Sufi Mysticism in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Nancy V. Workman

In the desert there is no sign that says,
Thou shalt not eat stones.
—Sufi Proverb

Both book reviews and literary criticism following the publication of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasize its dystopic nature, its satire of contemporary morals and politics. Indeed, even the paperback book jacket calls for political action: the *Playboy* review, for example, tells readers to "contribute to . . . [their] favorite liberal cause" while the *Newsday* excerpt refers to the book's "argument" as though the novel were a persuasive treatise instead of a work of imaginative prose.[1] Similarly, critics such as Amin Malak, Reingard M. Nischik and Roberta Rubenstein discuss the book's anti-Utopian slant and place it within the contemporary dystopian tradition.[2]

Largely overlooked in these recent discussions, however, is the narrative frame which Atwood uses to begin her novel, consisting of two dedications and three epigrams. While Linda W. Wagner-Martin has identified the people to whom the book is dedicated as Perry Miller, the Puritan scholar, and Mary Webster, an ancestor of Atwood who was tried for witchcraft and who curiously survived her execution,[3] Wager-Martin has neglected to consider the relevance of the second set of citations which preface the main text.

Taken collectively, the three epigrams establish an ideological boundary for the novel in setting up contrasting world views. The first, taken from the Book of Genesis, gives a biblical foundation for the society Atwood envisions in her novel—one in which handmaids function as surrogate mothers to infertile women.[4] Easily recognizable to most Westerners, this epigram is manifested within both the characters and plot of Atwood's work. Offred, the narrator, is equivalent to the maid Bilhah, just as Serena Joy is equivalent to the sterile Rachel. Similarly, the second epigram, taken from Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," is also readily understood. Just as Swift satirically overstated his case against neglectful landowners and immoral Irish tenants by calling for the cannibalization of children as a cure-all for social illness, Atwood caricatures both American Puritanism and the Moral Majority by rendering literal what is currently only theoretical in American fundamentalism. In addition, just as Swift borrows the idea about cannibalism from his "American friend," the Canadian Atwood suggests that her American neighbor to the south has invented the New Gilead as a prototypical model society on which others could be based.

It is the third epigram, the one taken from the Sufi tradition, that is, however, the most enigmatic of the three literary references which Atwood evokes to start her novel. Since most Westerners are unfamiliar with the tradition from which this proverb springs, they are likely to underestimate its importance or use within the novel. For example, Lucy Freibert remarks on its "simplicity" and argues that the proverb's meaning is that "on the most basic level of survival human beings instinctively know what to do and what to avoid; it suggests the corollary that authorities should avoid unnecessary regulation," without explaining exactly how she arrives at her conclusions.[5] In her paragraph of analysis, she neglects much of the proverb's allusiveness, incorrectly assuming that its meaning is readily apparent or self-evident.

In contrast, I feel that the proverb's message is complex in nature, hiding in its core a unifying element which is echoed throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* in the words and actions of Offred, the narrator. Beneath its apparent simplicity lurks a

complex alternative vision of reality, compared to the Judeo-Christian tradition which Atwood satirically mocks in her novel. To understand the epigram's importance, however, it is necessary to place it within the context of Sufi mysticism, for only then can readers see the far-ranging implications of its import within *The Handmaid's Tale*. Thus, I shall briefly summarize certain aspects of the Sufi tradition demonstrating how Atwood exemplifies them through her novel's heroine, who becomes a Sufi spokesperson who validates inward spirituality and truth rather than revealed doctrine. Following that, I shall examine the proverb's "meaning" in terms of its allusiveness, demonstrating that the "stones" to which the proverb refers are metaphorical. They refer to the many non-nutritional elements of institutional Christianity which leave unfed its practitioners. Furthermore, I shall demonstrate how these unfed hungers lead to sinfulness and wrong doing.

Like all other major religions which have existed for centuries, the history of Sufism is complicated, especially since there are several differing types of Sufism in both theory and practice. The *Hutchinson Encyclopedia of Living Faiths* notes, "Since Sufism is essentially the pursuit of spiritual experience by bodily discipline and mystical intuition, it is peculiarly resistant to any kind of systematic treatment."[6] However, since Atwood is not interested in promoting a particular version of Sufism in her novel, but rather in adopting some of its tenets to underline her own satire, it is sufficient to deal with it broadly.

