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## WOMEN BETWEEN TWO SHORES



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At 89, British writer Doris Lessing remains strongly attached to the country of her youth, present-day Zimbabwe, to which she dedicates a large part of her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature last December. On the occasion, she denounces our “fragmenting culture, where our certainties of even a few decades ago are questioned and where it is common for young men and women, who have had years of education, to know nothing of the world”.

Véronique Tadjo, born of an Ivorian father and a French mother, lives in South Africa. Before the Ivorian crisis, she was a world traveler. She has since been in exile. “Exile begins when it is no longer possible to return to the country you left behind,” she says. She continues to travel between the worlds of literature and painting.

*Whether or not in exile, they are far from their country of birth. They travel from one place to another, by force or by choice. They live in one country, think of another. They build bonds between opposite worlds. They are ‘in-between.’ Their work, too, is manifold, universal.*

From her Parisian apartment, novelist Spôjmaï Zariâb recounts the torment of leaving Afghanistan. She was a young, happy girl in Kabul, surrounded by books, fascinated by Don Quixote, The Count of Monte-Cristo, Father Goriot, and others. Then, the Taliban arrived. She fled the bombings with her two daughters. Today, she recalls a touching short story about exile, written by Rabîndranâth Tagore, which she had nearly forgotten: *A Man from Kabul*.

As for Michal Govrin, she has always needed a certain distance to ask the right questions. She left Tel Aviv, her native city in Israel, to study in France, and then returned to live in Jerusalem. She now lives in New Jersey (United-States). She performs theatre in her novels, and writes novels when she performs, with young Jews or Palestinians, who express their own pain through writing or staging plays. ▶

► Kiran Desai, in turn, did not choose to leave India. Her mother, famous writer Anita Desai, brought her along at the age of 15, first to England and then to the United States. And it is in the New World that the young woman felt more Indian than ever before, when writing *The Inheritance of Loss*, for which she won the prestigious Booker Prize in 2006.

And what of Argentine poet María Medrano? Without leaving Buenos Aires and her suburb, she builds bridges of words longer than that of the Gulf of Hangzhou! Once a week for the past five years, she passes over the walls of the Ezeiza women's prison to animate poetry workshops. She also organizes translation workshops, since the women she works with are from different countries and continents. This bridge between inside and outside which breaks through linguistic barriers, has become a vital space for prisoners.













So many very different and, in some ways, very similar destinies. So many women between two shores.

This issue of the *Courier*, produced in collaboration with the Division for Gender Equality of the Bureau of Strategic Planning of UNESCO, however also brings you men's words. In celebration of 27 March, World Theatre Day, our Spotlight feature highlights the message of one of today's greatest stage directors, the Canadian Robert Lepage. And to celebrate World Poetry Day on 21 March, we pay tribute to the great Tadjik poet Abu Abdullah Rudaki, who was born 1150 years ago!

In celebration of its 60th anniversary, the *Courier* explores several new features this year. Last month, it became interactive and we thank all our readers who sent us their comments. This month we have re-introduced the PDF format. Take a moment to revisit our last edition, "Languages matter"; you will find all the articles in PDF format.

Jasmina Šopova

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# Doris Lessing: Is it so impossible to imagine such bare poverty?

*Doris Lessing, Nobel Prize in Literature 2007, grew up in today's Zimbabwe, before moving to London in 1949. Greatly attached to the country of her youth, which rejected her as undesirable for her anti-apartheid stand, the British novelist devoted a large part of her Nobel lecture, "On not winning the Nobel Prize", to it. Excerpts.*



© Chris Saunders

**Doris Lessing:** « The storyteller is deep inside every one of us».

I am standing in a doorway looking through clouds of blowing dust to where I am told there is still uncut forest. Yesterday I drove through miles of stumps, and charred remains of fires where, in '56, there was the most wonderful forest I have ever seen, all now destroyed. People have to eat. They have to get fuel for fires.

