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Unveiling the Mystique of Sufism: A Study of Doris Lessing's Short Stories

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Abstract:

The Sufi aspect of spiritualism is evident in many of Doris Lessing's short stories. Sufism, a mystical philosophy that emphasises inner exploration and self-realisation, seeks to develop an understanding of the self to find meaning and purpose. The Sufi influence in Lessing's works emerges through the exploration of each character's lifelong search for identity and purpose. The five short stories, "Through the Tunnel", "A Sunrise on the Veld", "An Unposted Love Letter", "Our Friend Judith", and "Two Potters", exhibit character growth through internal transformation, and connection to the universe is presented as a pathway to spirituality. Characters in Lessing's stories reflect Sufi teachings on the subjective nature of experience by highlighting the need to transcend societal limitations and attain inner peace. Exploring Lessing's stories through a Sufi lens, this paper examines universal themes of human existence, the search for meaning, and the interconnectedness of individual and collective spirituality.

Keywords: spirituality, Sufism, self-discovery, consciousness, identity.

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Introduction

The quest for spirituality, or the pursuit of self-identity as a fundamental aspect of personal growth, has been a recurring and significant theme in literature across ages, from the great epic *Mahabharata* to the present-day narratives. In the context of the *Mahabharata*, Kurukshetra is the battlefield where man faces the challenge of self-attestation. Human life is a replay, in which what happened in Kurukshetra is repeated. Eastern and Western literatures alike celebrate the theme of spiritual quest. In both Eastern and Western traditions, the theme of spirituality is prominent, as seen in works such as *Ramayana*, *Chilappathikaram, Paradise Lost*, *Odyssey*, and *Tom Jones*. Literature is primarily concerned with the individual's struggle for survival and delves into the complexities of the inner self. Postmodern spiritual thought deconstructs the rationalistic and materialistic notion of the self, replacing it with an expressive, humanistic identity. It views reality as plural, subjective and shaped by the individual's worldview. Spirituality, therefore, is the desire for transcendence and the attainment of an enlightened consciousness. Tillich, Paul, a German-born American theologian and philosopher, remarks in *Systematic Theology*: "The 'search for identity' which is a genuine problem of the present generation is actually the search for the Spiritual Presence... The self which has found its identity is the self of the one who is 'accepted' as a unity in spite of his disunity" (23). Tillich defines faith as an ultimate concern, an act of the total personality that represents the most centred expression of the human mind and participates in the dynamics of personal life. Spirituality is one of the many possible ways to live and promote subjective life. It attracts individuals rooted in the dominant culture who seek activities that reflect their way of life, while simultaneously leading them toward deeper spiritual dimensions that stress growth, personal freedom, self-determination, and self-actualisation. Anthony Burgess' The *Clockwork Orange* (1962), Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) are notable postmodern novels that depict similar

themes. These novels show how an individual attains spirituality in the fragmented postmodern age as they attribute different levels of meaning to it. It is evident that, of all the postwar English writers, Doris Lessing is the foremost creative descendant of that great literary tradition of intense social concerns and moral realism, a tradition that scrutinises marriage and sexual life, individual psychology and the role of ideology in contemporary society.

Doris Lessing, a Persian-born English novelist, short story writer, essayist, dramatist, poet, nonfiction writer, journalist, and travel writer, explored most of the important ideas and issues of the twentieth century— especially the psychic journey of women through the personal histories of individuals caught up in an explosion of terrible and marvellous possibilities. In her short stories, Lessing frequently depicts individuals' psychic disintegration and states of madness alongside the specific social contexts in which these phenomena arise. Lessing boldly proposes that such disruptions may be integral to the characters' evolutionary paths toward mental and spiritual development. At any given point, individuals possess an inherent tendency to realise their capacities to their fullest extent possible, as manifested in that particular moment and situation while engaging with the world under the prevailing circumstances; they embrace themselves and their life situations. The major unifying concern in Lessing's works is the need for the individual to confront basic beliefs and assumptions about life to overcome preconditioned thinking and achieve psychic and emotional wholeness. She portrays the individual as someone who believes that personal effort moves the world and that no one should regard themselves as small and unimportant.

Mystical Influences: Sufism and Lessing

Lessing's faith lies in the infinite resources of the human mind that need not be imprisoned always in dogmas and programmed roles, and she advised people, "to recognise the invisible authorities within us that prevent us from making real choices, people must learn

