity and cannot abide the human diversity of purposes and she suggests that all conflicts and dissensions lead inevitably to creating an enmity which turns earth into a dystopia. All those who cannot respond to the spiritual solution that Lessing creates in the world of *Shikasta* are compared to those poor fools who laughed as Noah built his ark.

## 2. Narrative Technique in *Shikasta*

Doris Lessing's works display a tremendous versatility and cover a wide range of themes; she has written both realistic and space fiction novels. In her novels, Lessing represents the range of themes and concerns that stem from her experiential life and imagination. By turning to scientific fiction and space fiction in *Shikasta*, Lessing tries to push the boundaries of her early realist novels in order to give us a glimpse of the future. Lessing also tries to address the problems of her day and to introduce new ways of looking at those problems. Roberta Rubenstein (1979) about the worth of Lessing's later works says: "Her [Lessing's] efforts to break through not only the intellectual blinders to perception and knowledge, and conventional assumptions concerning the nature of reality itself, but also the limitations of verbal expression, should assure her stature as one of the major, unique and visionary writers of our time" (p.256).

Mona Knapp in *Doris Lessing* (1984) approves the shift in Lessing's style and narrative and explains that this shift in technique coincides with Lessing's studies in Sufism (p.14-17); indeed, Lessing's aim at finding solutions to the problems that mankind faces in the twentieth century made her change both her worldview and her narrative technique. This commitment to change her worldview is what Lee R. Edwards, in *Psyche as Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form* (1984), sees as the root of Lessing's shift in technique: "The realistic novel, with its commitment to logic, causality, and rationality, was gradually strained beyond containment by Lessing's developing awareness that these commitments worked against the solutions she was beginning to define. The new wine threatened the old bottles." (p.272)

The change in theme necessitates a change in the form and narrative technique; as Lessing's concerns have changed, her narrative techniques also changed. Lessing in her review of Idris Shah<sup>3</sup>, her Sufi master, "*What Looks Like an Egg and Is an Egg?*" from the New York Times Book Review (May 7, 1972) points out that: "The Sufis themselves seldom conceal that they are concerned with presentation and effectiveness, not indoctrination. Hence their writings are abundant with phrases like 'The colour of the wine is the same as the color of the bottle'" (p.149); that is, one cannot separate the message from the form in which it comes. This would seem to have a direct bearing on the narrative changes which take place in Lessing's *Shikasta*, the best manifestation of Lessing's Sufi ideology. Elizabeth Maslen in her "*Narrators and Readers in Three Novels*" (1986) suggests that Lessing's tendency to write in different genres and in different narrative techniques is the best ways to engage the readers; that Lessing "uses a variety of narrative voices to demonstrate linguistic traps, to exploit them, or to probe them. In her later works she makes ever increasing demands on her readers to work out for themselves what her narrative voices are up to." (p.4)

In *Shikasta*, Lessing uses lots of unfamiliar narrative techniques to engage the readers not only with the form, but more importantly, with the content. With Lessing's obvious concern for mankind's future, it seems appropriate that she should attempt to engage her readers in a more direct way when she comes to discussing the breakdown, and the possible future, of our society. It might have been because of this that Lessing in *Shikasta* becomes more daring in her narrative challenges to her readers. But surely the essence of Sufism must have interested Lessing because it addressed problems with which she was already concerned. So far, it is clear that the language of *Shikasta*, perhaps more than any of the Lessing's early novels, reflects the ideologies behind it; it is constructed both of the language of religion and of art. Based on Knapp and Maslen, we can conclude that Lessing's ideological and artistic attitudes shape the form and content of *Shikasta* in important ways.

Nancy Hardin (2003), while praising the fantastic realms of Lessing's later novels argues that Lessing's mystical fantastic novels, *Shikasta* included, are the locus of a saving vision that will teach us to "break out and away from contemporary conditioning" so that "we can awaken from the roles to which we have been so skillfully programmed" (pp. 324, 325). The purpose of creating such an alternative critical fictional world, Nancy Walker (1990) adds, is for getting ride of the conventional novel writing: "In order to free themselves from the 'love story', some writers, such as Doris Lessing... have used the mode of speculative fiction to propose full blown alternative worlds-whether utopian or dystopian."