The term "sufism" has been identified as coming from the "monastic tradition of wearing garments of wool, suf,"[7] which early Islamic mystics did, starting perhaps as early as the seventh century. Essentially ascetic, the first practitioners devoted themselves to interior spiritual development and largely rejected a theological approach to Islamic ideas, preferring more individual responses to the Divine and religious observance. As *The Encyclopedia of Religion* notes in its lengthy discussion of Sufism, the emphasis among Sufis has always been on "interiority," or private mystical union with God, sometimes at the

expense of political or social action: "The goal of every Muslim mystic is to recapture this experience of loving intimacy with the Lord of the Worlds."[8] Hence, proponents experimented with many rituals such as controlled breathing, frenzied dancing and intoxication, commonplace among mystics but largely neglected by more orthodox believers. As a result of these elements, serious misunderstandings have occurred, especially from modern Islamics of differing sects unfamiliar with their use and tradition. As *The Encyclopedia of Religion* notes, "The very premise on which Sufism is based, namely union with God, is rejected as un-Islamic. We see today in many of the most vibrant Islamic revivalist movements a similar tendency to espouse the most puritanical forms of literalist religion. In such a world Sufism has little place."[9]

Despite its rejection by more conservative Islamics, the Sufi tradition has flourished, yet, as a result of the personalism of spiritual growth, its history is one of individual teachers and their followers rather than a systematic theory of ideas. In addition, rather than developing a coherent canon of religious instruction, Sufi doctrine was promulgated by various literary means, especially through the epigram, the aphorism, sermons, letters and the like. Thus, even a modern Sufi "text," *The Way of the Sufi* by Idries Shah (1969), is a compilation of "Sayings of the Masters" and "Group Recitals" with very little commentary or explanation attached.[10] In *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, a noted expert on Sufism, Annemarie Schimmel, explains that these proverbial sayings are often paradoxes resulting from wordplay in the original language:

> A tendency to enjoy the infinite possibilities of the language has greatly influenced the style of Arabic poets and prose writers, and in many sayings of the Sufis one can detect a similar joy in linguistic play: the author indulges in deriving different meanings from one root, he loves rhymes and strong rhythmical patterns.[11]

Acknowledging that much of this wordplay is lost in translation, Schimmel points out that the traditional Sufi attitude is to see even the simplest proverb as a complex expression of faith despite its

apparent simplicity of form. It is meant to be seen as rich in allusiveness and import. She notes that the titles of Sufi books are particularly representative of the practice of encapsulating enormous meaning into a short phrase; the titles "allude to mystical states, to technical expressions, and often contain in themselves a whole spiritual program."[12]

That Atwood's handmaid is an ascetic, albeit not one by choice, is apparent from the very start of the novel. Forced to live in a monastic hermit's cell which is like that of a "nunnery" (10), Offred admits that "Nothing takes place in the bed but sleep," demonstrating the limitations of both her sexual activity and personal freedom. In addition to living in what she calls "reduced circumstances," she must also wear a red habit made of wool during the winter (69). Furthermore, she practices controlled breathing during which she hears "the sound of my own heart, opening and closing, opening and closing, opening" (190) during her attempts to sort out the complexity of life before her. Thus, given the etymology of the word "sufi," Offred can readily be regarded as one of its practitioners, at least nominally, since she possesses the exterior form and practices a ritual associated with the tradition.

More important than her outward appearance, however, is Offred's attitude to the events that surround her. In two important respects, she demonstrates a Sufi perspective: one, in her inwardness, her attempts to discover and evaluate her own feelings and psychological realities despite the teachings and proclamations of the society that denies them and which refuses to accept their legitimacy; and two, in her need to express that inwardness through language games that appear to be simple or perhaps clever, but which actually reveal complex networks of feelings and ideas. Serving as a "spiritual shorthand," her games reveal her attempts at sorting out her own experiences into a coherent system of belief and ethical action.

The world which surrounds Offred is that of Christian fundamentalism based on biblical authority. So pervasive is the

influence that even the cars which she describes have biblical Old Testament allusiveness: the Whirlwind, the Chariot, the Behemoth (23) all possess "prestige," not only associated with their use as status symbols by their owners of various ranks, but also indicative of their owners' spiritual authority. Thus, something as innocent as a means of transportation becomes a spiritual marker, capable of hidden messages. Similarly, the shop names which identify the products for sale have New Testament allusiveness: Offred trades at the Lilies of the Field (33), the Milk and Honey (34), and the All Flesh (36), recalling to mind Christian parables and their rich tradition of instruction based on simple narratives. Correspondingly, the fact that these stores are frequently empty of good attests to the fundamental emptiness of Christianity.