This is north-west Zimbabwe in the early eighties, and I am visiting a friend who was a teacher in a school in London. He is here "to help Africa," as we put it. He is a gently idealistic soul and what he found in this school shocked him into a depression, from which it was hard to recover. This school is like every other built after Independence. It consists of four large brick rooms side by side, put straight into the dust, one two three four, with a half room at one

end, which is the library. In these classrooms are blackboards, but my friend keeps the chinks in his pocket, as otherwise they would be stolen. There is no atlas or globe in the school, no textbooks, no exercise books, or biros. In the library there are no books of the kind the pupils would like to read, but only tomes from American universities, hard even to lift, rejects from white libraries, or novels with titles like *Weekend in Paris* and *Felicity Finds Love*. [...]

As I sit with my friend in his room, people drop in shyly, and everyone begs for books. "Please send us books when you get back to London," one man says. "They taught us to read but we have no books." Everybody I met, everyone, begged for books.

## I do not think many of the pupils of this school will get prizes

I was there some days. The dust blew. The pumps had broken and the women were having to fetch water from the river. Another idealistic teacher from England was rather ill after seeing what this "school" was like.

On the last day they slaughtered the goat. They cut it into bits and cooked it in a great tin. This was the much anticipated end-of-term feast: boiled goat and porridge. I drove away while it was still going on, back through the charred remains and stumps of the forest.

I do not think many of the pupils of this school will get prizes.

The next day I am to give a talk at a school in North London, a very good school, whose name we all know. It is a school for boys, with beautiful buildings and gardens.

▶ These children here have a visit from some well known person every week, and it is in the nature of things that these may be fathers, relatives, even mothers of the pupils. A visit from a celebrity is not unusual for them.

As I talk to them, the school in the blowing dust of north-west Zimbabwe is in my mind, and I look at the mildly expectant English faces in front of me and try to tell them about what I have seen in the last week. [...] I am sure that anyone who has ever given a speech will know that moment when the faces you are looking at are blank. Your listeners cannot hear what you are saying, there are no images in their minds to match what you are telling them – in this case the story of a school standing in dust clouds, where water is short, and where the end of term treat is a just-killed goat cooked in a great pot.

Is it really so impossible for these privileged students to imagine such bare poverty?

I do my best. They are polite.

I'm sure that some of them will one day win prizes.

Then, the talk is over. Afterwards I ask the teachers how the library is, and if the pupils read. In this privileged school, I hear what I always hear when I go to such schools and even universities.

"You know how it is," one of the teacher's says. "A lot of the boys have never read at all, and the library is only half used."

Yes, indeed we do know how it is. All of us.

We are in a fragmenting culture, where our certainties of even a few decades ago are questioned and where it is common for young men and women, who have had years of education, to know nothing of the world, to have read nothing, knowing only some speciality or other, for instance, computers. [...]

## We are good for irony and cynicism

We are a jaded lot, we in our threatened world. We are good for irony and even cynicism. Some words and ideas we hardly use, so worn out have they become. But we may want to restore some words that have lost their potency.



© Mark Taber

**Child holding a school book in shona, language spoken by 80% of Zimbabwe's population.**

We have a treasure-house of literature, going back to the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans. It is all there, this wealth of literature, to be discovered again and again by whoever is lucky enough to come upon it. A treasure. Suppose it did not exist. How impoverished, how empty we would be.

We own a legacy of languages, poems, histories, and it is not one that will ever be exhausted. It is there, always.

We have a bequest of stories, tales from the old storytellers, some of whose names we know, but some not. The storytellers go back and back, to a clearing in the forest where a great fire burns, and the old shamans dance and sing, for our heritage of stories began in fire, magic, the spirit world. And that is where it is held, today.

Ask any modern storyteller and they will say there is always a moment when they are touched with fire, with what we like to call inspiration, and this goes back and back to the beginning of our race, to the great winds that shaped us and our world. ▶



▶ The storyteller is deep inside every one of us. The story-maker is always with us. Let us suppose our world is ravaged by war, by the horrors that we all of us easily imagine. Let us suppose floods wash through our cities, the seas rise. But the storyteller will be there, for it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us -for good and for ill. It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth-maker, that is our phoenix, that represents us at our best, and at our most creative.

