DSC Prize Shortlisting: Reflections on South Asian literature

blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2015/12/07/dsc-prize-shortlisting-2016-reflections-on-south-asian-literature/

2015-12-7

On 26 November, the DSC Prize for South Asian literature shortlist was announced at LSE for the third year in a row. The novels selected were ***Family Life*** *by Akhil Sharma (Faber & Faber, UK);* ***Sleeping on Jupiter*** *by Anuradha Roy (Hachette, India);* ***Hangwoman*** *by K.R. Meera (Translated by J Devika; Penguin, India);* ***The Book of Gold Leaves*** *by Mirza Waheed (Viking/Penguin India);* ***The Lives of Others*** *by Neel Mukherjee (Vintage/Penguin Random House, UK); and* ***She Will Build Him A City*** *by Raj Kamal Jha (Bloomsbury, India).*

After the announcement, Sonali Campion caught up with the five members of the jury about why they accepted the invitation to participate on the panel and their experiences of judging the novels.

What drew you to being on the panel for the DSC prize?

Dr Syed Manzoorul Islam: When I was invited into the jury panel I thought it was a wonderful opportunity. First of all this will give me access to all these books. Secondly, I have been teaching South Asian literature, and I'm in constant need of ideas and the authors are very creative.

I wanted to also get in touch with other jury members. We're a cross section: three professors of English, one a bookseller and another one is a journalist, and I wanted to see how we come together in coming to an agreement about what's the best in South Asia.

As a successful fiction writer yourself, how do you find the process of judging the work of others?

Extremely difficult. Judging a story on its merit begs many questions – whether this is original or not, whether this is an experimental work, whether this is something based on reality, what elements go into its construction. The ultimate question is how well all these things come together.

I always believe that a novel should have a rich interiority. The interior space should open up and draw you in. There is one element I was on the constant lookout for. For example, *Hangwoman* very cleverly introduced the whole political question of whether the death penalty should be abolished. It doesn't really give any judgement, and that is what I like because I also believe that novels should be open-ended. They should work as a kind of rich interior space where you can enter with your own stories and narratives and come up with more.

What do you feel the challenges of translating in South Asian languages are? On the one hand you want to make it accessible, on the other – what is lost?

I really am afraid of translating other people's work, because then you just cannot have the licence to reconstruct or rearrange anything. But unless you have an extremely powerful hold on two languages you just miss many points.

Translations have to be done, and I believe that the best translations imagine the story in the relevant life and time and see what elements make it come together. I don't believe in forcing my language to contain all the elements of a foreign culture, but the language should grow into the wall of the original text and contain the original personality.

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Mark Tully, Chair of the jury panel, begins the shortlist announcement in LSE's Shaw Library. Image credit: DSC

What attracted you to the role of being on the jury for the DSC Prize?

Mark Tully: It was something I'd never done before and it gives me a chance to get much more up to speed with the literature in this area. I find in my sort of job and life you spend a lot of time reading very heavy texts rather than books. And I thought it was a good opportunity to do something I always like to do, which is to promote South Asia and promote interest in South Asia.

You were born in India and you've had an amazing journalistic career that has tracked a lot of the key events that are dealt with in the books. Does your experience affect the way you read?

Yes, certainly. The best example is *The Book of Gold Leaves*, because I covered Kashmir when the anti-Indian movement was a its height in the 1990s. Reading a novel about Kashmir made me realise how little I'd been able to capture the real agony that was going on, including the suffering in the army. I did sometimes comment on the central police who came from all over India and landed in Kashmir. They found themselves in an atmosphere where everyone was totally hostile to them and they had to stand around on the streets, knowing that they were hated by the people around them, knowing they couldn't even communicate with them because they didn't speak the language. So in that way, yes the book in Kashmir was the best example really of how it related to something that I had covered.

And was that very emotive for you?

Yes it was, very much so. And it made me sad that this dispute still goes on.

As someone who's written mainly non-fiction, but also some fiction, what do you think the advantages are to communicating ideas through novels?

The advantage is the freedom it gives you. But there's a lot of similarity as well, particularly in the research you have to do. In fact, for me anyhow, journalism is really about telling stories, just as these books are about telling stories. When I was judging the books, one of the things I looked for was: was it a story that really grabbed me?

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So have you enjoyed being on the jury for the DSC Prize?

Karen Allman: Oh it's been enlightening, it's been delightful to read the range of books, and also to read a lot of work that isn't always available United States. I think it's much more available more available in the UK, which is a

problem, because there's so much interest in South Asian and Asian writing in general in the states.