Lessing's narrative technique in *Shikasta*, her use of diaries, reports, notes, self-containing titles, preface, and other extra fictional structures as Susan Lanser states in *The Narrative Act: Points of View in Prose Fiction* (1981) have a number of uses to the author, among which are "to establish rapport with the audience; ... to clarify the (real or ostensible) purpose of the text; to establish the relationship between the story and history." (p.125) Moreover, "because the extra-fictional voice carries the ontological status of history, it conventionally serves as the ultimate textual authority. All other voices that the text creates are subordinate to it." (p.128). It

is obvious that such extra-fictional structures help Lessing to become a faithful 'messenger' and disappear from all levels of the text and the text itself conveys the message; therefore, the text addresses the readers directly. As Wallace Martin in *Recent Theories of Narrative* (1986) says, the disappearance of the author from the text and the "the appearance of problematic and fragmentary narratives" in the text force the readers "to participate in the production as well as the interpretation of texts." (p.157)

At the same time as Lessing is introducing these meta-fictional elements like self-contained titles, diaries, notes, and reports into her work, she also intersperses her fiction with such a quantity of verifiable facts of mankind's history from creation to the twentieth century that we are tempted to read the novel as a documentary of the breakdown of western civilization. The most striking attribute of the prophetic text of *Shikasta* is that it leaves the reader floating out of frame; it relies heavily on unconventional techniques. Presented with a world resembling in many parts like that of our familiar earth, the reader begins to settle into a realistic frame; however, no sooner is he settled there than he is presented with a mystic dimension in which the laws of time and space go beyond those that the reader is familiar with. Throughout the novel, Lessing shifts frequently between these two incompatible universes. As soon as the reader finds a similarity between the real world and that of *Shikasta*, he is shocked by a fantastic or mystical event.

This shift between the real world and scientific and fantastic world is very effective in making the reader aware of the shortcomings of the real world in comparison to that of the ideal one. By symbolizing the prophetic relation of the ideal world to that of the fallen *Shikasta*, Lessing sets the standards against which the real world can be measured. In this movement from the real world, the material world, to that of the world of imagination, fantasy, and vision, Lessing moves from Marx to Jung, while at the same time applying her Eastern spiritual vision of Sufism; thus, the primary world of the novel is materialistic; the secondary is purely mental and spiritual. The account of Lessing's spiritual journey through history in *Shikasta* resonates with classical archetypes and allusions as well as transcendental intimations of mystical experiences. Ruth Whittaker (1988) notes Lessing's use of "the fantastic, the mystic, the archetypal and the symbolic, not merely as literary devices to alert us to the paucity of realism, but because she genuinely needs those modes of expression to convey her experience of another dimension than that of the everyday world" (p.76).

Point of view in *Shikasta* is constantly shifting from one emissary to the other. After having been immersed in Johor's reports for a time, we leave them behind in the second internal text of this novel, which comes in the form of Rachel's diaries about *Shikasta*'s problems. Lessing, for conveying her Sufi ideas creates different kinds of characters in *Shikasta* who have different spiritual understanding. In *Shikasta* we have different characters that play different roles; some play major roles in the novel and others are stock characters that just help develop the plot of the story. As Phelan (2008) puts it, we can observe three types of characters in a novel: representational characters, superficial characters, and foundational characters. In *Shikasta*, there are superficial characters that are used to develop the plot of the story and they do not change through the story, most of the unnamed characters in *Shikasta* are of this type; and there are representational or dramatic characters who are more active and hold different characteristics that the writer attributes to them; Rachel is of the second type. Still, there is a third level of characters that are the foundation and basis of the whole novel. In *Shikasta* Johor is such a main character that is an impeccable representative of a Sufi and who stands for the ideal Sufi that Lessing has in her mind.