to trust their own experiences, and that is all that matters. We have become helpless in the face of authorities because we distrust ourselves" (Webb 15). Lessing certainly moved towards a metaphysical dimension in her explorations, where she thinks that "each individual of this species (humankind) is locked up inside his own skull, his own personal experience" (*Briefing for a Descent into Hell* 46). These reflect Lessing's interest, since in the 1960s, in Idries Shah, an author and teacher in the Sufi tradition, whose writings on Sufi mysticism stress the evolution of consciousness and the belief that individual liberation can occur only when people understand the connection between their own fate and the fate of society. Lessing was an admirer of Sufism, which underscores the infinite potential of the human mind. It is a mystic philosophy in which the spiritual quest is to achieve universal harmony with the spirit of Absolute Being, and to do this, unlike most other mystic philosophies, Sufism maintains an involvement with the world, because the Sufis see themselves, as Lessing has explained, as the substance of that current which can develop man into a higher stage of evolution. Lessing found in Sufi philosophy and its primary vehicle, the Sufi teaching story, such a tendency towards intellectual heterogeneity that she considered the fundamental life-giving principle. In the Preface to Shah's *Seekers after Truth,* Lessing writes: "It was they who developed, Sufis claim, the teaching story, an artefact created specifically for influencing the deepest and most hidden part of a human being—a part not accessible to any other approach" (13). Following the principles of Sufism, Lessing demonstrates a strong commitment to teaching and illustrating the evolution of consciousness. The emphasis that Sufism placed on growth further reinforces Lessing's belief in the inherent potential of human beings to attain meaningful personal development. In *The Four-Gated City,* Lessing has quoted from Idries Shah's Sufi concept of evolution:

> Sufis believe that, expressed in one way, humanity is evolving towards a certain destiny. We are all taking part in that evolution. Organs come into being as a result of

> a need for specific organs. The human being' organism is producing a new complex of organs in response to such a need. In this age of the transcending of time and space, the complex of organs is concerned with the transcending of time and space. What ordinary people regard as sporadic and occasional bursts of telepathic and prophetic power are seen by the Sufi as nothing less than the first stirrings of these same organs. (492)

The Sufis, therefore, argue that humanity is evolving toward a new mode of existence and that modern individuals have been granted the opportunity to participate consciously in this process. Accordingly, the future of humankind depends on recognising the possibility and actively engaging in its organic development. Lessing's adherence to this central tenet of Sufism helps to illuminate her perspective on human beings and their role in the evolution of the human race, revealing a belief in their capacity for conscious growth and transformation.. Lessing's short stories reflect Sufi principles, as her characters embody a spiritual search for inner peace and the foundations of happiness. One of the many principles of Sufism states that the truth is that there is not only one right path, but all paths can be made to be the right path; every individual has a different path and the true path is known by Source and is guided by Source. This law is based on a belief in subjective reality, which is a belief system in which there is only one consciousness; everything and everyone in one's reality is a projection of one's thoughts. The principles of Sufism are incorporated in the following stories of Lessing, as they demonstrate that a true mission in life or a true calling in life is nothing but the awareness of the singular consciousness.

The present paper examines the theme of spirituality in Lessing's selected short stories through Sufism, assessing its influence on both the author and her characters. It argues that Lessing was attracted to the intellectual heterogeneity of Sufi philosophy, which she considers the fundamental life-giving principle. The short stories "Through the Tunnel" and "Two Potters" from the collection *To Room Nineteen: Collected Stories Volume One,* "A Sunrise

on the Veld," from *This was the Old Chief's Country: Collected African Stories Volume One,* and "An Unposted Love Letter" and "Our Friend Judith" from *Temptation of Jack Orkney: Collected Stories Volume Two* are selected for analysis.

Review of Literature

Scholarly discussions of Doris Lessing's fiction often emphasise her engagement with spiritual traditions, among which Sufism occupies a prominent place. Critics note that, although Lessing does not always present Sufism directly, its influence is evident in her thematic concerns and narrative techniques. Critical studies on Lessing's works, such as *The Golden Notebook,* highlight her exploration of fragmentation, both at the level of narrative structure and character psychology. A broader perspective shows that works like *The Psychology of Sufism* by Javed Nurbakhsh and *The Sufis* by Idries Shah provide a useful framework for understanding Sufism as a means of developing self-awareness and perception. Recent scholarship includes William Rory Dickson's *Sufism in the Modern World* and Nile Green's *Sufism: A Global History*, both of which offer significant critical frameworks for situating Sufism in contemporary contexts. N.S.Hardin's *Doris Lessing and The Sufi Way* and *The Sufi Teaching Story and Doris Lessing* explore the influence of Sufism on Lessing's works. The existing scholarship suggests that Sufism plays an important role in Lessing's narrative fiction.

The centrality of Sufist thought in Lessing's narrative world.

Spirituality is taken as the life force or energy that sustains life in this world, and what lies at the heart of subjective life, that is the core of what it is to be truly alive. The key words of Sufism are experience and practice. Rather than attaching importance to the beliefs, doctrines, and ethical injunctions of theistic traditions, importance is attached to experiencing the heart of life, and practices are to be taken to facilitate the inner quest. The story "Through the Tunnel" clearly shows us how an individual, a young boy, attains spirituality through the

proper understanding of his autonomous self. Though Jerry is a boy who likes to push himself to the limits and likes the challenges, Jerry is spoiled because his mother gives him what he wants, and he likes to be the centre of attention. The story is all about a young English boy who goes with his mother to a foreign country for a holiday:

> He ran straight into the water and began swimming. He was a good swimmer. He went out fast over the gleaming sand, over a middle region where rocks lay like discoloured monsters under the surface and then he was in the real sea - a warm sea where irregular cold currents from the deep water shocked his limbs" (41).

