



LESSING, EDUCATION AND THE ISLAMIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract: This article intended to look at Lessing's thoughts on education, literature, racism, and women's rights and locate possible commonalities between them and certain facets of Islamic thought. As she is considered a humanist, a secular writer of great stature, the "grande dame" of British writing of her time, and handles explicit sexual relationships, a sense of remoteness and incomprehension is perhaps palpable in any attempt to discover an "Islamic Doris Lessing."

Key words: Lessing, Education, the Islamization of Knowledge, thoughts on education, literature, racism, and women's rights, Islamic perspectives.

Аннотация. В этой статье мы хотели рассмотреть мысли Лессинг об образовании, литературе, расизме и правах женщин и найти возможные общие черты между ними и определенными аспектами исламской мысли. Поскольку ее считают гуманистом, светским писателем большого масштаба, «гранд-дамой» британской литературы своего времени и она затрагивает откровенные сексуальные отношения, чувство отдаленности и непонимания, возможно, ощутимо в любой попытке обнаружить «исламскую Дорис Лессинг».

Ключевые слова: Лессинг, образование, исламизация знаний, мысли об образовании, литературе, расизме и правах женщин, исламские перспективы.

Introduction

Doris Lessing, the Nobel Prize-winning British author, explored a wide range of themes in her work, including gender, politics, and social issues. While she did not focus exclusively on Islamic thought, her writings often touched on themes related to Islam and the experiences of Muslim characters. However, given that she is known for her courage and outspokenness, as well as for making unconventional moves and iconoclastic statements sometimes at the expense of her literary reputation, it will be interesting to see her ideas from Islamic perspectives. Born in the Kermanshah Province of Iran, brought up in Rhodesia.

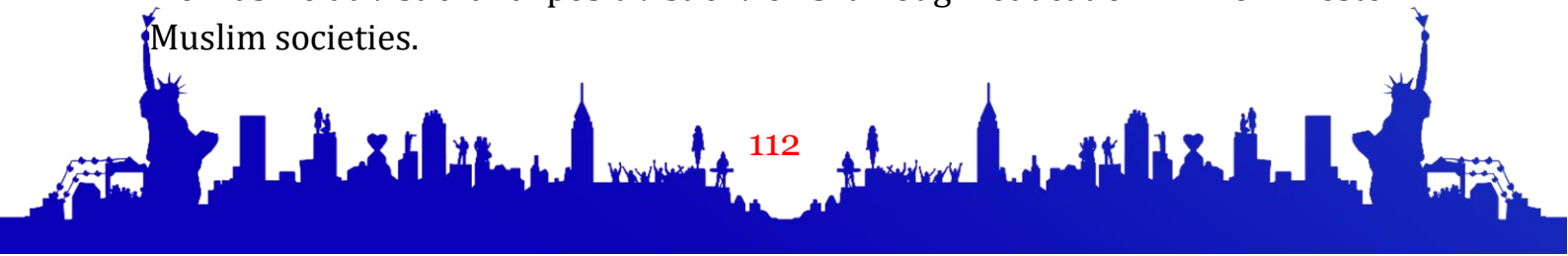
In her novel "The Golden Notebook," Lessing delves into various cultural identities, including those of Muslim characters. She examines the complexities of identity and the impact of cultural backgrounds on individuals. Lessing's





works often critique patriarchal structures, including those found in some interpretations of Islam. She addresses the challenges faced by women in various cultures, including Islamic societies, highlighting both oppression and resilience. Lessing was interested in the intersections between different religions and philosophies. She often advocated for understanding and dialogue among diverse belief systems, which can include Islamic perspectives. Lessing's background in colonial Africa influenced her views on power dynamics, colonialism, and the struggles for independence, which can intersect with Islamic contexts, particularly in post-colonial literature. In her later works, Lessing explored themes of spirituality and mysticism, which can resonate with Islamic thought, especially in relation to Sufism and the search for deeper meaning.

