

Multicultural Doris Lessing: Lessing through the South Asian Lens

Abstracts

Speaker: Prof. Josna Rege (President, DLS)

Keynote titled ‘World Tales: the Expansive Vision of Doris Lessing’

From childhood, Doris Lessing read voraciously and freely, without regard for institutional, disciplinary, or geographic boundaries. She had no patience for those who would pigeonhole her, as she outgrew label after label, seeking and shedding ever-widening frames, ultimately no smaller than the cosmos itself. Her interest in fables through her long immersion in Sufism and Sufi teaching stories deepened her interest in “world tales” (as her teacher, Idries Shah called them), stories that either travel or arise spontaneously in many far-flung cultures by virtue of the human mind that gives rise to them. I will briefly touch upon some of these tales and how they shaped her creative vision. The Doris Lessing Society seeks to carry forward that expanding and expansive vision. As her work does, we hope that DLS-South Asia will flourish at the borders of cultures, languages, and genres, free from fixed habits of thought, inclusive, ever-curious. May it continue to be inspired by Lessing’s own practices, many of them taking their inspiration from Asia, carrying us into and across cultures through translation, transformation, and the immortal power of storytelling.

Bionote: Josna Rege is Professor of English at Worcester State University, in Worcester, Massachusetts (USA), where she teaches world and postcolonial literatures, the modern and contemporary novel, and contemporary women’s writing. Her scholarship is on nationalism and the Indian novel in English and on South Asian women’s writing across national and linguistic boundaries. She has published a book on the Indian English novel and articles and book chapters on Doris Lessing, Anita Desai, Rukhsana Ahmad, C.S. Lakshmi, Shashi Deshpande, and others. Most recently both her teaching and scholarly interests have been focused on issues of immigrants and refugees, citizenship and democracy. Professor Rege has been a fan of Doris Lessing’s work since she was 19 years old and has served as President of the Doris Lessing Society since 2019.

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Speaker: Prof. Ratna Raman (Sri Venkateswara College, Delhi University)

Doris Lessing at New Delhi: The Beginnings of a Journey in the 1980s

At a meeting during the masters program in Delhi university in the early eighties of the previous century, we met Margaret Drabble and her historian Husband, who discussed her books and then introduced her husband Sir Michael Holroyd as the biographer to whom her friend Doris Lessing was going to leave all her papers. Did that happen? Were Lessing's papers sent to him? Lessing lived on for another thirty odd years, while Sir Holroyd, one of Britain's foremost biographers is no longer writing Lessing's definitive biography. Yet in the years inching past her centenary, it would be useful to examine Lessing's presence in India's central university in the last two decades of the twentieth century and her subsequent brief reign in the undergraduate syllabus at the turn of the century. Lessing was by this introduced into our M.Phil Program at Delhi University in the early 1980s where *The Golden Notebook* was prescribed as part of the reading material for a course on the Modern English Novel. In fact, we were introduced to Rushdie, Woolf and Lessing in this course offered our supervisor Professor GK Das, who was also an expert on E.M.Forster.. What did Lessing contribute to the 20th century novel and to feminism? This paper traces the headiness of reading *The Golden Notebook* in the 1980s in the India of those times.

Bionote: Ratna Raman teaches and tutors graduates and undergraduates in English at Sri Venkateswara College Delhi University. Her PhD thesis was on Doris Lessing and she is deeply interested in women's writing, 19th century literature, the twentieth century novel and Indian classical literature. She had a weekly column *Mind Your Language* for over three years in *The Tribune*. She writes for newspapers and news journals and has published the occasional short story. Her blog *In the Midst of Life* is at ratnaraman.blogspot.in.