When Jerry swims back to the shore, as he feels lonely, he sees a group of boys who are preparing for swimming.

> They came running, naked, down to the rocks. The English boy swam towards them, but kept his distance at a stone's throw. They were of that coast: all of them were burned smooth dark brown and speaking a language he did not understand. To be with them, of them, was a craving that filled his whole body. He swam a little closer; they turned and watched him with narrowed, alert dark eyes. Then one smiled and waved. It was enough. In a minute, he had swum in and was on the rocks beside them, smiling with a desperate, nervous supplication. They shouted cheerful greetings at him; and …he was happy. He was with them (41-42).

Jerry tries to impress the foreign boys with an attempt to swim through a tunnel, and for that, he begs his mother to buy goggles. The following day Jerry discovers a black tunnel which is very dark and gloomy, and he begins to swim through it. As Jerry swims through it, he becomes afraid and decides to go back. As he comes up for air, he sees the other boys snickering at him, and Jerry decides he must do this to impress the boys and have them like him:

> Through his hot shame, feeling the pleading grin on his face like a scar that he could never remove, he looked at the group of big brown boys on the rock and shouted…
>
> He counted one, two, three…
>
> At fifty, he was terrified.… At a hundred, he stared around him at the empty hillside.… He counted faster, faster, to hurry them up, to bring them to the surface quickly, to drown them quickly…
>
> He climbed back to the diving rock and sat down, feeling the hot roughness of it under his thighs. The boys were gathering up their bits of clothing and running off along the shore to another promontory. They were leaving to get away from him. He cried openly, fists in his eyes. There was no one to see him, and he cried himself out. (43)

At first, Jerry is presented as a boy who always feels isolated despite the number of people around him. As the boys begin to dive, Jerry decides to join in, and each time, when he dives in, he feels proud of himself. However, even after the boys leave in the afternoon, Jerry stays down there and works on his breathing and concentrating on going through the tunnel. He practices without any support from anyone; it is a course of action he determines for himself. During the last day of vacation, he says to himself that it is the last day to do this. To prepare himself, he sits in front of the clock to see how long he can hold his breath. As he goes through it he has flashes of his life being threatened and himself drowning. From this, we can infer that Jerry is not an immature eleven-year-old boy, but an individual with high aspirations. He is a boy with a combination of essential psychic qualities which characterise him a different person: "He let go of the rock and went up into the air. He sees the Sun was low. He rushes to the villa and finds her mother at her supper. She says only, 'Did you enjoy yourself?' and he said, 'Yes'" (45). He pursues his practices independently, without relying on anyone else, choosing this path through his own determination, and he is sure that "If he did not do it now, he never

would" (47). He resolves to wait until the following summer, when he will be bigger and stronger, but then an impulse overtakes him and he feels that he must make his attempt immediately — now or never: "He was trembling with fear that he would not go; and he was trembling with horror at the long, long tunnel under the rock, under the sea." (47). He keeps swimming and counting until he comes to a dark point. He thinks he is going to die. Finally, he sees a light in the distance, and he swims to the surface. Although his nose is bleeding, and he is in extreme pain, he proves to himself that he can do what the big boys do. After he finds the tunnel, he makes it his goal to get all the way through the tunnel. In order to do this, he needs to hold his breath for quite a long time. He spends his entire vacation training himself to hold his breath long enough to make it all the way through the tunnel and back to the surface. It is his determination that makes him focus completely on his goal of getting through the tunnel. As he proceeds with the challenge to himself, he emerges victorious and achieves his goal. When he finally achieves his goal, he does not receive any kind of applause from anyone, but experiences a quiet celebration within himself. He knows at first that he will not be able to swim throughout the tunnel without taking a breath of air, so he has done exercises and that has resolved his problem. His exercises make it clear that mind-body spirituality is important to an individual for self-improvement and for acquiring spiritual life in action. This story depicts the importance of a positive attitude; it envisages a ' can-do' way. Sufism speaks of the psychological method of apprehending reality as observed by Idries Shah: "Unless the psychology is correctly oriented, there is no spirituality, though there can be obsession and emotionality, often mistaken for it" and "Anyone trying to graft spiritual practices upon an unregenerate personality will end up with an aberration" (*The Sufis* 47). But Jerry, in this story, has a purpose here on earth, in the present surroundings, because there is a lesson to learn. Thus, this story speaks about the importance of the proper understanding of one's mind and a positive belief that will lead a person to accomplish their will. Humans have a responsibility to