Yet Offred cannot readily accept this orthodoxy, despite its pervasiveness. Over and over again she announces her need to make "distinctions" between what she is "supposed to feel" and what she does feel about her society (45, 44). And, instead of looking for confirmation of the social order through its teachings or its legislators, she deliberately looks inward to her own self as the "authority" for values and ethical choice. She establishes her need for a clarity of vision, her unwillingness to accept blindly the pronouncements around her. As a result, she minutely examines her surroundings looking for some understanding of meaning and purpose (68). Seeing the world "in gasps" (40), she recognizes the need for "perspective" (185), and tells the Commander that she craves knowledge of "Whatever there is to know" (243). To Offred, the world is perpetually one of mysteries needing uncovering: "Something has been shown to me, but what is it?" (65).

In addition, she sees the Night as her "time out" for meditation and reflection (49) and she makes deliberate choices about how to spend it: "Where should I go?" she asks. This question is directed to her inner space since she is unable to make those choices regarding her physical being. Thus Night becomes a paradox: nominally her enforced time of repose and rest, it becomes her most active time, a time for ethical choices and

understanding, the importance of which is underscored by the novel's division since eight of the fifteen chapters take place then.

The significance of Night is central to the Sufi tradition for, as William Stoddard explains in *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam,* Night has traditionally been regarded as a woman named Laila who is the goal of all spiritual journeys. He notes, "In this symbolism Laila and haqiqa (Divine Reality) are one."[13] Thus, contemplation of Night (and the celestial bodies of the moon and stars) is an important undertaking. As a result, in pursuit of her spiritual understanding of Night, Offred periodically examines those topics germane to this exploration—piety, prayer, and Faith. Never systematic in her examination, again like the Sufis who look for knowledge of the Divine in obscure places and events, she nonetheless comes to know and reveal her own truth regarding these matters. For example, she initially distrusts Ofglen for demonstrating false piety. Offred notes, "I resent this grace of hers. I resent her meek head, bowed as if into a heavy wind. But there is no wind" (58). Offred realizes that the pose of meekness is unnatural and an affectation: it is an inappropriate response to the conditions of life. Similarly, Offred challenges the purpose of the Soul Scrolls, admitting that she cannot accept that God listens to them (217).

Yet in rejecting the conventionalities of the Christian religion, especially those aspects that promote an "abasement" of womanliness (251), Offred does not become an atheist. Rather, she affirms her own sense of prayer and sacredness: she prays "where I am, sitting by the window, looking out through the curtain at the empty garden. I don't even close my eyes. Out there or inside my head, it's an equal darkness. Or light" (251). Composing her own version of the Lord's Prayer, she adds:

> My God. Who Art in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is within.
>
> I wish you would tell me Your name, the real one I mean . . . .
>
> I have enough daily bread, so I won't waste time on that. It isn't the main problem. The problem is getting it down without choking on it. (251-252)

Here, in her unorthodoxy, Offred reveals her own sense of prayer, one that would be regarded as heretical by her captors.

Likewise, Offred has periodically commented on the Faith left behind in her room in the petit point cushion. Accepting that the cushion is an enigma over which she "can spend minutes, tens of minutes, running my eyes over the print" (75), she introduces a multiplicity of meanings in that utterance. For example, her statement can mean her realization that her captors have indeed left their "worn" faith behind in creating their political system, just as another Puritan, Hawthorne's Goodman Brown, left behind his own Faith when he ventured into the forest. Or, indeed, her captors "overlooked" Faith in building their society. In their pursuit of righteousness, they failed to see the reality for what it was—mistaking the cushion for a decorative ornament, they neglected to "read" it, accepting only its utility rather than its underlying spiritual importance. Symbolically, they have created an entire ethical system based on biblical truth, while neglecting to recognize other authentic expressions of spirituality. For example, Offred asks of the other cushions: "HOPE and CHARITY, where have they been stowed?" (140), symbolically attesting to their absence in the New Gilead.

Then again, her captors may have forgotten that Offred could read and thus come to a private understanding of Faith's import. Here they appear forgetful, and, in their forgetfulness, they are contemptuous of her ability to understand the allusiveness of language. Thus, Offred possesses an unorthodox religious understanding, certainly equivalent to the Sufi attitude to fundamental Islamic doctrines. By substituting her own insights for those of revealed religion, she subverts its claims and authorities, especially when she notes at the bloody Salvaging that Faith cushions are notably absent (351). Thus, a simple decorative ornament becomes an allusive spiritual proverb.