Speaker: Dr Ujjal Jeet (Assistant Prof., Dept. of English, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar-143005)

The 'Free Women' of Doris Lessing with a Special Focus on the Experiential World of *The Golden Notebook*

The Golden Notebook by Doris Lessing is distinguished, primarily, in two prominent ways among others- the first that it was included in the feminist canon of the Women's Movement of 1960s and second, that it is known to have a very complex narrative structure. Lessing did not favour the first. She emphasized that *The Golden Notebook* did not extend the feminist cause of the 1960s, per se. The book dealt with the larger issues of equality and justice and the argument is proceeded in the narrative style of the text, in addition to the thematic positions and the plot construction. *The Golden Notebook* is not just Anna Wulf's personal story, rather it is an epic-like anthology of a number of sub-stories dealing with a variety of subjects of oppression, viewed from the lens of Anna Wulf's perception. The story not only deals with the binary of male-female but also refers to a number of other social divisions underlying the structure of the civilized world. The frame story of the novel is titled 'Free Women'. The current paper tries to determine Lessing's unique vision about the freedom of women and explores the novel from two stances- the gender question in *The Golden Notebook* and the distinctive narrative style of the text. The paper borrows from the

methodological assumptions of Systemic Functional Linguistics by Michael Halliday, a prominent modern functional linguist, to support the theoretical assertions. The paper, therefore, locates the rationale of the theoretical findings in the experiential universe of *The Golden Notebook*, constructed by means of the lexico-grammatical choices of the text.

Bionote: Dr Ujjal Jeet works as an Assistant Professor at the Dept. of English, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. She holds a doctoral degree in the application of theoretical assumptions of Systemic Functional Linguistics on the writings of Doris Lessing. Her interests and areas of specialization include Stylistics, Systemic Functional Linguistics and text analyses, Lessing Studies, language and power, syntax, etc. Along with her teaching and research duties, she also writes poetry and short fiction for literary journals and magazines.

Speaker: Prof. Mamunur Rahman (Islamic University, Bangladesh)
Translating Doris Lessing: South Asian Experience

This paper reflects on my experience as a translator, particularly of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*, and tends to relate it to the broader issue of translation practices in South Asia. What does it mean to be a translator from South Asia? To what extent does a translator's awareness of being a bearer of South Asian or postcolonial identity impact on the choice of source language text (SLT)? Again, does this awareness help to negotiate the gap of meaning between SLT and TLT? How are the culturally implicated words or phrases translated, and to what extent does it indicate the translator's bias? This paper seeks to answer these questions from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

Bionote: Dr. Md. Mamunur Rahman is a Professor of English at Islamic University, Kushtia-7003, Bangladesh, where he has been teaching since 1999. His awards and achievement include nomination for Japanese Government Monbukagakusho Research Scholarship (Embassy Selection) and appointment as the visiting researcher by the Graduate School of Language and Culture, Osaka University. He has successfully completed two projects sponsored by Japan Ministry of Education and Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS). His co-authored books *Portraits of "Rebels: Modernization and Its Discursive Formations in Britain, India, and Japan* and *Repetition and Diversity of Modernization: Analysis of Discursive Deconstruction of "the East and the West" from the Perspective of Foucault's "Archeology"* were published from Hiroshima in 2013 and 2021 respectively. Professor Rahman has published a fair number of articles, English short stories and translation works. His translation of Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing* was published from Dhaka in 2015.

Speaker: Dr. Sajeesh S Vappala (Dept. of English, St. Gregorios College, Kerala, India)
Multiplicity of Truths and their Implications in Doris Lessing

This paper explores the ambivalence of the fact and fiction, the actual and possible, fantasy and the real, and the personal and the universal in Doris Lessing's self-representational writing. The title self-representational writing signifies a large number of her semi-autobiographical works and the two volumes of her proper autobiographies. The present paper considers the above ambivalence as Lessing's narrative strategy for exploring multiple truths in autobiography. Her non-adherence to these three conventional dichotomies in narration evidences her non-conformity to the conventional norms of autobiographic truth. Against the definite nature of autobiographical truth, she sees her past a space of possibilities for multiple interpretations from different perspectives. Her style of crossing genre borders, possible and actual worlds, imaginary and real, fact and fiction provides her ample scope for constructing multiple truths. This paper analyses Lessing's method of exploring memory and imagination as distinct hermeneutic tools for self-interpretation and the interpretation of the past.