That poor girl trudging through the dust, dreaming of an education for her children, do we think that we are better than she is - we, stuffed full of food, our cupboards full of clothes, stifling in our superfluities?

I think it is that girl, and the women who were talking about books and an education when



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**We are a jaded lot? Not all of us!**

they had not eaten for three days, that may yet define us.

*Doris Lessing, Nobel Prize in Literature 2007*



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**Véronique Tadjó: «It would be interesting to see where women's literature is heading in the long term.»**

## Véronique Tadjó, a collector of travel souvenirs

*Exile begins when you can no longer return to the country you left behind, says poet, writer, and painter Véronique Tadjó, laureate of the Grand Prix Littéraire d'Afrique Noire 2005. Born in 1955 in Paris and raised in Abidjan, she now lives in South Africa after having traveled throughout the world.*

*Interview by Bernard Magnier, French journalist and specialist in African literature.*

**How did your numerous travels contribute to your work?**

I can almost associate each of my texts with a little flag. Each text is marked by the place in which I wrote it. I borrow and incorporate a number of ele- ▶

► ments gleaned here and there, much like a collector bringing back souvenirs from her trips.

I have traveled extensively since birth. I married a journalist, and continued traveling: England, Mexico, Nigeria, Kenya, and today, South Africa.

My first book of poems, *Latérite* (Hatier, 1997), was born from crossing the desert after I left Paris having completed my studies. I was homesick. I told myself that it would be good to travel slowly, to return to the Côte d'Ivoire by land and discover the desert I was dreaming of. Rather than taking pictures, I began to write in order to capture my experiences. This is the voyage that truly triggered my desire to write.

***Are you sensitive to your immediate environment when you write?***

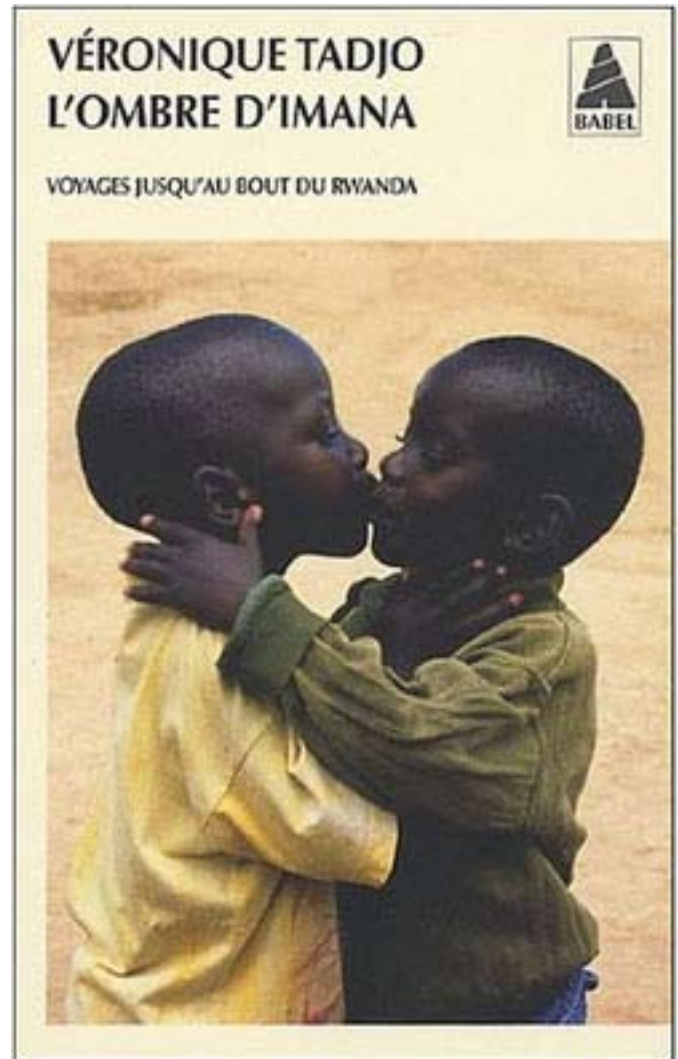
Absolutely. When you live with people, you end up integrating their hopes and problems. You would like to know them better, to better understand them. I do not like to lock myself up to write. I want to be able to participate in daily life, share, communicate and exchange ideas.