Have you been aware of – particularly since there have been more film adaptations of South Asian literature – a growing interest in America? What's your sense of what the audience is?

Oh absolutely. We actually co-produce a smaller version of a travelling Jaipur, *Words on Water* it's called, where we have anywhere from 3-8 authors visiting, some of the DSC Prize winners have spoken.

It's a real mix of people who are interested. We have a real audience for literary fiction. There's also a large contingent of people in Seattle from all over Asia. The first South Asians to emigrate to the US came in the 1890s, so it's a long-standing and integrated community. There's also strong interest in the pan Asian-American community from Asia, or that's Asian American. So I think people are really hungry for these voices.

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Why did you accept the invitation to be on the jury?

Dr Neloufer de Mel: It's nice to do this every three or four years because it's a really good way of keeping abreast with the trends in South Asian literature, with what people are writing about and what they're thinking about. So when I was invited to be on the jury I immediately I felt it was a privilege and a great opportunity for me.

Do you think there are trends in the way that novelists are writing about women in South Asia?

Certainly. There's a very significant highlighting of gender-based violence, and gender-based sexual violence, of women's domestic roles and the interface of their public and professional lives. There is also discussion around the amazing resilience of these women, and their negotiations with their past, all of that written in very compelling ways.

I think writers are much more conscious about how they portray female characters, and I would say all the books shortlisted, even longlisted, have very significant women characters, a lot of them have female protagonists. So you've gone away from the stereotypes of the women, and you're getting much more complex characters.

The prize is going to be announced in Sri Lanka – how do you feel about that?

Absolutely fabulous. I'm so happy the Galle literary festival is starting up again. The DSC secretariat brings down as many of the shortlisted authors as possible, which will be really good for the festival and also for our students, you know, giving them exposure to writers. I think that's enormously exciting.

The people doing the prize really should be recommended because it's not just about organising a prize and giving money. I think in their commitment to bringing the writers to the festival and the jury members here, there's a real support for South Asian literature there.

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What drew you to being a juror?

Dr Dennis Walder: Well I already have some familiarity with Asian writing. I think anybody who's interested in modern fiction should really pay attention to what is coming out of Asia and also what's been written about Asia.

I also find that meeting with the other jurors, they all come from very different backgrounds and contexts. That's very interesting because you have the opportunity to discuss the literature of a particular area with people who have a very different take from yourself. I live in London, I've been to parts of Asia quite a few times, but my fellow jurors were all born there and brought up there and really know that area of the world very intimately.

You are a postcolonial literature specialist, do you think there is anything particularly distinctive about South Asian literature in that context?

It's probably true to say that most of the novels touch on the imperial inheritance, the colonial inheritance in some way. But that's something they have with writers from other former British colonies and in some ways that's not the most interesting thing about them anymore.

It's more a case of the distinction between the thematic obsessions of South Asia based authors on the one hand and the interests of, say, UK-based writers on the other. So for example, the Asian writers that are on the list, and indeed the ones not on the list, give much stronger sense of politics and of social pressures, of class, and indeed of history, than many UK-based novelists who write very well but are relatively narrow in their preoccupations. That's not unique to Asian writers, it's true of writers from the Caribbean, and other ex-British colonies.

What do you think of the inclusion of translated works in this prize?

It's a positive because it means by definition that the writer and the publishers are aiming to make their work accessible to a wider world. They also want to reach an audience beyond even the large audience that, for example, Malayalam. It's good to have novels in a fiction prize like this that are in translation. It does pose difficulties because you sometime feel "is this really what the author was writing?" These are familiar problems to people who deal with translation.

To find out more about the DSC Prize, catch up with South Asia @ LSE posts from last year's shortlisting or visit dscprize.com.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read ourcomments policy before posting.

About the Authors

Dr Syed Manzoorul Islam *is Professor of English at the University of Dhaka, award winning fiction writer and an art critic who has curated Bangladesh art exhibitions in UK, India and Iran.*

Mark Tully *is a renowned journalist who has commentated on a wide range of issues affecting the South Asian region for over four decades.*

Karen Allman *is a highly respected book seller and literary coordinator based out of Seattle, USA.*

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Dr Dennis Walder *Emeritus Professor of Literature at the Open University, UK, who has authored several articles and books on 19th and 20th century literature*

Sonali Campion *is Editor of the South Asia @ LSE blog. She recently completed an MSc in Comparative Politics at LSE and also works at Democratic Audit UK. She tweets @sonalijcampion.*