Bionote: Sajeesh Vappala has done his doctoral research focusing the self-narrative strategies, dialogical and relational patterning(s) in Doris Lessing. He is focused on the multidisciplinary research possibilities in the area of 'self and writing'. His current research interests are, the philosophical and psychological dimensions of self, self and writing, autobiographical truth(s), dialogues and narratives of self and fictional elements in memory. At present, he is engaged in his post-doctoral research on "Fiction as a Therapeutic Strategy in Self-writing"

Speaker: Dr. Devaki Jain

(Feminist-Economist & Author of *The Brass Notebook*)

Title: The Generous Doris Lessing

It seems miraculous if not unbelievable that I should have met Doris Lessing while she was writing her famous books. The Golden Notebook was not yet ready. I feel devastated to think that I did not preserve the books she gave me, those which preceded 'The Golden Notebook'.

It is a long story but I hope it will help or enable what is called contextual analysis. I am thinking of showing you how I met Doris partly to show you the era and the gatherings taking place in London. Most of you have heard of the Bloomsbury group (a circle of artists, writers and intellectuals including Virginia Woolf etc.) and we all know about the groups that Simone de Beauvoir had organized. It was a time when writers had much more connection with each other than I notice now. While Doris Lessing had not yet finished writing her clutch of books, she was in the process of doing 'The Golden Notebook'. Anne by herself was a well established novelist.

Doris urged me to write- write about my life and also bring in information on Indian history, Indian freedom struggle. Why was my life interesting then? I think there was a thought or a perception that I had broken the normal boundaries of young Indian girls or it could be that I was very eager to write. But I know we had a wonderful time and Doris was more interested

in India. As I wrote my memoir, certainly Doris came to my mind urging me to do that and so I brought in the Notebook idea, but as 'Brass', as I explained in the foreword to the book.

Bionote: Devaki Jain graduated from Mount Carmel College, Bangalore with gold medals for standing first in both literature as well as mathematics. She went on to graduate from Oxford on PPE and is now the honorary fellow of the college. She was a lecturer in Economics in Delhi University from 1963- 69. She moved on from teaching to full time research and publication as the director of Institute of Social Studies Trust. Over the course of her career she founded a wide range of institutions such as Development Alternatives for Women for a new era [DAWN] – a third world network of women social scientists and Institute of Social Studies Trust [ISST] – a research centre in Delhi. She has been a member of several policy making bodies in India and abroad:

- State Planning Board of Karnataka
- The erstwhile South Commission, established in 1987, chaired by Dr. Julius Nyerere and various other committees/agencies such as
- The Advisory Committee for UNDP Human Development Report on Poverty, 1997;
- The Eminent Persons Group associated with the Graca Machel Committee [UN] on the impact on children of Armed Conflict etc.

She has been a visiting fellow at Harvard University, Boston University, University of Sussex, SIAS and Oxford University.

She is the recipient of the Bradford Morse Memorial Award (1995) from the UNDP at the Beijing World Conference. She had been awarded Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in 2006 for her contribution to social justice and the empowerment of women.

She has written several books related to women's role in national and international progress. Her most recent work is her Memoir, The Brass Notebook, published by Speaking Tiger in 2020.

Speaker: Dr. Swaty Mitra (Barasat Govt. College, Kolkata)

Portrait of Ladies: In Lessing and Bengali Cinema

In 1962 Doris Lessing presented the problems of being a 'free woman' through Anna Wulf, who struggled against traps that threatened or violated that freedom. During the same time, Bengali films broke away from the conventional portraits of women and started portraying the modern women. A gamut of films started voicing concerns, heretofore unrepresented. This paper concentrates on films which portrayed the advent of the 'free woman' in Bengali films ranging from Mahanagar (1963), Charulata (1964) to 'Paromitar ek din' (2000) vis a vis the notion of women's freedom.