Sometimes I tell myself that, had I not lived in Kenya, I would probably not have been as sensitive to the Rwandan genocide. There were so many Rwandan refugees in Nairobi, and the newspapers frequently covered the topic while I lived there. Writing *The Shadow of Imana* (Actes Sud, 2000), the book that enabled me to exorcise Rwanda, was thus a logical outcome.

***It has been a long time since you lived in Côte d'Ivoire. How do you experience the Ivorian crisis?***

For a long time, I traveled, my mind and heart at peace, telling myself that I could return home when I wanted to. Things changed with the Ivorian crisis. I had the impression the door suddenly closed and left me outside. I found it difficult to understand what was happening, how we got there. I felt alienated, as if everything had to be started all over again.

I believe that exile begins when you can no longer return to the country you left behind, when the way back becomes painful. But somehow, I think that many Ivorians felt the same thing. This idea that the



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**Cover of the book that enabled Véronique Tadjo to exorcise Rwanda.**

change was irremediable. The feeling that nothing will ever be the same.

***Numerous writers throughout the world live in exile. Do you think that being in exile is beneficial for writing?***

There is desired exile and forced exile. When we are in exile but are serene, we may be in a 'comfortable' position. In fact, distance can help put things into perspective, take a few steps back. We have the possibility of removing ourselves from the daily grind and to keep our head above water. We can adopt the position of an observer, a luxury that is beyond the reach of those who permanently live in the thick of the action. ►



©UNESCO/ Véronique Tadjó

« Life cycle », painting by Véronique Tadjó, photographed by the artist in her garden in Nairobi (Kenya).

▶ However, exile can only be serene if we can return to our country regularly. Otherwise, we end up living off blurry memories which becomes an uncomfortable situation. The country is then more a myth than a reality.

I see no advantage in living in a sad exile because it is painful. Although it may drive one to write, it may also lead to great despair. As the memory of little things fades, self-awareness falls apart. And we are left with a difficult choice: forget our previous life and adopt a new one or live as if we were skinned alive.

***Since the publication of your first book, the place of women in the African literary landscape has considerably evolved. What do you make of this evolution?***



Women make their voices heard and demonstrate a remarkable—and logical—dynamism in writing. It has taken many generations to allow them to have access to education. It has also taken many generations to allow them to speak up in societies where their voices were not encouraged. With women's entry into the workforce and into the political arena, mentalities have finally evolved. Today, the young generation benefits from a greater open-mindedness and an enhanced mobility.

It is regrettable, however, that living in Europe remains a rite of passage for those wishing to make a name for themselves that transcends the borders of their country of origin. This is due, in part, to the continent's lack of editorial infrastructure.

I also worry about globalization, which absorbs all forms of writing to better commercialize them. It would be interesting to see where women's literature is heading in the long term. What are its trends? In what ways are women's discourses different from those of their male predecessors? Somewhat like in politics.

***What is the state of youth literature? How do you see the evolution of its production in the last few years?***

Youth literature is, in my opinion, the missing link. We cannot have a thriving literature able to reach its public if young people haven't been taught to enjoy books and reading. Thankfully, things are evolving quite well. African editors have understood that there is a promising market for this type of literature, as youth under the age of 15 represents nearly half of the African population.

The themes and illustrations of books for youth are more and more varied. This is a good thing, because we have to encourage young people to develop their imagination.