The main characters like Johor act in a way that not only convey the main ideas that Lessing has in mind, but also invite the readers to participate in the different experiences that the main character acquires. The mere personality of such character is of no importance for a Sufi like Lessing, but the ideas that they represent are of value. Lessing's move toward space fiction shows that she is not very interested in the dramatic role of the characters and the characters for her are like prototypes that convey different key ideas. Through Johor we find out about the difficult life on earth and through his symbolic actions we find about our different dimensions as human being. Johor as a messenger and prophet in *Shikasta* tries to show the people of earth the right way through salvation and warns them of the different problems that they may have. He warns us to study the past and to plan our future based on not only logic but also faith.

To conclude, according to Hinchman and Hinchman (2001) there are two different types of narrative. The one that views narrative as a means to create "order out of chaos, i.e. out of a manifold of disordered impressions, sensations, memories, and inner states" (p.19); the other school views it as representing a "pre-narrative identity that is already there 'in itself'" (p.19). Lessing's narrative in *Shikasta* belongs to both types of narratives; because Lessing believes that mankind has a utopian past and a true identity that is there but which is forgotten and by applying the spiritual belief system of Sufism, Lessing, in a prophetic act, tries to regain such a lost paradise and to create order out of chaos. Therefore, a permanent revision of the religious texts and a permanent insight into the past of the planet earth is needed for recreating and rewriting the present in terms of one's own ideology. Through *Shikasta*, Lessing, by delving into the realms of imagination and knowledge, tries to put order in the chaotic condition of both her thoughts and that of the actual earth which she lives on; doing this, she comes out with both an external artistic product called *Shikasta* and an internal spiritual peace in the way of a true Sufi.

### 3. Sufism as Religion and Art

The relationship between Sufism and literary style, both in the history of all religions and in the comparative literature around the world, is a new artistic trend. Every kind of study about Sufism and Literature make us to think about the way they are related. The

key to such a question is in Sufism's tendency toward spiritualism, mysticism and symbol which makes Sufism related to the fantastic world of fiction.

Lessing's effort to create a spiritual world in *Shikasta* has its precedent in prophet-writers like Milton, Blake, and W.B. Yeats. Yeats was interested in spiritualism throughout his life. He tried to create a religion of his own and he found it in 1880s and 1890s in an organization that he called Order of the Golden Dawn. As Yeats says, spiritualism for him was not just a hobby and it was his way of life: "the mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write" (Ellmann, 1948, p.94). Like Lessing, Yeats believed in the idea of progress and he believed that by purification and cultivation of the will and aided by secret knowledge, one can ascend by gradual steps to oneness with the divine. As can be observed Yeats' and Lessing's works share basic concepts with Sufism.

Everybody who reads Lessing's *Shikasta* finds the same elements that one can find in the Sufi stories and the same kind of "intuition", in Hardin's (2003) word, can be found both in Lessing and other Sufi stories (p.319). Beside different structural layers, a Sufi story, as it may move through different times and different places, acquires deeper layers of meaning. It is because of this multidimensional characteristic of the Sufi stories that as we go on reading we find out it more complicated and with a lot of layers to be discovered. Lessing says that such kinds of Sufi stories are like "Chinese boxes" (A. Shah, 2009, p.11); a story opens into another one and the reader gets lost in the complex net of different stories. The purpose of such kind of stories, as Lessing says, is not only entertainment; they also serve for making the reader aware of an important meaning.

Lessing's *Shikasta* is a sacred Sufi work that invites us to participate in a new way of *being* in the world that actualizes freedom and justice. It shows us what is really possible, what we can actually achieve with perseverance and effort; and what is possible, in turn, can become an object of passionate utopian hope. But *Shikasta*'s proclamation will remain forever mute if we fail to appropriate it *imaginatively*. Thus in Johor's anguished cry, we hear Lessing's claim that the real cause of human impoverishment is not so much sin, in the traditional sense, as atrophied imagination, a figurative hardness of hearing that deafens civilization after civilization to the very words that can breathe life into spiritual deserts:

They [men] did not dream of Utopias in the future: their imaginations were not tuned to the future at all, unlike those of previous revolutionaries or religionists: it was not that "next year, or in the next decade, or next century, we create paradise on earth..." only, "This is what you are like." When this hypocritical, lying, miserably stupid system was done away with, then everyone would be able to see... (*Shikasta*, pp.158, 159)