In Lessing women resist gendered roles (Martha, Anna, Kate Brown, Al Ith) and in their search for freedom initiate new roles for themselves. The pattern is from the individual struggle to a collective or at times a depersonalized spiraling into the spiritual. In Bengali

films, freedom for women begins within the folds of the many roles they fulfill naturally (daughter, wife, mother). In their new found capacities as economic providers, they voice their objections but often return to conformity, as they either fail to realize a need to restructure, or because they shy away from it. The journey of the new woman that begins with the collective, economic need moves to questions of personal choices and opinions. There is also a difference between the treatment of the woman's situatedness in films by male directors, whose new woman initiates protest and social change, while those by a woman director, such as Aparna Sen, have women foray inward, questing for answers to private crises. To the audience their individual voices become protests or private musing. But placed alongside the questions raised by Lessing, they establish wider perspectives.

A Comparative approach foregrounds coincidences and divergences between questions raised by Lessing and their resonances in a multicultural, polyphonic society that is reflected in Bengali films, making Lessing's visions relevant outside a white, European milieu. At the same time it shows how Bengali women directors raise concerns that go beyond the discourse of their immediate society and engage with larger ones, thus posing a global question than a parochial one.

Bionote: Swaty Mitra, Assistant Professor in English, West Bengal Education Service, currently posted in Barasat Government College, Kolkata is also a member of the Doris Lessing Society and IACLALS. She explored Doris Lessing's novels in both her M.Phil and PhD dissertations. She has been particularly drawn to Lessing's use of multivalent narrative texts and forms. She presented papers in many National and International conferences including Doris Lessing's Second Triennial in Leeds UK in 2007, as a Charles Wallace Scholar, and again presented a paper in Doris Lessing Centenary Conference held in the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK in 2019. She initiated a writing workshop in British Council, Kolkata, to commemorate Lessing's centenary in 2019 and in the same year presented a proposal to the Doris Lessing Society to begin a Chapter in South Asia, which is underway.

Speaker: Dr. Subhajit Sengupta (Dept. of English, Burdwan University)

Teaching *The Grass is Singing* in the Indian Classroom

Teaching Doris Lessing in the Indian classroom tends to be frequently determined by the similarities and overlaps between the experiences of living and growing up in colonial India and in colonial Rhodesia. Though these overlaps have obvious advantages, Indian students are required to negotiate the tripartite framework of their colonized history, their own postcolonial moment, and a white narratorial voice that is simultaneously 'colonial' and resentful of the colonial enterprise. Sage Lorna's description of Lessing as 'an expert in unsettlement' and Judith Gardiner's assessment of her as 'a colonial in exile' suggest that Lessing works both within and outside the colonial experience. Her position as a critic of colonialism complicates students' understandings of an oppressive white colonial culture, and invites revision of racial fear and antagonism. It is in light of this complex response to Lessing in the Indian classroom that this paper looks at *The Grass is Singing* where the relationship between a 'poor' white woman, Mary Turner, and a black native, Moses,

becomes an ideological paradigm that offers a variant of conventional colonizer-colonized relationships.

Bio-note: Dr Subhajit Sen Gupta, Associate Professor and former Head of the Department of English and Culture Studies, The University of Burdwan started his academic career as Lecturer in English at Raidighi College in 1999. He also taught at Krishnagar Government College and Vidyasagar University before joining The University of Burdwan. He has deep interest in European Renaissance studies, and his doctoral thesis was titled 'Genre and Meaning in Shakespeare's Histories'. He is member of The Shakespeare Society of India, and has been member of the British Shakespeare Association. Dr Sen Gupta has presented papers and published both in India and abroad. He has also been Principal Investigator in UGC-funded research projects on Indian adaptations of the drama of Shakespeare and other European playwrights. Besides the European Renaissance, his areas of interest include eighteenth-century studies, sports literature, colonial and postcolonial studies, and studies in the interplay of literature and the other arts.