# Spôjmaï Zariâb : The Man from Kabul



© UNESCO/Dominique Roger

History turned every Afghan into Tagore's *The Man from Kabul*.

***Spôjmaï Zariâb was ten years old when the compulsory veil was abolished in Afghanistan in 1959. The future novelist led a happy life in Kabul, surrounded by books. Then, the Taliban seized power. In 1990, she took refuge in France with her two daughters.***

You ask me what exile is...

Years ago, in a quiet corner of Kabul, I read the Persian translation of *The Man from Kabu*, a short story by Rabîndranâth Tagore.

With his magical words, this talented Indian writer made me discover the pain of exile... but it was an economic exile: an Afghan flees misery, leaving his wife and eight-year old daughter behind, and gets lost in the vastness of India in search of work.

His path crosses that of a little girl. She reminds him of his own daughter and he feels great affection

for her. Nostalgia and memories often compel him to visit her, his pockets full of candy and small change.

But exile's meanders and to life's surprises ends up leading him to jail, where he spends 15 years.

Once he regains his freedom, his heart beating and his pockets full of candy and small change, he heads off in the hope of finding the little Hindu girl he once knew. Arriving at her doorstep, he is surprised by the crowd's uproar and the hubbub of the music. Dazzled by spangles and lights, he looks for the girl and is brought before the bride.

Gaping, he ponders over the tyranny of time, and thinks of his own daughter who, in his absence, has



© Mercedes Uribe

**"I was young and had no concerns other than to accompany Don Quixote in his adventures."**



▶ also become a woman. He thinks of her childhood, stolen from him, and of his fatherhood forever lost.

This short story shattered me, but I was young at the time and did not know what poverty was. I had no concerns other than to accompany Don Quixote in his adventures, share Renée's melancholy, and laugh with Molière, discover the enamoured Madame de Raynal, sit by the lake with Lamartine and by the peaceful Don river with Cholokhov, share the pains of the old Goriot, follow the Count of Monte-Cristo's ploys for revenge, cry with Fantine and Cosette, scrutinize the noble words of Tolstoï, shed tears upon Werther's death... Haunted by Dostoïevski, I would visit his house of the dead, change into an insect with Kafka, and wander behind the walls of his castle, listen to the works of Sartre and hear Hemingway's bell toll, search for things passed with Proust, admire Kazantzakis' Christ re-crucified, and experience hundred years of solitude of Garcia Marquez, all the while forgetting the man from Kabul and his suffering in exile.

I, who was sheltered from misery and who had only known war in books, saw myself also sheltered from exile... until the end of my days.

At the time, I ignored that one day, alas, history's unfair hand would turn every Afghan into the man from Kabul by Tagore. That history's folly would divide an entire nation and disperse the Afghans to all four corners of the world, far from their fathers, mothers, children, sisters and brothers.

Around me, I do not know of a single family that was spared the torment of exile, and that, although without having read Tagore, did not live the story of the man from Kabul and did not feel his pain within.

You ask me what I am thinking of...

What could I be thinking of when I see developing countries, still struggling to free themselves from the claws of misery, fall victim to the devastation of war? What could I be thinking of when I hear poor



© UNESCO/Neguine Zariab

**Spôjmaï Zariâb : "Where is the remedy for the insanity we call 'war'?"**

people being condemned for knocking on distant doors to save themselves? What could I be thinking of when I see that, throughout the centuries, neither religion, philosophy, literature, art, science or technology have been able to appease the hunger in the World's belly and to find a remedy for the insanity we call 'war'?

Why have they not appeased it...? Why have they not found it...?

This time, I am asking you.

Do you have an answer...?

*Spôjmaï Zariâb, Afghan novelist living in Paris*



# Michal Govrin : the curse of wandering

*Michal Govrin reveals the passionate – even erotic – dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Born in Tel Aviv, the novelist, poet and theatre director today lives between Israel and the United States. She is the laureate of the 2003 Acum Prize which rewards Israel's best literary work.*

*Interview by Jasmina Šopova*



© Forward Association

**Michal Govrin**

***Today you are living between Jerusalem and New Jersey. How does this experience “between two shores” shape you?***

Living “in between” is another description of my way of being a writer, of having all at once a close and a remote vantage point on myself and the world.