The Sufi stories like *Shikasta* try to make a change in the ontology of the readers and help them to observe the multidimensional aspects of life. Sufi stories have no central point and they invite their own readers to go beyond the logical ways of solving a problem. Ornstein (2006) suggests that the Sufi stories show the readers ways not yet taken; some of them include "patterns" (p.18) that the reader can understand difficult problems if he follows such patterns; and some are like impulses that make the conventional mind familiar with strange and bizarre worlds. In *Shikasta* we can observe easily the way that Lessing violates the conventions of the common stories by creating alien and strange worlds and this creation makes the conventional reader change the way of reading and become more active through the process of reading.

#### **4. Individualistic Identity vs. Collective Identity**

Lessing's special narrative in *Shikasta* helps us understand and review the past historical events on earth and to analyze them in the light of new ideas that Lessing tries to teach us. Understanding what we are now unavoidably involves the recollection of the past; thus, the temporal dimension of existence is significant in terms of understanding the universal identity that we have now at the present moment. The temporal dimension of human existence is fully conveyed in *Shikasta* by Lessing's narration of the history of mankind from the creation to its hopeful future. The search for a viable universal identity in *Shikasta*, inevitably, involves narrating the past and relating it to the present conditions to find out the shortcomings and the solution.

In *Shikasta* the universal identity emerges from the narrative and the reader's spiritual and psychic journey into the history of mankind can be considered as various versions of experiencing this identity. It is exactly this mode of individual self exploration from the part of every reader that makes them aware of a universal whole and they, guided by the logic of the text and the different turns of the narrative, move toward the universal identity that the writer prepares them to move toward. Thus, Lessing believes that individual's salvation depends on that of the society one lives in. The free will might give us the impression that we can construct ourselves however we wish, but we have to bear in mind that "the story of one's individual life depends on the larger stories of the community to which one belongs" (Hinchman&Hinchman, 2001, p.24).

David Carr (2001), in "Narrative and the real world: An argument for continuity", attempts to prove that the above utterance about the relation of individual and community is accurate. He uses Husserl's theory which claims that we cannot view anything as happening in the present without intertwining it with the past and the future (p.11). According to this theory, the manner in which we view our life is by "explicitly consult[ing] past experiences, envisag[ing] the future, and view[ing] the present as a passage between the two" (p.12). This shows that our actions have a "means-end structure" which is similar to that of the "beginning-middle-end" structure of narrative. In *Shikasta*, Lessing tries to create a collective identity by first giving a short history of the utopian past of mankind, and

then describing our present situation on earth and prophesying a utopian future that can be created by feeling a sense of responsibility toward each other and by creating a collective identity.

Since identity is said to be constructed through narrative, and that in different narratives we could encounter different types of identities, Lessing creates a special narrative in order to establish a universal and collective identity. Lessing chooses some of the most important real events in the mankind's history, like the life in heaven, the Fall, Noah's flood, the first and second World Wars, the Cold War and lots of other important events in the history of the earth, to give her narration a coherence and to give a general picture of the world from the beginning to the present moment; Lessing does so because one of the ways to create order and coherence in life writing is by analyzing "causal connections", i.e., the significant experiences that mark the growth of one's individual or that of a community. Jennifer L. Pals (2006) uses this theory in order to analyze the manner in which people construct narratives about their past experiences and their relations to the society they live in by drawing upon the most important events or circumstances in their lives and that of the world around them, and interpreting the manner in which these have shaped them into individuals they are at the moment of recounting these experiences: "One of the advantages of thinking of the formation of causal connections as an interpretative strategy for creating coherence within the life story is that it shifts our conceptualization of coherence toward the idea that it is something we continually try to do as we construct our life stories – an interpretative act of self-making and away from the idea that coherence is a static characteristic that the life story as a whole does or does not possess" (ibid, p.177).