Similarly, like the Sufis, Offred expresses her unorthodoxy through language play, through simple statements masking complex understanding. For example, early in the novel she reveals inadequacies of patriarchal control which has not created female equivalents for certain relationships. She notes that while

"*fraternize* means to behave like a brother . . . there was no corresponding word that meant *to behave like a sister*" (15). Offred recognizes that the discursive language of patriarchy creates its own realities by failing to name certain bonds of affectiveness that exist between women.

In addition, Offred senses that orthodox understanding is flawed since it holds only limited understanding of words, and symbolically, the realities that stand behind them. For example, in listing many of the meanings of the word "job," she quickly moves from "job" meaning an occupation to the Book of Job (224), demonstrating that patriarchy has also conflated the two by associating one's occupation with patience and the virtues which the Biblical Job demonstrated while enduring his Divine punishments. Through a short language game, Offred reveals the complex relationships that exist between language and power and how entire value systems can result from playing with these features.

That Offred sees the power of language is best demonstrated in her strategies when playing the illicit game of Scrabble with the Commander, who presumptuously inquires of her if she knows how to play. Relying on her past association with the game, she remarks that "This is freedom, an eyeblink of it" (180). By this she means not only the momentary freedom she is enjoying as she plays the game, but also the ultimate freedom that language play allows—the power to shape reality. Furthermore, her pun on "eyeblink" alludes to the Eyes, the everpresent totalitarian spies who outlaw most experiences except those in keeping with their rigid notions of law and order. For her to play at freedom, the Eyes must blink. Furthermore, when she and the Commander make up "nonsense words," she demonstrates both her competency at language formation and, more importantly, her central understanding of language empowerment.

Thus, in her inwardness and language play, Atwood resembles in spirit the Sufi tradition. Again, this is evident in the complex ways in which she refers to the Latin inscription which she finds in her closet. Sometimes a prayer ("I don't know what it means, but it sounds right, and will have to do, because I don't

know what else I can say to God [117]), at other times it is merely an entreaty to the Commander ("Not a prayer"). Creating a paradox, Offred demonstrates the over changing realities around her.

Another significant way in which the Sufi tradition differs from the Judeo-Christian is that it has allowed for the expression of women's spiritual leadership and guidance, validating the experiences of feminine members. Unlike Jewish and Christian religions, which are religions of the "father" in many senses, the Sufi tradition has honored and celebrated women saints as teachers from early on. As Margaret Smith demonstrates, one of the central figures of early Sufism was Rabi'a who is credited with prayers and poems representing some of the earliest aesthetic expressions of mystical experience in Islam. In describing the equality between the sexes in Sufism, Smith notes:

> So the title of saint was bestowed upon women equally with men, and since Islam has no order of priesthood and no priestly caste, there was nothing to prevent a woman from reaching the highest religious rank in the hierarchy of Muslim saints.[14]

In qualifying Smith's 1928 statement, Schimmel notes that

> the ascetic aversion to women in all monastic and ascetic traditions, where woman is seen as threatening to man's spiritual purity, has contributed to the degradation of women in most pre-modern societies. However, women like Rabi'a, who teach humankind the secret of unconditional love of God, have always held a very special place in religion and society . . . . Even in our day, we find mystical women leaders in Islam . . . whose influence extends far beyond the small circle of her closest disciples.[15]

Just as Offred uses her version of Sufi mysticism in her attempt to understand and give a construction to the world around her, she looks to her schoolgirl friend Moira as a "saint" from whom to gain understanding. Rejecting the established womanly

role models of Serena Joy, the Aunts, and even her mother, Offred projects onto Moira many virtues such as bravery, daring, and, most importantly, sexual autonomy, for it is Moira's lesbianism which sets her apart from Offred most dramatically. By refusing to accept heterosexual inequality and the romanticized views of "falling in love," Moira remains chaste even as she nightly surrenders her body at Jezebel's.

