

Women's, Gender, and Sexuality



PennState

Studies Department

Coffee Hour Talk

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ARTS

“Helpless Against the Tides: The Spirit of the Times in Doris Lessing's Autobiographies”



Maria Olausson, Professor of English Literature, Linnaeus University, Sweden

Doris Lessing's novels can be considered among the most important sources of feminist inspiration for a generation of women who came to be involved in activist work in the 1960s and 1970s. Her descriptions of independent women dedicated to political work are based on her own experiences in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and London in the 1940s and 1950s, and often express a deep sense of disillusionment and critical distance to political activism. Lessing's troubled relation to feminism was brought out in her 1987 publication *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*, based on the Massey lectures of 1985, where she discusses the power and dangers of religious and political movements. In this presentation I want to read Lessing's autobiographies, *Under My Skin* (1994) and *Walking in the Shade* (1997) against the ideas expressed in the Massey lectures with a particular focus on how Lessing depicts the difficulties of depicting and explaining “the spirit of the times”.

Maria Olausson is Professor of English at the Linnaeus University in Sweden. She has published on Feminist theory and African literature, especially African women writers. She is the author of *Three Types of Feminist Criticism and Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Forceful Creation in Harsh Terrain: Place and Identity in Three Novels by Bessie Head* as well as the edited collection *Africa Writing Europe: Oppositions, Entanglements, Juxtapositions*. Her teaching and research interests are in African literature, Gender and Postcolonial Studies. She is currently working on a project entitled *Narrating the Animal Subject: Concurrences as Narrative Strategy*.

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