A reader, for analyzing the relationship between the important events that Lessing narrates in *Shikasta*, first should find such key events and then interpret them in order to find out the general pattern and the general goal that they pursue. To elaborate more on this point, then, the analysis of 'causal connections' is divided into three phases: first, we have to find the causal connections in the narrative of *Shikasta* "in which the narrator spontaneously and explicitly interprets an aspect of the past experience, broadly defined (e.g. relationships, life stages etc.) as having enduring causal meaning in relation to an aspect of the self or identity" (ibid, p.179). The second phase involves looking into the nature of the experiences, then evaluating the importance of those experiences in developing a specific identity of the individual or the society. The third phase involves "identifying patterns of self making across multiple causal connections within a person's life story" (Pals, 2000, p.180) and those of the society.

The individual's relationship with the collective is always Lessing's concern in her novels, though she presents the subject as always struggling to find a balance between their own needs and those of the collective. Many critics emphasize the dialogic logic of Lessing's work, her preoccupation with the relation of self and others, individual and collective, inner and outer worlds. Betsy Draine (1983) explains that in the dialectic of the individual and the collective, "Lessing is fascinated with the dynamics of this relation and with the evolution of human consciousness through this dynamic" (p.13).

In *After the 'Thirties: the Novel in Britain and its Future*, Jack Lindsay (1956) mentions that "human unity" becomes possible only when "man holds the universe in his hands," and it is therefore necessary to create "a new consciousness" to "see each separate aspect in relation to the whole—and the whole is the whole of human life in its struggle, its unity with the whole of nature" (82-84). But the question is how to arrive at a dialogic relation between self and collective through the dialectical transformation of both sides. Lessing invents a new kind of 'collectivist protagonist' that reflects a more relational subjectivity, as opposed to a purely autonomous or independent individuality. The allegory at the end is a way for the individual to realize the unconscious collective through the mythic relationship. Lessing's adoption of Sufism is one of the most important elements in her allegories in order to search for spiritual breakthrough, otherwise difficult to obtain in a world largely conceived in materialist terms. The evidence of Sufism in many of Lessing's works, *The Four-Gated City*, *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, and *Shikasta*, all suggest Lessing's prophetic ambition to surpass the limitations of an exclusively individualistic world toward a collective consciousness and unity; as Lessing proposes that the responsibility of the writer is to fill the gap "between the public and the private conscience" (*SPV*, 1956, p.11).

### 5. Lessing's Alchemy: Dialogue among Civilizations

As was discussed in the previous section, Lessing's stress on the prophetic capacity of her fiction reveals its timely engagement with real problems in her society and her deployment of a nonrealistic narrative for such a kind of projection shows her desire for a true and possible globalization. Therefore, she can be considered not only as a successful experimental novelist but as a prophet of globalization searching for a unified identity. Also, Lessing's use of the Eastern Sufi belief system in a Western literary style makes her like an eastern messenger in the west that tries to establish a dialogue among different civilizations.

Galín (1997) believes that when we try to evaluate Lessing as the "eastern messenger in the west" we should pay attention to the "western literary conventions" through which Lessing tries to convey her Sufi ideas to her western readers. For such a purpose Lessing uses the science fiction, psychology, and spiritualism in *Shikasta*. Lessing, more than any writer or philosopher, finds the way to unify the east and the west in Sufism.

As was mentioned above, Sufism makes a connection between religion and literature, and between the spiritual and the material. Thus, because of the appealing aesthetic nature that Sufism has among other religions, it is regarded as a bridge between the east and the west. More importantly, Sufism is a combination of science and poetry, religion and philosophy, art and divinity, and materialism and

spirituality. Sufism can be regarded as being not only religious, but also artistic and literary. For this reason, the Sufi always is interested in combining literary style of the west with the spiritual stories of the east in a creative way.