At the very start of the novel, Offred conjures her remembrance of Moira, and associates Moira with goodness (49). Later, Offred remarks that Moira's story is essentially a "better" one (166), meaning in both interest and resolution. From recollections of Moira, Offred repeatedly draws inspiration and guidance. For example, she remarks that Moira's presence made her "feel safer" (92) and admits that their clandestine conversations in the bathroom of the Leah and Rachel Center made her feel "ridiculously happy" (95). Offred admires Moira's gutsiness, especially regarding a plan for escape (115); whereas Offred counsels safety and prudence, Moira tells her "Not to worry," to which Offred admits her own emotional needs: "I couldn't stand the thought of her not being here, with me. For me" (116). Here Offred acknowledges that Moira's very existence subverts the totalitarianist regime. In a fitting tribute to her friend Offred concludes:

> Nevertheless Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked. (172)

Throughout the novel, Moira remains with Offred through her recollections and functions as her conscience, offering alternative understandings and values to the institutional ones. For example, while Offred is waiting to enter Jezebel's, she questions her presentability, outfitted as she is in worn-out clothes and lacking proper makeup. In reaction to her concern, Moira, though absent, calls Offred an "Idiot," (303) showing the extent to which

Offred has internalized Moira's presence, calling it forth as both balm and vinegar at the appropriate times. When Offred eventually sees that Moira has not truly escaped, despite the valiant efforts of her associates, Offred finally admits to the burden of responsibility that she has given her friend. Offred says that she is "frightened" at hearing the "lack of volition" in Moira's voice and announces, "And how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not?

I don't want her to be like me" (324).

Yet even in her superficial defeat at the hands of the Commanders, Moira functions as a spiritual guide to Offred. Just as the earlier Islamic saint had functioned as a role model to Islamic women, Moira becomes the "saint" of *The Handmaid's Tale.* Similary, just as Rabi'a preferred celibacy to the expected sexual roles of mate and mother, Moira offers a feminist alternative: in her sexual interactions with women, she subverts the inequalities of heterosexuality.

Thus, Sufism has offered Offred both an alternative perspective as well as a means of articulating her new found understanding. In her simple proverb-like statements, she utters a new theology, one that contrasts dramatically with the World of the Commanders. In creating this spiritual text, Offred tells us that she creates "litanies . . . to compose [herself]" (140). Just as liturgical litanies reveal different aspects of a subject, they gather their force from accumulated utterances. For example, a typical litany to the Virgin Mother praises her by all the different names by which she is known (Mother of God, Blessed Virgin Mary, Seat of Wisdom, etc.) while gathering emotional and spiritual force through the recognition of the various aspects of the same subject and the repetition of response by the congregation. Similarly, Offred periodically presents us with a "litany" of "hunger" that reveals aspects of human need and which gathers force as the individual statements accumulate throughout the novel.

Offred's litany of "hunger" extends from her need for touch (14); her desire for "small goals that can be easily attained" (17); her wanting of "treacherous smells" associated with kitchens from

her past to her craving for face cream while being "held and told my name" (125). Through her litany, especially of those things connected with memory and self-hood, she reveals simple but desperate needs that her culture has neglected to feed. As with all litanies, the force of her utterances accumulate and gather more significance collectively than they would have had individually.

Correspondingly, through the use of food imagery, Atwood reveals that modern Christianity offers "stones" in its desert as nourishment to these various needs, actually encouraging the practitioners to partake of non-nutritional experiences on many psychic levels. For example, Offred describes her dinner as "A baked potato, green beans, salad. Canned pears for desert. It's good enough food, though bland. Healthy food . . . . No coffee or tea though, no alcohol" (85). Here, encapsulated in a food metaphor, Atwood demonstrates the austerity of Puritanism. Forbidding sensual enjoyment, even of those foods that give nourishment, Puritanism supports a bland life.[16] Thus, unsatisfied hungers become illicit and Offred dreams of hungers which cannot be indulged. For example, she tells us that in playing Scrabble, "My tongue felt thick with the effect of spelling. It was like using a language that I'd once known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long since passed out of this world: café au lait at an outdoor table, with a brioche, absinthe in a tall glass, or shrimp in a cornucopia of newspaper" (199). Here, Puritanism has offered food "stones" whereas the previous culture had allowed for sensual pleasures of the appetite.

To emphasize how often these hungers go unfed, Offred employs synesthesia as a vehicle of expression. For example, in the games of Scrabble, word play becomes associated with sensual indulgence and hunger: "I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous . . . . The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would also taste of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious" (180). Hence, word play is seen as yet another appetite, and the proverbial "eating those words" (235) takes on new significance.