Since childhood I was convinced that the only way to “really live” would be to become a writer. But this dream crumbled, because all of my admired models wrote about far away places where fascinating childhoods take place, whereas I had no choice but to write about a boring childhood with two elderly par-

ents (both married again after having had previous living or dead families, about which I knew almost nothing) in a third floor apartment of a new housing project in Tel Aviv.

The only way out was to flee. So for my PhD I decided to leave for Paris. It was a way to confront myself, to ask questions, from a distance. In a century of exile and migration, I was not the only one experiencing this situation: that of starting to cherish my own story far from home. I became an alien, a minority, an exile, akin to the Parisian street-corner hobos. In Paris for the first time I felt what it meant to be the other.

When I came back to Israel I was no longer the same. I left Tel Aviv and settled in Jerusalem. Yet I feel the tension that exists between the two cities like a tug between the sacred and the profane.

Since, my family life has taken me from my home in Jerusalem to Paris or New Jersey for periodical stays. Living in between became my writer's exile, a constant mode of putting into question, of facing new challenges.

***Ilana Tsouriel, the heroine of your novel Snapshots is, like you the daughter of one of the State of Israel's founding fathers. She maintains she is hit by the “curse of wandering”. What does this represent for you?***

Ilana uses this term ironically to describe her cosmopolitan life as an echo to the Zionist criticism of the Jewish Diaspora, and to the dream of “saving” the Jews from a destiny of Exile and wandering, by returning to the Promised Land and a new independent State. Ilana leaves Israel pained by the violence of the nation building process, and the conflict it

► engendered. But as she matures as an architect, she tries to escape these rigid contradictions. In her Monument for Peace project for Jerusalem, the epicenter of the conflict, she draws on Jewish traditional concepts that introduce a dimension of wandering and renouncing as another way of life in a place (the Sabbatical Year, the Sukkah Hut).

***Your mother survived the holocaust. To what extent did this influence your way of being and your work?***

My mother, a strong woman full of life, never spoke to me about what she had gone through. As soon as she arrived in Israel in 1948 she had the number tattooed on her when she entered Auschwitz removed through plastic surgery. Therefore, as a child, I did not know, "that my mother had been in the holocaust", neither did I know why her son, whose pictures were hidden in her lingerie drawer I would secretly open, was not alive. The long and complex process of discovery started for me at adolescence. It kept changing with every stage of life and with the extreme period we are going through. It is an open question with which I live, and a commitment I uphold, loyal to my mother's ethics, that of being a "Mensch" (real human

being). For me this is the only real lesson to be drawn in the face of the abyss of humanity. Most of my writings, whether novels, poems or essays, attempt, again and again, to put this unique and extreme experience and duty, into words.

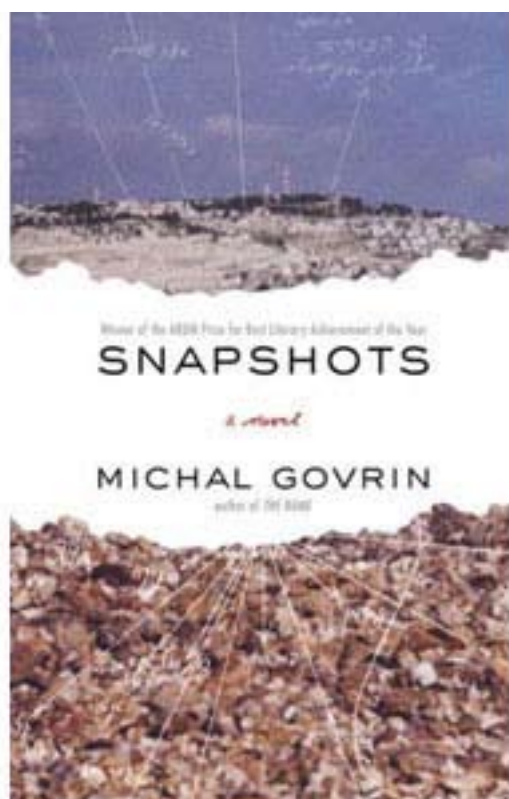
***Ilana's love for the Palestinian Sayyid fills her with a feeling of betrayal to her father. What can you say about this feeling?***