One of the most prominent features of Lessing's life is that she is perhaps the only Nobel laureate in literature who is a high school dropout by choice. More remarkably, she is possibly one of the few individuals who have no regret for not receiving a university-level formal education. She "remained immensely pleased with her lack of education" [The Telegraph, 2013] and considered her premature withdrawal from formal schooling at age 14 "a lucky escape" [Lessing, 2007: 17]. This does not necessarily prove her disregard for formal knowledge and training; rather, it exhibits her dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of the mainstream institutional education system and of the prevailing pedagogical practices that have largely failed to develop a person's abilities and learning potentials fully or to harness their "available faculties" [Galín, 1997: 222] more extensively. She believes that a harmonious, balanced development of the population's abilities can help the world "evade catastrophe" and that conventional education is not very helpful in this regard. Lessing's view of the modern education system shows her frustration with the content and methods of the prevalent knowledge tradition. Harvard professor Harry Lewis' downbeat observation on the moral decrepitude of conventional education and of many of the educated elite vindicate her reservations and frustrations. He says: "Society is going to hell in a handbasket, and the great universities are going to get there first" [Lewis, 2006: 108]. What is obvious about both of their views is that universities are not producing morally responsible and ethically grounded graduates – a crisis that is compounded by the proliferation of Western materialistic cultural influences as well as relativistic and positivistic views through education in non-Western Muslim societies.

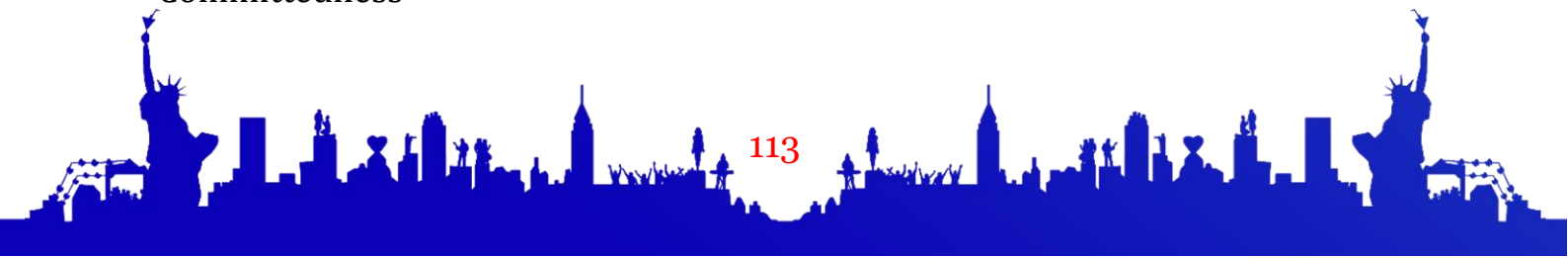




In fact, a similar perception led some scholars to undertake the intellectual venture of the Islamization of Knowledge (IoK) during the 1970s. This movement represents a quest for educational and intellectual reform from an Islamic perspective in the context of decadence in the contemporary knowledge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

Commonalities between Lessing and the proponents of IoK include their shared concern for the holistic development of the human personality and potential. According to the University of Chicago professor of Islamic thought Fazlur Rahman [Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988)], the deficiency of the modern education system is largely due to the “discrepancy between the power of knowledge which man has, and his failure to live up to the moral responsibility arising from that knowledge” [1988: 4]. In other words, every knowledgeable person bears ethical and moral responsibilities to them and to society, and failure to render these makes their institutional learning less meaningful. Qur’an 80:23 attests to this: “No! Man has not yet accomplished what He [God] commanded him.” The Qur’an acknowledges and celebrates each person’s immense potential and emphasises the correct and productive use of them, for this is where a person’s success in both this life and the life hereafter lies. The crux of the problem is that while human beings have accomplished near miracles in science and technology and their material life, their moral and ethical foundation is perhaps at an all-time low. This is because “while the presence of the desire for novelty and discovery of something new is ever present, the urge to solve problems ethically does not keep pace” [Rahman, 1988: 4]. Ultimately, what is needed to address the contemporary world’s educational decadence is to employ “time, energy and money in the creation of ... minds” and of “thinkers, those who have the capacity to think constructively and positively” [Rahman, 1988: 11]. As is the case with the IoK undertaking, the main thrust of Lessing’s critique of conventional education also points out its inadequacy and inability to create such enlightened individuals and thinking creatures. Thus, the ideas of both Lessing and the IoK scholars have converged in their concern for the current faulty knowledge system and in their urge to rectify it.