take part in positive creative activity and to work to heal ourselves, each other and the planet. Physical reality is a reflection of inner or subjective reality, and the Sufists advocate that one's thoughts and feelings create one's life. The subjective reality is a belief system in which there is only one consciousness; each individual represents that singular consciousness, and everything and everyone in one's reality is a projection of one's thoughts. Shah illustrates the Sufi story of a peach: "A person may be emotionally stirred by the exterior as if the peach were lent to you. You can eat the peach and taste a further delight…You can throw away the stone- or crack it and find a delicious kernel within. This is the hidden depth" (28). Though Jerry was a little boy, he could internalise his aim and allow himself to be touched by it. The theme of exercising autonomy to develop, express, and celebrate who you really are can be quite applicable to Jerry. On the day before Jerry and his mother leave for home, he decides that it is time to prove what he is capable of, and he eventually swims through the tunnel.

In another story, "A Sunrise on the Veld," the main character is a fifteen-year-old boy who goes on a journey through the African bush. At the very beginning of the story itself, we are quite aware of the rather flagrant arrogance of a boy of his age as he thinks that he is in control of absolutely every aspect of life. He wakes up every morning before the alarm clock rings just to prove that he can control himself: "But he played with it for the fun of knowing that it was a weakness he could defeat without effort: just as he set the alarm each night for the delight of the moment when he woke and stretched his limbs, feeling the muscles tighten, and thought: Even my brain--even that! I can control every part of myself" (26). He feels invincible and full of life: "The boy stretched his frame full-length, touching the wall at his head with his hands, and the bedfoot with his toes; then he sprang out, like a fish leaping from water" (26). The boy wakes up every morning at 4:30 to go hunting for guinea fowls, and his parents have never known how early he rises. He takes his gun and goes outdoors, taking his dogs with him. He is aware of every sensation he feels: the cold ground beneath his feet, the dew-covered

grass, and the chilled steel of his gun. He is filled with a fascination of the world around him. The boy is standing over a cliff, and is shouting out at the world about how much control he is in, and then he thinks, "That was what he was, he sang if he chose; and the world had to answer him back" (28). He begins running through the grassland but ends up waking up the guinea fowls, and his hunt is over, but instead of going home, he continues running through the field, "He leapt into the air, shouting and yelling wild, unrecognisable noises" (29). And "he was clean crazy, yelling mad with the joy of living and superfluity of youth. He rushed down the vlei under a tumult of crimson and gold, while all the birds of the world sang about him. He ran in great leaping strides, and shouted as he can, feeling his body rise into the crisp rushing air and fall back surely on to sure feet" (29). But later, he hears a pain-filled scream, an animal that is screaming turned out to be a buck with a broken leg, with a swarm of flesh-eating ants eating it alive. The boy watches the buck slowly die, knowing that there is nothing that he can do; the death of this animal is unalterable, and his whole outlook on how much control he has over life totally changes, and for a few minutes, he realises just how little control over life he actually has:

> All over the bush things like this happen; they happen all the time; this is how life goes on, by living things dying in anguish. He gripped the gun between his knees and felt in his own limbs the myriad swarming pain of the twitching animal that could no longer feel, and set his teeth, and said over and over again under his breath: I can't stop it. I can't stop it. There is nothing I can do. (31)

This realisation bothers the boy; the death of the buck proves to him just how little control he actually has over the world. After the buck's skeleton had been stripped clean by the ants, the boy went over to examine it closely. He thinks about how it looked when it was alive. The boy thinks that an hour before the buck died it had been running through the forest, unharmed, and an hour later it had been eaten clean, picked down to the bone: "That morning, perhaps an hour

ago, this small animal had been stepping proud and free through the bush, feeling the chill on its hide even as him himself had done, exhilarated by it" (33). He also realises that even though he can control what he does to some extent, there are many things in this world that no one can control. The knowledge of fatality, of what has to be, has gripped him, and for the first time in his life, he is left unable to say: "Yes, yes, this is what living is" (33). Here, the boy finally moves beyond the world, understands the ultimate reality and explores spirituality. The boy decides to go home, but he promises himself that tomorrow morning he will go to the bush and think about what he saw today. The story presents the new awakening of a boy: a growth from adulthood to manhood.

Both Jerry in the story, "Through the Tunnel" and the boy in "A Sunrise on the Veld" experience a different kind of spirituality in the form of a transformation from innocence to experience. Though they share many similarities, there is a clear contrast between the two: Jerry's innocence stems from a lack of confidence, whereas the boy in "A Sunrise on the Veld" appears overconfident, yet still conveys a sense of innocence. However, at the end of each story, the protagonists actualise themselves through experience. As the Sufis argue, mankind is currently evolving toward a new form of existence, and present humanity has recently been offered the possibility of taking a conscious part in this process. Therefore, the future of mankind depends on a realisation that an opportunity exists to actively participate in this organic development. Lessing's adherence to this central tenet of Sufism helps to explain her attitude towards human beings in their roles in the evolution of the whole of the human race.