Ilana and Sayyid's affair unravel the passionate – even erotic - dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A conflict that is rooted in the Abrahamic Religions based on a passionate rivalry and mutual exclusiveness between brothers. The consequences of the political conflict are tragic because loyalty to one story is simply perceived as the inevitable betrayal of the other. Ilana, a dedicated member of the Peace camp, believes she can go beyond this boundary, even if she betrays her father's Zionist commitment. But as the novel unfolds, and she reads more from her father's legacy, she understands that his own dream of Peace was not so far from hers, whereas during the Gulf war and the Intifada, she feels betrayed by Sayyid and the members of the Palestinian theater company who slowly turn their backs on their collaboration.

Where does betrayal end, where does loyalty begin? What is betrayal and what is loyalty? - is a major question that *Snapshots* raises from the personal, erotic and political point of view, all the while also asking whether betraying rigid convictions is not in fact the same as true loyalty. This is a question that a woman may well be in a position to put forth in the most poignant way– since she rarely has the right to do so, since women are rarely able to decide on their own existence and bodies.

***You teach at the School of Visual Theatre in Jerusalem. As a novelist, what is your relationship to theatre?***

Sometimes, like an actor, I "improvise", lead the text to unknown places, hidden even from me, only to hunt down and touch the unsaid. Often I use the monologue, to capture the subtleties and fluctuations of the living voice, of the fleeting moment. And then, through rhythm, respiration, body expression, I "draw in" the reader to "perform" this monologue, to experience it as powerfully as an actor who is carried by the role he plays.



© Riverhead Books

***Snapshots*, Riverhead Books, 2007.**



▶ As a teacher of young directors in Israel, with students from backgrounds as different, even opposed, as this region provides, I have worked both with Jewish students expressing through Chekhov their pain after the settlements were uprooted in the Gaza Strip, and with Palestinian students also trying to transmit their pain through writing and directing actors. My approach has always been the same: to develop the young artists' unique talent and mission, along with a fundamental commitment to the art of the theater, that is to say, a sincere and unbiased commitment - beyond all else - to the human dimension of theater, to humanism.

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The Danya Elraz Ballet at the Visual Theatre of Jerusalem.



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## Kiran Desai: A life between East and West



© Jerry Bauer

**Kiran Desai, the youngest laureate of the Booker Prize.**

**With *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai has become the youngest female laureate of the Booker Prize (2006). In her book she talks about exile, globalization and belonging to two cultures. Born in New Delhi in 1971, she left India in 1986 with her mother, the author Anita Desai, to live in England and then the United States.**

For Kiran Desai, life has been a heady whirl of travel and adulation since October 2006, when her second book, *The Inheritance of Loss* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005) won her the coveted Man Booker Prize. The shy and unassuming 36-year old who hails from India, but has spent more than half her life in the United States, is today one of the most sought-after new voices on the international literary circuit.

Criss-crossing the globe from Hay on Wye in Wales to Copenhagen, to Shanghai, Hong Kong, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Brazil, Canada, Indonesia, Desai ▶

▶ laughingly describes her recent life as “living in cartoon form,” where she hops from place to place.

Desai’s new life is in stark contrast to the nearly eight years she spent toiling on the book that won her fame. “It was a long, long journey for me,” she admits. “I was devastated and sad at the end of it.” The often lonely process of writing was actually a happy one for her, she insists. Running out money after she spent her publisher’s advance and being too poor to afford health insurance or a place to call her own was not easy.