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





Perhaps the greatest convergence between specific Islamic concepts and Lessing's ideas lies in the notion of literature. Away from the "art for art's sake" dictum, Islam maintains a utilitarian view of literature by promoting ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE 'ilm nāfi' (useful and beneficial knowledge). This concept is foregrounded in the following well-known hadith of Prophet Muhammad: "O Allah! I seek refuge in You from the inability (to do good), indolence, cowardice, miserliness, decrepitude and torment of the grave. ... O Allah! I seek refuge in You from knowledge which is not beneficial, and from a heart which does not fear (You)...". Since literature is a branch of knowledge, its usefulness must be analysed from an Islamic perspective.

Another prophetic tradition states: "There is magic in eloquence, ignorance in knowledge, wisdom in poetry (literature), and heaviness in speech" [Mishkat al-Maṣābīḥ, 2004: 34-35].

As these hadiths suggest, Islam may not regard a well-structured academic discipline with scholarly credentials and pedagogical roots and embellishment as true knowledge if it does not benefit human beings. In today's world, various branches of knowledge and their practitioners are perhaps well-equipped with information about their respective fields, but "most of them do not seem to have developed an internally set moral compass that could function as their guide and help them distinguish what is right and what is wrong and act accordingly" [Hasan, 2014: 6]. Due to the knowledge system's weak ethical foundation, possessors of conventional

education may not have a greater claim on "moral and ethical armour capable of withstanding the blandishments of greed" [Meisel, 2005: 9]. Knowledge and scholarship devoid of practical, ethical benefits for its practitioners and for the wider society may be regarded as a futile exercise. As Qur'an 18:103-04 states: "Say: Shall We inform you of the greatest losers in (their) deeds? (These are) they whose labour is misdirected and lost in worldly life, even though they think that they are doing well in work." Impressive intellectual efforts and excellence may not be worthwhile if their practitioners are not ethically sound and if it benefits no one, not even its possessors. Based on this fundamental premise, it can be inferred that in Islam the usefulness of literary practices in a broad and generic sense is what counts and is an essential criterion to differentiate between good and bad literature.

As [Meisel, 2005: 9] states: "For Muslims, a work of art should either benefit



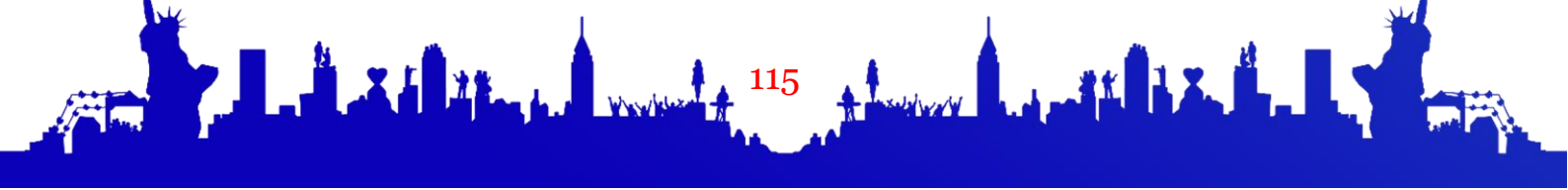


them materially or spiritually.... If this is not the case, then artistic or literary practices will be deemed a waste of God-given talents.” In order to describe Islam’s approach to literature, the British writer and translator of the Qur’an DISCOVERING DORIS LESSING: CONVERGENCES BETWEEN ISLAM 108 AND HER THOUGHTS 109

Marmaduke Pickthall [1927: 2] states: “The whole of Islam’s great work in science, art and literature is included under these two heads: aid and refreshment. Some of it, such as the finest poetry and architecture, falls under both.”