"An Unposted Love Letter" is from the collection of short stories titled *The Temptation of Jack Orkney* and is structured as the monologue of an actress in the form of a written love letter. The very beginning of the story is confusing when she says: "Yes, I saw the look your wife's face put on when I said, 'I have so many husbands, I don't need a husband'" (86). However, this story centres on the search for selfhood in a way to construct one's own vision

of reality. The story is set in the green room of a theatre, where an actress has reminiscences about her life. Although she knows that she is a fading actress, she boasts of herself:

> I am not just any actress, I am Victoria Carrington, and I know exactly what is due to me and from me. I know what is fitting (…) but for what I stand for instance…'I am an artist and therefore androgynous.' Or 'I have created inside myself Man who plays opposite to my woman. Or I have objectified in myself the male components of my soul and it is from this source that I create.' Oh, I'm not stupid, not ignorant, I know the different dialects of our time and even how to use them. (86)

Further, she speculates on how a conventional society perceives her as an artist. There is a common notion in society that artists are not intelligent and should not attempt to appear so. Being an artist, she can easily identify Irma Painter, another actress, when they sit together in the dressing room, recognising Painter's face "as mine, we have the same face, and I understood that it is the face of every real actress" (87). She feels that it is not a mask- like face, but the real face of an artist. Here she is presented as an individual with a self-developed identity. A well-developed identity gives her an awareness of her strengths, weaknesses, and individual uniqueness, which helps her to change her roles according to the situations. At a party, she tries to disguise the basic plainness of her character by holding together the beauty for which she is known.

Later, she mentions the aims for writing such a letter: "This letter is a sort of homage, giving you your due in my life. Or, perhaps, simply, I cannot tonight stand the loneliness of my role (my role of life)" (88). After that she starts recollecting her days when she was a girl. She took every man whom she met or heard of as her lover since she thought that "it was her right" (88). At that time, she had a lot of lovers in her imagination, but not in reality. "No man in the flesh could be as good as what I could invent, no real lips, hands, could affect me as those that

I created like God" (88). She marries several times, but she is not able to understand the meaning of the word "love". Later, she falls in love with a doctor, and she succeeds in discovering herself through that relationship. "He loved me, but not as I loved him, and in due course he left me" (89). Although at first, she feels sad, then she understands one thing that, "…for the first time, a woman, as distinct from that fatal creature 'a charming girl', as distinct from 'the heroine'- and I and everyone else knew that I had moved into a new dimension of myself, I was born again…" (89). As the years pass by, she resigns herself to herself and begins to understand a kind of relationship between herself and life itself. Now, she realises the logic of what she is and what she shall be. Finally, she reaches the stage of self-realisation.

> Everything I am almost proud of seemed nothing at all - what I have worked to achieve, what I have achieved, even the very core of what I am, the inner sensitive balance that exists like a sort of self-invented super instrument, or a fantastically receptive and cherished animal - this creation of myself, which every day becomes more involved, sensitive, and delicate, … (92).

The self-identity of the lady leads to the adoption of a sexual orientation, a set of values and ideals and a direction towards a definite goal. The story ends on a positive note as she decides to release the man to his own joys, "I leave you to your love. I leave you to your life" (94). When she resolves the conflict successfully, a positive identity is formed, and further development will automatically ensue. Shah presents Sufism as a path that transcends individual religions, as it is a school of spirituality for the actualisation of an individual, and it involves an enlightened inner being that transcends social conventions. Shah states that an individual may become objective and that objectivity helps him to grasp the higher facts about life. By considering Sufism as a real intellect, he opines in *The Sufis*:

> Sufis believe that, expressed in one way, humanity is evolving towards a certain destiny. We are all taking part in that evolution. Organs came into being as a result of the need for specific organs (Rumi). The human being's organism is producing a new complex of organs in response to such a need. In this stage of transcending of time and space, the complex of organs is concerned with the transcending of time and space. What ordinary people regard as sporadic and occasional outbursts of telepathic or prophetic power are seen by the Sufi as nothing less than the first stirrings of these same organs. The difference between all evolution up to date and the present need for evolution is that for the past ten thousand years or so we have been given the possibility of a conscious evolution. So essential is this more rarefied evolution that our future depends upon it. (27)

Shah suggests that the self we perceive as the real one is a product of conditioning and that it may be possible to access the real self by removing the filter of conditioning. Sufism, according to him, shows the way in this direction. In this story, the heart of the woman is the mirror of receiving spiritual truth, and the truth that she is capable of receiving depends upon the qualities of the heart.