Lessing's belief in a possible unity between east and west is revolutionary in its own; she speaks in a time when anti eastern ideas dominate west and "clash of civilizations" and "death of God" are proposed as a solution to mankind's problems. Against such hostile ideas, Lessing's Sufism links all nations and individuals through creating a spiritual system of thought. Her cosmic totality is like the German Romantics whose dream was creating an "organic national community". They stressed the "oneness of all things" and they believed in an ontological unity of man's nature which was spoilt by the modern civilization. (Hitler, 1975, P.51)

Lessing suggests that globalization without applying any divine outlook is an engine of disintegration. Without finding a unifying spiritual identity an eternal peace is impossible and turning the world into a globalized utopia is just a dream. Samuel Huntington (1996) recommends the westerners to forget their "universalists pretentions" and their effort toward globalization. Such kind of hopelessness is because of secularization; Lessing fully understands the conditions and the different views and still she thinks there is a way out of the chaos, a spiritual one.

In *Shikasta*, Lessing shapes the eastern ideas of Sufism a new form by applying them to western issues. The result is a two directional and recursive model that unites the east and the west and all human being. Instead of treating the eastern subject of Sufism and the western problems monolithically, Lessing posits a mutual relationship in which both sides are changed by their interaction. Lessing's goal is to account for the dynamic and open-ended nature of cultural interaction as opposed to essentially static formulation of those in the west or east. Although applying the spiritual ideas of Sufism to the rigid and materialistic world of the west seems impossible, Lessing believes that the beliefs and cultures are like meandering streams that can confluence and spread everywhere.

The geopolitical identity of *Shikasta* epitomizes the mutual relationship of the west and the east. In its dynamism, the utopian world that Lessing tries to create at the end of the novel is a process of re-inscription and re-interpretation of the concepts shared among all mankind whose notion of identity is homogeneous and collective. This kind of globalization, for Lessing, contains a positive dimension which can potentially oppose the twin dangers of mere ideology or utopia. The collective identity that is fictionalized in *Shikasta* is a fluid and trans-national identity which is a relation among the network of differences. By rejecting the absolutes of the different political groups and different extreme separatist opinions, Lessing finds a way for universalism in *Shikasta* which, she believes, is applicable. Although Lessing is well aware of the history of imperialism, capitalism and other -isms and the extent to which they tend to create an imbalance between human beings for the sake of power, her critique of mankind's history up to the twentieth century in *Shikasta* comes not from her denial of political groups, but from an attempt to re-conceptualize politics in a more humanized way and away of negative ideologies. Lessing believes that the western tradition that begins with the pre-Socratic philosophers and continues into existentialism and postmodernism, failed to create a peaceful and harmonized utopian life on earth and she suggest an alternative by using her Eastern Sufi ideas. To summarize, then, Lessing's fictional spaces in *Shikasta* broaden the horizons of the home culture on earth and creates a hope for having a utopian future.

## 6. Apocalypse: The Third World War

Lessing's apocalyptic narrative in *Shikasta* represents the failure of humankind's efforts to find a way out of the chaos and by mentioning the Cold War and its aftermath Lessing tries to show the surging violence and the open-ended insecurity that threatened earth during the twentieth century; this crisis is defined by Eric Hobsbawn (2000) as a secular crisis "whose nature was unclear, and without an obvious mechanism for either ending it or keeping it under control" (*Age of Extremes*, p.562). The fear of a nuclear holocaust after the Second World War, the long dominant and paralyzing fear that human civilization would bring about its own annihilation come true in the fictional narrative of *Shikasta* and a Third World War destroys earth symbolically. The fictional third World War suggests that human beings cannot find a way out of the trouble themselves and a prophetic, superhuman, should show the way. Thus, if we can recognize the history of the fictional *Shikasta* with our own world, we come to find the similarity between the 'Century of Destruction' in *Shikasta* with twentieth century on earth. If we fail to do so, as Johor says, we will become extinguished like the inhabitants of *Shikasta* by a third World War:

Here we must emphasize that most of the inhabitants of *Shikasta* were not aware that they were living through what would be seen as a hundred-years' war, the century that would bring their planet to almost total destruction. (*Shikasta*, p.103)