STUDENTS' PAPERS:

Deeksha Samra, (Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar)

'Exploring L'écriture feminine through short stories of Doris Lessing, Ismat Chughtai and Maheswata Devi'

This research paper presents a comparative study of selected short stories of Doris Lessing, Ismat Chughtai and Maheswata Devi. Doris Lessing was a British-Zimbabwean, nobel prize winner author whose works varies from plays, novels to short stories. Whereas Ismat Chughtai was a muslim writer of Indian origin who wrote short stories in urdu. Maheswata Devi was a hindu writer of Indian origin who wrote in bengali. The three women writers, despite being from different socio-cultural backgrounds shared similar observations when it came to condition of women in the society. The theory of l'écriture feminine, as suggested by Helene Cixous, is applied on the works of the respective writers to see how these female writers dealt with various issues of women in their works. Their work highlights various socio-cultural factors that effected lives of women. The comparative study of various female characters portrayed by these writers reflects on how these women effectively highlighted mindsets of women as they dealt with rules and regulations of society. The research also compares other aspects of short stories like, plot of stories, socio-cultural belief system that effected women negatively and sexuality of women through the eyes of the respective writers. The paper will conclude how writings of these women writers successfully contributed to world of female writers who wrote about women.

Bionote: Deeksha Samra is currently pursuing Masters of Philosophy from Guru Nanak De University, Amritsar. Her research work mainly involves Critical Discourse Analysis and

Systemic Functional Grammar. She is studying Margaret Thatcher's speeches to see how Thatcher used language to persuade people.

Oindrila Dey (Bethune College, Kolkata)

'War and Illusive Peace: Explorations of Collective Trauma in Lessing's *Martha Quest* and Waheed's *The Collaborator*'

The purpose of the paper is to explore and discuss the traumatic legacies of war by drawing comparisons between Doris Lessing's novel *Martha Quest* and *The Collaborator* by Mirza Waheed as we wait at the brink of another large scale one. Just like Lessing's *Martha* suffocated in her destitute African farm, Waheed's nineteen-year-old protagonist lives in a valley turned graveyard where he shuffles through corpses for IDs and weapons. Both *Martha* and the nameless narrator begin to discover inconsistencies in the way others speak and act, leading them to distrust people and their surroundings. To study these two selected books, this paper uses Jeffery C. Alexander et al.'s *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* and Kai. T. Erikson's *Collective Trauma* as the theoretical framework. Both narrations take on the task of portraying the realities of battle. As a result, the inquiry indicates that these two semi-autobiographical fictional novels, through memories of the past, present a compelling account of endless pain, establishing the reality that moral responsibility should be shared rather than borne solely by individuals.

Bionote: Oindrila Dey is an English literature Master's graduate from Bethune College, the University of Calcutta, Kolkata. Her research areas include memory in literature, scar studies and how trauma intermingles between the two, with particular focus on children's literature and the exploration of the erased queerness in myths and film noirs.

Sudipta Dutta, (West Bengal State University, Kolkata)

'Womanhood Reinscribed: Relating the Preface to *The Golden Notebook* and Ashapura Devi's *The First Promise*'

Doris Lessing's groundbreaking work *The Golden Notebook* (1962) is well-known among the critics for the novel's structural aspects. The frame narrative, the colour symbolism, the central theme of 'breakdown' as Lessing herself describes it- are some of the areas that researchers are mostly concerned with. But, as morning shows the day and a preface shows what is an author up to in the work that follows, this paper will focus on the preface and something that, according to the novelist herself, is not the central theme- the women's question. Lessing somewhat ridicules, in her preface to the novel which she wrote nine years after the novel was first published, the contemporary critics who have perceived her novel "as being about the sex war." Lessing's novel may not be dealing with the women's question centrally, but the words she spends in her preface on the issue of gender can fit in perfectly to describe another literary venture that was going on parallelly at the same time in India, which Jasodhara Bagchi calls "the intergenerational feminist trilogy" by Ashapura Devi. My paper will particularly take up the first novel of the trilogy which won the Rabindra Puraskar in 1965 and Jnanpith Award in 1976- *Prothom Protishruti* (*The First Promise*) (1964) and

measure the possibility of situating sections of Lessing's preface as a foreword to Devi's novel.