In the story "Our Friend Judith," Judith clearly possesses deep insight into how others think and feel- an ability that, though rare, Lessing amply demonstrates in her works. In this story, a woman's reality is shaped by what she believes it to be. The story opens intriguingly, as the narrator explains that she stopped inviting Judith to social gatherings because her presence raised too many questions. Judith is a spinster who wants to be alone in order to be her own person. Judith always has a natural look, "tall, small-breasted, slender" (8), and dresses in shabby clothing, constantly trying to appear as simple as her mind allowed. She values her privacy and lives in a somewhat isolated place, and she has no interest in discussing personal matters, such as her sex life, even with her two lady friends — Betty and the narrator. She is

not a well-socialised individual, and she lives in her self-imposed isolated world. The narrator describes three incidents that she thinks are important in understanding the personality of Judith. The first incident, which is referred to by the narrator, is an incident where "the first time Judith's mask slipped" (8), and it takes place when Betty tries to give Judith a Dior dress. It has been given to Betty, but as it is very short, Betty feels that, "It's not a dress for a married woman with three children and a talent for cooking" (173). Looking at Judith in Betty's Dior dress, the narrator and Betty are greatly impressed and are surprised at the "renewed discovery" (8) that Judith is beautiful.

> We had both too often caught each other, and ourselves, in moments of envy when Judith's calm and severe face, her undemonstratively perfect body, succeeded in making everyone else in a room or a street look cheap…
>
> …Judith could of course evoke nothing but classical images. Diana, perhaps, back from the hunt, in a relaxed moment? A rather intellectual wood nymph who had opted for an afternoon in the British Museum reading room? Something like that. Neither Betty nor I said a word, since Judith was examining herself in a long mirror, and must know she looked magnificent. (8)

Though Betty insists on Judith keeping the dress, Judith returns it and goes back to her ordinary outfit: "One surely ought to stay in character, wouldn't you say?" (9), she asks. It is Judith's own decision not to be a beautiful woman, but to be an invisible person so as to keep in touch with her own self. The "second revelatory incident" (9) is Judith's refusal to have her male cat castrated. Since the cat makes every night hideous, the neighbours file a complaint, and the landlord notifies Judith that the cat must either be castrated or abandoned; if neither is feasible, she must vacate the place. Judith tries another alternative by advertising. As no response is received, Judith takes the cat to the veterinarian to be euthanised. While hearing this, the

narrator wonders, “She didn’t think of compromising? After all, perhaps the cat might have preferred to live, if given the choice?” (9). Judith seems to respect the nature of a male cat more than its right to live. She might have believed that there was no need for the cat to live as a cat even after losing its real self. The third revelatory incident clearly defines Judith’s personality when she allows a young American- a friend of a friend living in Paris- to occupy her flat while she visits her parents during Christmas. The young man and his friends stay there for ten days “of alcohol and sex and marijuana” (9), and when Judith comes back, it is a tiresome job for her to clean the room and have the furniture repaired. She telephones him and tells him that it would be good for him if he keeps out of her way in the future. She later calls him to apologise for losing her temper: “I had a choice either to let someone use my flat, or to leave it empty. But having chosen that you should have it, it was clearly an unwarrantable infringement of your liberty to make any conditions at all. I do most sincerely ask your pardon” (10). By describing these incidents, the narrator makes it clear that Judith is a woman who places greater importance on individual independence, whether of a person or an animal.

Judith has lived for the past twenty years in a small, shabby two-roomed flat. She neither smokes nor drinks, and eats very sparsely. In the middle of the story, the narrator describes Judith as a brilliant woman who studied poetry and biology at Oxford. Every three or four years, she publishes a volume of poems that are restrained in tone yet distinctly intellectual. Judith has a lover, a middle-aged professor who has a wife and two children. Betty reports the conversation that took place between Betty and Judith:

> ‘I asked her if she was sorry not to have children. She said yes, but one couldn’t have everything.’
>
> … ‘I asked about marriage, but she said on the whole the role of a mistress suited her better.’

> And then she said that while she liked intimacy and sex and everything, she enjoyed waking up in the morning alone and her own person' (13).

When the Professor considers divorcing his wife in order to marry Judith, Mary becomes irritated, believing that such a decision would be difficult for his wife and children to bear. From this, Judith's true individuality emerges: she is a self-respecting woman with deep empathy for others. Her reluctance to marry can be seen as an assertion of independence, as her life as a spinster allows her to exist on her own terms. In an effort to distance herself from the Professor, she travels to Italy, where she meets a local barber named Luigi. She asks Betty:

> "Can you see me married to an Italian barber?"
>
> "Well yes," I said, "you're the only woman I know who I can see married, she'd always be her own person." (15)

According to Betty's report, Judith and Luigi make a very good couple: "Here she's quite different, all relaxed and free. She's melting in the attention she gets" (15). Judith has a pregnant cat in her room, and she is not ready to leave the room until the kittens are born. One day, Judith's cat gives birth to five kittens, but it kills the first kitten. Luigi takes one of the surviving kittens to the cat, but she refuses to accept it. He then kills the remaining kittens, declaring that the cat, too, must be destroyed. Judith says: "He hasn't destroyed. She's still alive. But it looks to me as if he were right" (22). This event causes her to leave Luigi, though she admits that he is fundamentally a good person. The story ends with the conversation between Judith and Betty. Judith doubts;

> 'But if one cannot rely on what one feels, what can one rely on?'
>
> 'On what one thinks, I should have expected you to say'.

