

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

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Doris Lessing straddled continents. She was born in Asia, came of age on the African continent and then returned home to England where her parents' ancestors had mostly lived, although the nuclear family of the twentieth century had pretty much shaken off the mud around its roots as it settled firmly around new and alien soil. Lessing lived in London for upwards of fifty years and travelled to different parts of the world, exploring and trying to connect with the world she lived in. However, her writing, fictional and non-fictional, has possibly travelled more than she did, in her own lifetime and after. It is fitting that her work has a wide, global reach, given the eclectic ideas and perspectives that she engaged with, time and again.

Even while Lessing did make brief visits to different parts of Asia, India is a country that she never dropped in on. So, the title of my paper, which speaks of a journey at Delhi University which began in the 1980s, has more to do with my own engagement with Doris Lessing's fiction and collected essays that were slowly becoming available in the odd bookshop or at the pavement book-spread hosted by the itinerant Sunday bookseller. This is perhaps the way most readers engage with writers, through their work and the significance it holds for them, as narratives continue to be disseminated through time and space into entirely different cultural contexts and situations. Lessing's narratives of the 1950s highlighted for me in the 1980s the restrictions faced by women within homes and in public spaces, despite legislation that guaranteed them equal rights with men. Literature provides a significant intervention after any right is legislated and before its incorporation into the consciousness of any given community.

At an English lecture in the course of the Master's program at Delhi University in 1983, we met Margaret Drabble and her historian husband Michael Holroyd. After fielding questions about her own novels, Drabble was asked about her friendship with Doris Lessing. She shared with us the information that her husband was to be the future biographer and that Doris Lessing was planning to leave all her papers with him. While Lessing was to live on for another thirty years, Sir Michael Holroyd, who was knighted in 2007, was no longer slated to write Lessing's biography by then. Her papers were passed on to Patrick French, who had written a riveting biography of V. S. Naipaul, a colonial writer settled in England. Lessing died in 2013 and, sadly, Patrick French himself passed away in 2023, having done substantial work on Lessing's biography which

will surely heighten the connections between her life and her fiction and the constant criss-crossing between former colonies and their outposts.

In 1979 Delhi University began its MPhil program in English, and Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* was introduced as part of a course on the twentieth-century novel, along with writers such as Rudyard Kipling, Virginia Woolf and Salman Rushdie. Lessing's magnum opus was the last novel in the list of essential primary readings, which allowed us to examine how writers from the colonizing country engaged with India and the world around them. *The Golden Notebook* (Lessing) and *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie) came at the tail end of the spectrum and were the most complex texts that we had engaged with because we were looking at lives being lived in the immediate past. Lessing (born in Kermanshah and having come of age in Southern Rhodesia) wrote of the Second World War, Southern Africa, Europe, and Communism, tracing her narrative through female characters who peopled her narrative in Africa and in Britain in a format of notebook and autobiographical novel that was completely new.

Bombay-born Salman Rushdie, who left India for England in the mid-1960s, tightrope-walked with language and magic realism, creating a voice for the recently decolonized subject in India's tumultuous twentieth century. Although Lessing never actually visited India at any time, colonial interrogations were in place and Lessing's *TGN* allowed women to find new ways of examining themselves as subjects in a modern patriarchal world. Examining issues of race and class and colony, Lessing's fiction introduced women characters who would provide a valid perspective from "the filter which is a woman's way of looking at life" (*TGN* xvi). Academia, which had been immersed until then in New Criticism, was now opening up to a plethora of readings such as structuralism, deconstruction, new historicism, feminism and Marxism.

In the years inching past her centenary, it is useful to examine Lessing's presence in India's premier central university at Delhi from 1979 to the first decade of the twenty-first century. It was Professor G. K. Das, an E. M. Forster specialist, who put Lessing on the MPhil map, while locating her in the long tradition of English writers whose narratives engaged with the post-colonial world through the English language. Even after Independence in 1947, English was not only the language of power and academia, but also addressed the aspirations and anxieties of women in independent India who struggled to emerge from cocooned or oppressed lives. More locally, when MPhil students at Delhi University read *The Golden Notebook*, there was a trickle-down effect as they in turn discussed Lessing with their undergraduate students; the new syllabus revisions in 1998 introduced *TGN* into the undergraduate curriculum for students enrolling for a three-year programme in English Honours. Lessing's fiction was also being offered in other universities in India.

Her inclusion in the canon at the university provided a context that continues to be significant not only in personal memory but in enabling an understanding of the extraordinary inputs that Lessing and other contemporary novelists provided through their writing; namely their engagement with a