In addition to providing a litany of hungers which Christianity neglects, Offred demonstrates that Christianity actually causes its practitioners to violate moral sanctions. By its constant deprivation of human desire, institutional Christianity actually encourages all of the cardinal sins itself. For example, Offred notes that in her house "we all envy each other something" (63), a clear statement of cause and effect. The old values, both of Victorian culture and biblical Christianity, have created the envy, the wrong feeling. Similarly, Offred wants to "steal" a knife (126) as an act of rebellion against the suppression of her freedom. Most strikingly, she tells us that during her escape with Luke, they had to "kill" the cat in order to survive (248). Here, animal murder is the direct effect of religious belief. Similarly Offred must "keep the match" that she had been given by Serena Joy (269), again with the intention of committing murder, here of the inhabitants and herself. In each instance, the institution of Christianity has created the occasion of sin. It has literally *caused* the sinfulness.

Through this "litany" of examples involving the "sinful" desires to which Offred is subject, Atwood demonstrates the corrupting force of institutional Christianity. While churches are established to foster proper behavior and conduct, they have become the means of corruption. Denying the legitimacy of the human spirit, they have entrapped their practitioners in sinfulness, actually forcing them to acts of covetousness, adultery or despair. As Offred says, "I want anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things" (300). Hence, forbidden the expression of natural feelings and appetites, Christians resort to sinning by way of rebellion. In a theological Catch-22, they are then punished for the very acts which their religion has encouraged.

With this understanding, Offred's statement associating God with an egg in the desert of life gains significance. In a lengthy, very Sufi-like passage, she conflates many of the ideas which are touched upon elsewhere. If institutional Christianity only offers stones for nourishment, life itself teaches otherwise:

> The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by the sunlight, like craters

> of the moon. It's a barren landscape, yet perfect; it's the sort of desert the saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what God must look like: an egg. The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside. (141)

Continuing her theological speculation, Offred tells us that the "egg is glowing now, as if it had energy of its own." She relishes its warmth, and its good feelings. The egg is a "pleasure" for her whereas, in reduced circumstances, she will seek out "strange objects" to survive instead. Thus, in this simple yet enigmatic passage, Offred shows how the secrets of life are hidden in simple objects, not in complicated discourses of biblical exegesis. Her Sufi self has revealed the mysteries of her understanding and pronounced them in a simple yet profound metaphor.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood contrasts the barren landscape of Christianity with the fertile soil of Offred's imagination at Night. Through her allusions to the Sufi tradition, Atwood offers alternative ethical understanding. Perhaps tongue-in-cheek, she anticipated that someone would uncover this very thing, for, in the "Historical Notes" section of her novel, Crescent Moon alludes to a paper entitled "Krishna and Kali Elements in the State Religion of the Early Gilead Period" (380). However, the New Gilead has hidden the Sufi tradition so that only a careful attention to Offred's proverb-like narrative will illuminate it.

NOTES

[1] All references to the text are taken from Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985) and appear parenthetically in the text.

[2] See Amin Malak, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition," *Canadian Literature* 112 (Spring 1987): 9-16; Reingard M. Nischik, "Back to the Future: Margaret Atwood's Anti-Utopian Vision in *The Handmaid's Tale*," *English-American Studien* 1 (March 1987): 139-48; Roberta Rubenstein, "Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*," in *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, Ed. Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1988): 101-112.

[3] See "Epigraphs to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *New Canadian Literature* 17:2 (March 1987): 4.

[4] For a fuller discussion, see Lucy M. Freibert, "Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," in *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*, Ed. Judith McCombs (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988): 280-292.

[5] Freibert 285.

[6] "Sufism." *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of Living Faiths*. (London: Hutchinson, 1988): 189.

[7] *Living Faiths* 190.

[8] "Sufism" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987): 105.

[9] *Religion* 121.

[10] Idries Shah, *The Way of the Sufi* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969).

[11] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 1975): 13.

[12] Schimmel 14.

[13] William Stoddart, *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam* (New York: Paragon, 1986): 74.

[14] Margaret Smith, *Rabi'a the Mystic and Her Fellow-saints in Islam: Being the Life and Teachings of Rabi'a Adawiya Al-Qaysiyya of Basra Together With Some Account of the Place of the Women Saints in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984 [1928]): 2.

[15] Smith xxxiii.

[16] Recently a similar theme was developed in the film *Babette's Feast* in which the opulence of Babette's French upbringing and enjoyment of simple pleasures is contrasted with the austere and forbidding Scandinavian Puritanism.