Lessing's emphasis in *Shikasta* on the destructive function of wars in human history shows her belief in the fact that wars are the most important factor that prevents mankind in creating a universal peace. Her symbolic Third World War in *Shikasta* and the utopian world that is created after this war shows Lessing's hope is a better future based on spiritual progress and dialogue among civilizations. Despite the fact that Doris Lessing was born after the First World War, and experienced the Second World War only indirectly, she considers war as one of the worst things that a human being can go through. She makes a strong claim about the influence that the war had upon her: "We are all of us made by war, twisted and warped by war, but we seem to forget it" (*Under my skin*, p.10). Therefore it is not surprisingly many of her novels are about war, conflict, and the end of the world scenarios. She faces us with the destructiveness that is present within ourselves, the "horrible things" that her father was faced with after the war are present

in all of us “but the war had made them worse, that was all” (ibid, p.7). Lessing’s space fictions, specially *Shikasta*, serve as a sort of warning about the destruction that we will face if we do not stop and think that war is the worst thing that can ever happen: “If we make war impossible the world will be full of whole and healthy and sane and marvelous people who... In my mind I lived in utopias, part from literature and part the obverse of what I actually lived in” (ibid, p.156).

Lessing’s view of history, like that of Blake and Yeats, is apocalyptic in the sense that all of them believe that when the utopian future comes it is final and everlasting. Such a belief is based on the religious books like Bible and Koran which is best represented in Lessing’s Sufi ideology. Lessing in *Shikasta* depicts this fact in a future when the evil would be expunged and history would end in a utopia; an atomic third World War extinguishes the ninety-nine percent of the population of the earth and just a *few select* are survived and they, by the help of the envoys of *Canopus*, establish the current of SOWF, the substance-of-*we*-feeling. This sense of apocalypse and final utopian future is also expressed by Yeats in his *The Land of Heart’s Desire* (1894); Yeats believes that God “at the end/ Shall pull apart the pale ribs of the moon/ And quench the stars in the ancestral night;” (p.10) he also adds that when the “last autumn” is over men’s hearts and the nature “grow gentle as time fades into eternity.”

Lessing observes the societies in collapse and finds out that the unleashed consequences of modernization make the earth into a dystopia forever and the civilization soon will be consumed by what Robert Kaplan (2000) calls “the coming anarchy” and earth in the near future will be nothing but a “planet of slums” in Mike Davis’ (2004) words. This end of the world narratives by different thinkers are described in Lessing’s prophetic novel. The chaotic and dystopian landscape imagined for the post Cold War era by Kaplan, Davis, Huntington and others is imagined decades in advance by Lessing in her *Shikasta*.

The emphasize of *Shikasta*’s narrative on the ongoing and runaway crisis, and the catastrophes of the end of the world events shape the pessimistic narrative of the future of the earth if no solution is suggested out of the dystopia. Lessing looks beyond the pressing nuclear threats in order to attend to a wider field of threats which have their roots in the fundamental operations of society; therefore, she suggests that any effort to change the present situation should be fundamental and she proposes a third World War. After the war *the few select* that are survived are those humble people who practice Lessing’s Sufi principles and adhere to her message. In all religions such a reward is honored to the selected ones after the apocalypse:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. (*Matthew*, 5:3–11)

### 7. Second Coming: Paradise Regained

Lessing’s solution to end the dystopian life on earth in *Shikasta* is creating a golden age to follow after the symbolic destruction of a world grown tawdry and horrible. Total change requires a total solution and the symbolic total destruction of earth is proposed through some mysterious cosmic process and transforms the dystopian earth into a New Jerusalem, a world of unity and peace. Lessing, as the utopian prophet of the contemplative mode, sees the decay of the old world and the coming of a new as a foreordained certainty. Her utopia is a world in which competing passions and beliefs are eliminated in order that harmony and equilibrium prevail.

