

Visit and Guest Lecture by Dr. Rafat Ali



On the 22 February 2016, at 10:30 am all the students of the Department of English were gathered in the Audio Visual room for the much awaited guest lecture by Dr. Rafat Ali, Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Jadavpur University Kolkata. He has a PhD from Jadavpur University under the supervision of Prof. Supriya Chaudhuri, where he worked on the representation of Islam and the Muslim world in medieval and early modern travel writing. He has since contributed to this area of study through various publications and conference papers at national and international conferences, panel discussions, special lectures and as resource person at several Refresher Courses and workshops. In 2010 he received a Short Research Visit Grant from Charles Wallace India Trust and was also invited by the St. Philips Center for Inter-Faith Relations at Leicester, UK to deliver a talk on 'Crusades, Conversion and Co-existence in Medieval Travel Writing'. His recent publications include, 'Islam and Early Modern Orientalism' in *JUES* vol.22, ed. Ananda Lal and 'On the Road to *Dar-al-Shahadah*' in *Believing and Belonging*, ed. A. R. Kidwai (New Delhi: Viva Books) forthcoming.

The lecture began after the welcome note and a short introduction by Ms. Kasturi Ghosh, Assistant Professor Department of English. The topic of the talk was 'Re-orienting the idea of Europe: Medieval and Early Modern English/ European Literature'. Dr. Rafat Ali very correctly pointed out how the history of the world is

interpreted and presented from a European perspective, where all history end up into the history of Europe or in relation to Europe, i.e., encounter with European civilization in war or as a colony. He further questioned the existence of Europe both geographically and historically, and pointed out how the idea of this continent exists only in literature and art and the Europeanized history or the false history of the world. The lecture also discussed in detail the degree of civilization attained by the Europeans in comparison to other races and religious groups that predated this civilization, and how the European civilization negated them all, calling itself superior and the only civilized race. Which consequently bred suspicion and insecurity, created binaries like the civilized and the uncivilized, superior and inferior races, the ruler and the ruled, the fair and the dark skinned, the Christians and the others, believers and the non-believers and so on and so forth; which resulted in forming stereotypes and attacking non Europeans, non Christians, and especially Muslims as the enemies.



He also traced back to the renaissance and through paintings and literature proved how all races co-existed at that time, and binaries or distinctions and divisions did not exist. Like the identity of Europe, the myth of the European sensitivity as well as the idea of the true European as 'humane', 'kind', 'liberal' and

'good' were explored and found lacking. What was found was this generalizing of different people like the Greeks, the Romans, the English or the French and the Spanish as Europeans, a simultaneous and constant othering of the non European races; which again generalized all non-Europeans as stereotypical uncivilized races, barbarians and pagans. The professor urged his audience as students of English literature to guard against these stereotypes, and not take history and literature as sacrosanct or as the ultimate truth, but to read different perspectives and give equal weightage to all opinions, races, cultures and religions, in order to form a more comprehensive idea of the world that we are living in. To take off the European glasses and to accept, appreciate and learn from the differences and diversities that make the world a truly interesting place. Only then can we break the boundaries of these binaries and peacefully as well as amicably co-exist with each other.

A short interlude followed this lecture, where Monika Rana, 3rd year English Honours recited her poems in Nepali and Hindi. There after we moved into the next session of the talk where the speaker took questions from the audience, which was very engaging and interesting. At around 1:00pm the lecture was rounded up by presenting Dr. Rafat Ali with a few tokens of appreciation and an eloquent vote of thanks by Mr. Peter Lepcha, Head of the Department of English. The students and the faculty left the venue with a new perspective of Europe and a very novel critical angle to put to use in their future readings of European history, literature and art.

Reported by

Ms. Kasturi Ghosh, Assistant Professor, Department of English, SCSC