> ‘Should you? Why? Really, you people are all very strange. I don’t understand you’. She turned off the electric fire, and her face closed up. She smiled, friendly and distant, and said:‘I don’t really see any point all in discussing it.’ (23)

One of the central principles of Sufism holds that there is no single right path; rather, any path can become the right one. Each individual follows a different path, and the true path is recognised and guided by the Source. This law is based on a belief in subjective reality, which is a belief system in which there is only one consciousness; everything and everyone in one’s reality is a projection of one’s thoughts. The story implies that an independent identity can only be gained by concentrating on the inner self of an individual. At the same time, Sufism does not advocate the abandonment of `worldly duties, but it argues for the attainment of the self- conscious principle which derives from one’s struggles in everyday life. Practical work that is the self-work in line with the traditional adoption by Sufis of ordinary professions through which they earned their livelihood and worked on themselves (Shah, *The Sufis* 28). Lessing’s Judith claims no external source of authority. Luigi acts according to his mind as he considers it is correct, while Judith firmly depends on her own thoughts. However, both trust in themselves, as the Sufis believe, the individual is the standard of truth, saying that “truth as an objective reality simply does not exist” (Shirley MacLaine 18).

The three main characters in the story, “Two Potters,” are the narrator, a potter named Mary Tawnish, and an old potter - an imaginative figure who appears only in the narrator’s dreams. This story portrays the different attitudes of the three individuals towards life, though all of them lead quiet and peaceful lives. According to the narrator, there are two types of humans in the world, “those who dream and those who don’t, and both tend to despise, or to tolerate the other” (306). This sentence highlights the theme of the story. While the narrator belongs to the first category as she enters the dream with pleasure as if listening to a story,

Mary Tawnish finds the dreams quite depressing: "I've never had a dream in my life", and she adds, " At least I don't remember. They say it's a question of remembering" (306).

The narrator describes Mary as a tall, large woman with brown eyes and hair who always seems to be fresh and cool. She has faced a lot of misfortunes in life, a poor childhood with erratic parents, failure in the first marriage, many love failures, the death of her child and so on. Leading a quiet family life with William Tawnish, Mary prefers to live in the present rather than escape into an imaginary world, unlike the narrator. The narrator regards dreams as a source of wish fulfilment, which deeply affects her thoughts, and she often appears still-faced, as if lost in a world of fantasy. It is in the book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), that Sigmund Freud first argued that the motivation of all dream content is wish-fulfilment, and that the instigation of a dream is often to be found in the events of the day preceding the dream, which he called the "day residue." Freud's disputation, "The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to knowledge of the unconscious" (1), is relevant in this context because this story is an exploration of the narrator's unconscious. One of the main characters in this story, an old potter, appears before the readers only through the narrator's dreams. The narrator describes the old potter's first dream in detail:

> The first dream about the potter was simple and short. Once upon a time…there was a village or a settlement, not in England, that was certain, for the scene was of a baked red-dust bareness. Low rectangular structures, of simple baked mud, also reddish-brown, were set evenly on the baked soil, yet because some were roofless and others in the process of crumbling, and others half built, there was nothing finished or formed about this place. And for leagues and leagues, in all directions, the great plain, of reddish earth, and in the middle of the plain, the settlement that looked as if it were hastily moulded by a great hand out of wet clay, allowed to dry, and left there. It seemed uninhabited, but in an empty space among the huts, all by himself, working away on a

> primitive potter's wheel turned by foot, was an old man. He wore a garment of coarse sacking over yellowish and dusty limbs. (307)

The narrator begins to think of the old potter as if he were a real person, living a lonely life in a deserted village. When the narrator shares the dream with Mary, she finds it interesting. The second dream about the old potter differs somewhat from the first, as she finds that he attains a sense of satisfaction, though he still has no customers. Whenever the narrator reflects on the dream, she begins to think of Mary, even though the old man and Mary have little in common. In her letter, Mary expresses sympathy for the old potter's lack of customers. Later, the narrator informs her that the old potter has become fortunate enough to attract many customers. The narrator then describes her next dream as a discouraging one:

> I was inside the potter's mind and I knew what he was thinking. He said: 'Just once, Lord, just once, just once!' he put his hand down into a patch of hot shade under the wheel and lifted on his palm a small clay rabbit which he held out to the ground. He sat motionless, looking at the sky, then at the rabbit praying: 'Please, Lord, just once.' But nothing happened. (311)

The narrator writes about the old potter's wish to give life to his clay rabbit and his hope of seeing it lift its long, red-veined ears and hop up and down among the earthenware pots. At the narrator's insistence, Mary makes a yellowish-brown clay rabbit and gives it to the narrator: "I made it for you. You must admit, it may not be pretty, but it's more likely to be true." Accepting the clay rabbit, the narrator says, "Well, thanks for coming down to our level long enough to play games with us" (317).