Lessing in her preface writes that her women readers were angry with her for dealing with those topics that they did not want men to 'overhear'. Elaine Showalter in her 1979 work "Towards a Feminist Poetics" talks, along with emphasizing upon the importance of female subculture and the responsibility of the gynocritics in unveiling this world. Compared to Lessing who perspicuously pronounces her political stance, Devi is more subtle in her expression but she leaves no stone unturned to bring to the reader the graphic details of Bengali women's experimental world within the inner quarter of the house or the 'andarmahal' of the late colonial period in her magnum opus published fifteen years prior to Showalter's work. Like Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Devi's *The First Promise* touch upon 'petty personal problems' and both the texts prove to some extent that the 'personal' is not, in Lessing's words "uniquely one's own."

Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, "Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of woman." Devi in her novel tried to do away with that myth as she considered the very word "woman" as "a symbol of eternal mystery and enchantment." My paper will also seek to relate the famous expression used by Lessing in her *The Golden Notebook*- that is the "Free Women" Devi's depiction of the women protagonist Satyabati who carries out a lifelong struggle for "emancipation."

Bionote: Sudipta Dutta is an independent researcher who has just passed his postgraduate examination conducted by Department of English Literature and Language of West Bengal State University, Kolkata-700126, West Bengal, India with the First class First rank. He graduated in 2019 from one of the most renowned colleges in West Bengal- Barrackpore Rastraguru Surendranath College. He has been presenting papers at various international and national seminars, webinars and conferences since his undergraduate days. West Bengal State University, New Literaria-An International Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, Sarojini Naidu Vanita Mahavidyala, Hyderabad, Serampore College, Midnapore College and Berhampore Girls' College are among the many reputed institutions where he has presented his research works. He is also a part of the organizing technical team at Centre of Studies in Gender, Culture and Media, West Bengal State University. His primary areas of research interests are- myth, folklore, ecocriticism, Dalit literature, partition studies and popular culture.

Anutosh Sinha ((Jadavpur University, Kolkata)

'Treatment of Indigenous Subjects in Lessing's Short Stories'

Many of Doris Lessing's short stories, specifically the African stories, have delved into the indigenous cultures and brought out multiple aspects of that society to the readers from all over the world. The voice of the indigenous cultures is reflected in her writings, but they are never overexplained or misrepresented. Her settings, plots, characters covertly say a lot about the struggle of those communities. Her unique way of telling stories impart knowledge, make people aware, as well as critic the usual ways of living- of past, present and prospective future.

I shall try to analyse how she deals with (indigenous cultures, their, women, nature etc.) and raises their questions of identity, alienation, subjugation etc. I shall use the lens of postcolonialism and orientalism to assess her treatment of the aforementioned themes. I shall draw references from similar themed works by vernacular and English language authors/creators from the Indian subcontinent, like the writer Mahasweta Devi, and filmmakers Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, to study how Lessing's approach resembles and departs from theirs. I have chosen her short stories for discussion because they deal with a wide array of themes related to the indigenous subjects. Thus, I aim to understand Lessing's broader approach towards the indigenous question more compositely and comprehensively by drawing parallel to the approach maintained by the authors from Indian subcontinent while dealing with similar subjects.

Bionote: Anutosh Sinha is currently pursuing his M.A(4th semester) in English Literature from Jadavpur University. He has completed a Translator's Training Programme from NTM, Mysore. He has presented one academic paper at the International Conference, titled 'Renaissance Man: Re-Appraisal and Re-Invention' organized by Jadavpur University, another on Gender Studies and Women Empowerment, organized by NIIT, Agartala. Email address- anutoshsinha1998@gmail.com