Like Islam, Lessing emphasises the usefulness and ethical considerations of creative production. Being a great realist, Lessing believes that literature should be “committed” and must have edifying and instructive functions. As she states: “I see no reason why good writers should not, if they have a bent that way, write angry protest novels about economic injustice. Many good writers have. Dickens, for instance, was often inspired by poverty and injustice” [Lessing, 1974: 3]. According to her, writers have the potential to render a simple moral instruction and exhortation “much more powerful” by using their creative talents. She argues that “propagandist literature, religious or political, is as old as literature itself.” However, she deplores the fact that “the idea of committedness is in disrepute” in literary discussions mainly because of the poor quality or misuse of such literary practices. She highly appreciates the nineteenth-century literary tradition, which was marked by “a climate of ethical judgement” [Lessing, 1974: 4-5]. As opposed to that literature, Lessing laments, subsequent literary practices have become divorced from moral judgement and the ultimate concepts of good and evil, and are conspicuous by “a confusion of standards and uncertainty of values” [Lessing, 1974: 5]. This resonates with what the literary critic and educationalist Ali Ashraf [1978: 53] observes:

The difficulty that twentieth-century writers are faced with is the difficulty brought about by the lack of faith in anything spiritual. Man stands disintegrated; that is why some important writers have tried to re-integrate man by reformulating his concepts and by establishing man's nature in a new context. This is what Ezra Pound or Yeats or D. H. Lawrence have tried to do. But the difficulty lies in the esotericism of these writers and their inability to see that they are trying to create various kinds of disconnected concepts. Their partial realisations are marred by their claim to have realized the whole. In manifest opposition to the core thesis of “art for art’s sake,” Lessing proposes that a writer be a “humanist” and “an architect of the soul” who has “a feeling of





responsibility, as a human being, for the other human beings he influences ... and must feel himself as an instrument of change for good or for bad" [Lessing, 1974: 6-7]. She abhors the isolationist notion of literature that places a writer "in the ivory tower" with no necessary effect in, or relation to, the practical world of experience. Emphasising writers' important task of guiding their fellow human beings, she says that all of us are living a time which is so dangerous, violent, explosive, and precarious that it is in question whether soon there will be people left alive to write books or to read them. It is a question of life and death for all of us; and we are haunted, all of us, by the threat that even if some madman does not destroy us, our children may be born deformed or mad. [Lessing, 1974: 7]

Therefore, writers cannot turn their "backs on [their] chosen responsibilities" of instructing and guiding people to find peace and meaning in life and of "preventing an evil" and "strengthening a vision of a good which may defeat the evil" [Lessing, 1974: 7]. If we compare her view of literature and Islam's view of knowledge in a generic sense, we find a strong commonality between them, as both stress using knowledge (or, for that matter, literature) for the good and progress of humanity. After touching on the harmony and convergence between the Islamic concept of "beneficial knowledge" and Lessing's notion of "committedness," in the following section, I will highlight another striking point of confluence: Islam's and Lessing's outright rejection of racism.

Conclusion

While Doris Lessing may not have explicitly focused on Islamic thought as a central theme in her work, her exploration of cultural identity, gender issues, and interfaith dialogue reflects a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding Islam and its impact on individuals and societies. Her writings encourage readers to consider diverse perspectives and foster empathy across cultural divides.

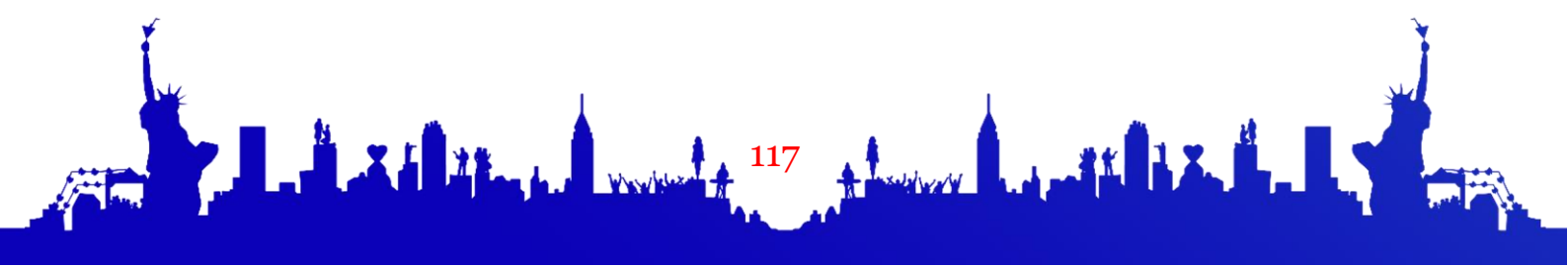
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