The ending of the story becomes very interesting, as the narrator feels a sense of unity with the old potter, making it difficult for readers to distinguish between reality imagination.

> That night, at home, I went into the market place, and up to the older potter who stilled his wheel when he saw me coming. The small boy lifted his frowning attentive eyes from the potter's hand and smiled at me. I held out Mary's creature. The old man took it, screwed up his eyes to examine it, nodded. He held it in his left hand, scattered water on it with his right, held his palm down towards the littered dust, and the creature jumped off it and away, with quick, jerky movements, not stopping until it was through the huts, clear of the settlement, and against a small outcrop of the jagged brown rocks where it raised its front paws and froze in the posture Mary had created for it. Overhead, an eagle or a hawk floated by, looked down, but failed to see Mary's creature, and floated on, up and away into the great blue spaces over the flat dry plain to the mountains. I heard the wheel creak; the old man was back at work. The small boy crouched, watching, and the water flung by the potter's right hand sprayed the bowl he was making and the child's face, in a beautiful curving spray of glittering light. (320)

Here, the three main characters, along with a rabbit, roll into one. It is common that much of the difficulty arises in being unable to acknowledge the darker, lesser-known aspects of the self, as well as the more known, accepted daylight self. Nevertheless, Lessing successfully reconciles these two conditions by unifying them. In *The Summer Before the Dark,* it is her dreams that enable Kate to travel beyond the fragmentary self:

> Ever since she was small, five or six, she had been able to reach her hand into the country behind the daylight one, to touch a familiar object that lived there, or to walk through it at ease, not astonished or afraid. Nor was she surprised by a dream that developed like a fable or a myth: she accommodated several such long-running dreams, and when a new stage of development of a familiar theme was presented to her, she would lie awake for as long as she could, before letting it be seen that she was awake,

> thinking of the ideas that were taking shape in her, and which she could not see except in the reflections like firelit shadows on the walls of her sleep. (142-43)

In this context, Shah's observation in *The Sufis* on fables is quite remarkable: "They often enable people to absorb ideas which the ordinary patterns of their thinking would prevent them from digesting" (1). Following this idea, Lessing examines the dreams as ways into knowledge of the different levels of consciousness.

In this story, every single individual has a fixed purpose in lifestyle, and this purpose is associated with universal goodness. They believe that positive thinking, supported by affirmations, leads to success in all areas of life. Therefore, as one begins focusing attention and consciousness on the positive, on the "half-filled" glass of water, reality starts shifting and materialising the positive intentions and aspects of life. As Sufism advocates, everyone is a spiritual traveller, and in their long journey through this Universe, they experience many wonderful things to finally arrive at the stage of the heart — the stage of spiritual exploration. Here, the narrator's addiction to the dreams, Mary's attachment to the family, and the old potter's intimacy with his work help them move confidently in their long journey to the stage of spirituality. Everyone becomes satisfied, happy and spiritually fulfilled. Sufism maintains an involvement with the world because the Sufis see themselves, as Lessing has explained, as the substance of that current which can develop man into a higher stage of evolution.

Conclusion

Lessing explores the intricate connections between personal experience and political reality. In *The Four-Gated City,* Lessing has quoted from Shah's Sufi concept of evolution:

> Sufis believe that, expressed in one way, humanity is evolving towards a certain destiny. We are all taking part in that evolution. Organs come into being as a result of a need for specific organs. The human being' organism is producing a new complex of

> organs in response to such a need. In this age of the transcending of time and space, the complex of organs is concerned with the transcending of time and space. What ordinary people regard as sporadic and occasional bursts of telepathic and prophetic power are seen by the Sufi as nothing less than the first stirrings of these same organs. (492)

Thus, it is obvious that in each story, Lessing proclaims the central idea of understanding one's own capacities. Lessing's narratives remain relevant and resist outmoded ideas, and her characters emerge through fragmentation, alienation and uncertainty. As Nile Green observes, "Sufism has continually been reshaped by the societies in which it exists"(Green 26). The spiritual development often emerges in response to changing social and personal conditions. The five short stories discussed in this chapter demonstrate that individual effort is central to the process of spiritual exploration. The protagonists of all these stories attain spirituality in one way or another. Lessing writes realistic short stories that probe characters' consciousness and identity. She explores spiritual possibilities through realistic portrayals of contemporary men and women. These stories reflect Sufi influence, evident in the way Lessing's characters struggle with fragmentation, alienation, and a persistent search for meaning. For Lessing, spirituality is an intensely personal experience- one that each individual must define for themselves, as such inner realities are often very difficult to articulate fully in words. The characters of Lessing are committed to shaping their own realities by overcoming all possible adversities and fulfilling their individual missions.

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