One of the characteristics of Lessing’s later novels when she was practicing Sufism in her fiction is her faith and hope in human salvation. Although such kind of faith and hope can be attributed to Sufism, but Galin (1997) believes that Lessing does not write merely Sufi novels and she is not a writer of one convention. Lessing is not a Britain writer, Rhodesian, Iranian, Christian, or Muslim, nor is she a pessimist western writer or a pure eastern spiritual novelist; Lessing is like an inquisitor; a prophet who by questioning the prevalent condition tries to introduce new way of communication between all human beings. Lessing’s jovial way of life also proves her true understanding of life as she says: “I don’t understand people being bored. I find life so enormously exciting all the time. I enjoy everything enormously.” (Ingersoll, 1994, p.12)

One of the main features of Lessing’s dealings with religion in the context of the broader discussion of ideology is her notion of apocalyptic. In the scene when the Third World War is occurring Lessing gives the reader a sense of the end of the world by describing an atomic war. The apocalyptic feeling of the reader has two diverse functions that include the two extremes of complete obliteration and the inauguration of a new age, of the end of the history and its beginning *anew* on an entirely different plane. Symbolically, the atomic bomb kills ninety-nine percent of the people and a new utopian era begins. The utopian world begins after the atomic bombardment and a new community that is formed around the apocalyptic vision is shaped. In *Shikasta*, Lessing portrays this atomic holocaust as a spaceship air raid. Johor, the emissary from Canopus, reports:

We went back to the cities. [...] In each were a few people who could hear us, and these we told to leave at once with any who would listen to them. [...] Having made sure of the safety of those who could be saved, we signaled in the space-fleet, and the cities were blasted into oblivion. (*Shikasta*, pp.107, 108)

In *Shikasta*, Lessing shows how *Rohanda* collapses from a lack of SOWF and how mankind, in the midst of cultural rot, finds itself faced with two alternatives: the evil *Shammat* or radical change. By suggesting a second stage of mysticism and creating a fantastic

world again, Lessing finds a cure for the upheavals of the twentieth century. The intention of creating the final ideal world is to fuse the two worlds of *Rohanda* and *Shikasta* into one new and different universe; a new everlasting ideal world that uses both the idealism of *Rohanda* and the experience of *Shikasta* amidst chaos. This is experienced as a considering the text as a whole. By playing the role of a spiritual seer, Lessing is successful in turning the two different worlds into a perfect and harmonious one.

## 8. Conclusion

The Night passed and our talk did not end:  
What sin was the night's?  
It was our speech which was too long.

-Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Table-Talk*

In *Shikasta*, Lessing uses a combination of scientific, historical, and literary elements with Sufism to create a discourse which urges a competent reader to investigate and understand the history of the earth as a construct created by transgressing the borders of reality and by entering the realms of imagination or the worlds we finally build in our interpretation of our inner self and the outer space. For doing so, Lessing applies a deep spiritual insight into the collective consciousness and the past of humanity in order to either obliterate or cope with the reality of world around herself and to trigger a heartrending view toward the world. The way Lessing puts together the pieces of the story depends on her previous experiences with the Sufi ideology and also this representation is faithful to the real history of the world. Thus, the reader can recreate the true history of the world out of the tumultuous world of Lessing's novel beset by spiritual representation of such a world and haunted by the Sufi doctrines. The spiritual representation of the history of the world breathes novelty and flavor to the mere linear events, creating an original account of the history of the world.

Lessing, as a prophet and a seer, gives the inevitable need for a total change a boost through her wholesale condemnations of the present state of the earth. Lessing's vision of a utopian future is a peculiar mix of utopianism, dystopianism, and spiritualism. Expressing, as it does, many utopian hopes and desires, *Shikasta* contains a muted critique of the current social and political order. Yet in accepting the possibility of change through spiritual unity and collective human action, Lessing softens her critique and situates her utopia in human reach. This is to say that the kind of utopia, dystopia, and spiritual dialectics that is found in Lessing's *Shikasta* is peculiar to her novel alone because of ending with a different ending.

## Notes

1. Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273) was one the foremost and celebrated poets and Sufi figures in the Muslim world whose Sufi thoughts and practices gave rise to the famous 'whirling dervishes'.
2. The *Gulistan* (Rose Garden) and *Bustan* (Orchard) of Saadi of Shiraz (1184-1291) are two classics of Sufism and Persian literature which provide the moral and ethical basis of the reading of millions, in Iran, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.
3. Idris Shah (1924-1996) was a modern Sufi teacher in the west. Doris Lessing discovered his school of Sufism in the 1960's and Shah's ideas were a source of inspiration for Lessing in her space fiction.

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