“I was quite stern and mean-spirited while writing the book, fearful of the risk I was taking,” she explains. She hopes winning the Booker will change that, allowing her to be “more eccentric” and to “play more” when she writes again.

## Immigration is a great con game

But the hardest part about writing was coming to terms with her own identity, as someone who had been born in one country and resided in another. The daughter of renowned Indian author Anita Desai, Kiran Desai was born in India in 1971 and immigrated to the United States via Great Britain when she was 15.

She thought she had “migrated in quite a simple way at first”, until she started writing the book and confronting “what it means to live between east and west.”

The process led her to examine her own family’s history of migration and exile – Desai’s maternal grandmother was German and never returned home after moving to India before World War II; her grandfather was a refugee from Bangladesh. Her father’s father hailed from a small village in the western Indian state of Gujarat, went to England to study, and returned to work for the Indian Civil Service. “My leaving India was no accident. There were certain moves made long ago that ensured that I would leave.”

“I think immigration is a great con game; you tell yourself lies, you reinvent yourself in many different ways, and to undo all of that took a long time,” she said in an interview with CNN.



© Flickr/Sangeet Kothari

**The Indian band Colonial Cousins rocks New York, near Bryant Park.**

At first, Desai imagined that as time went by, she would feel more American than Indian, but she holds onto her Indian passport. “People are constantly asking me where home is, and after writing the book, I have less of an answer than ever before,” she said.

“Literature is located beyond flags and anthems, simple ideas of loyalty,” she feels. But working on the book led her back to India in many different ways. She felt “much more Indian” after writing the book than she had before. “Being part of the Indian diaspora gives one a precise emotional location to work from, if not a precise geographical one. This book was a return journey to the fact of being Indian, to realizing the perspective was too important to give up. America might give me half a narrative, but I had to return to India for the other half of the story, for emotional depth, historical depth.”

“The book is movingly strong in its humanity... a magnificent novel of humane breadth and wisdom, comic tenderness and powerful political acuteness,” observed the writer Hermione Lee, who headed the team of judges awarding the Booker to Desai, making her the youngest woman to win the award in its 40-year history. ▶



© Regoli Nara

**The Inheritance of Loss** brought Kiran Desai back to India, her country of origin.

### ► My mother opens a magic space to me

While Desai is quick to acknowledge the influence of writers including V.S. Naipaul, R.K.Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Naguib Mahfouz, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, Kenzaburo Oe, Kazuo Ichiguro, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, it is her mother who has had the most profound influence on her writing. “To my mother I owe a debt so profound and so great that this book feels as much hers as it does mine,” Kiran Desai said, as she accepted the prize which her mother has been nominated for three times, but never won.

The mother-daughter relationship, explains Desai, goes much deeper than just editing manuscripts.

“When I walk into her home (Desai lives about an hour’s drive away from her mother) it is almost as if another dimension opens up, a magic space in which I can work and think like nowhere else,” she explains. “It is the peace of it, the stillness of the light, the flavour of exile that seems essential to writing, the fact that everything seems to bend to the fact of it being a writer’s home. It’s the rhythm of a writing life that comes from 50 years of working, and from that older time of being a writer in India when you wrote for writing’s sake alone, not for the cocktail samosas.”

In the not-too-distant future, Desai hopes to escape the limelight and spend some time with her mother in Mexico, where they will both write and she will start her new book. Like her mother, Kiran Desai does not feel comfortable discussing her work before she finishes writing it. But her third book will likely be set in “a mish-mash of locations for the sake of being able to explore the truth and lies that exist between places,” she reveals.

Desai will also stray far from fiction to contribute to “AIDS Sutra: The Hidden Story of AIDS in India,” a collection of first-hand accounts by well-known writers based on encounters with a wide variety of people affected by AIDS in India. To be published by Random House India in May, the book is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and aims to promote a public dialogue about the disease in India and abroad.

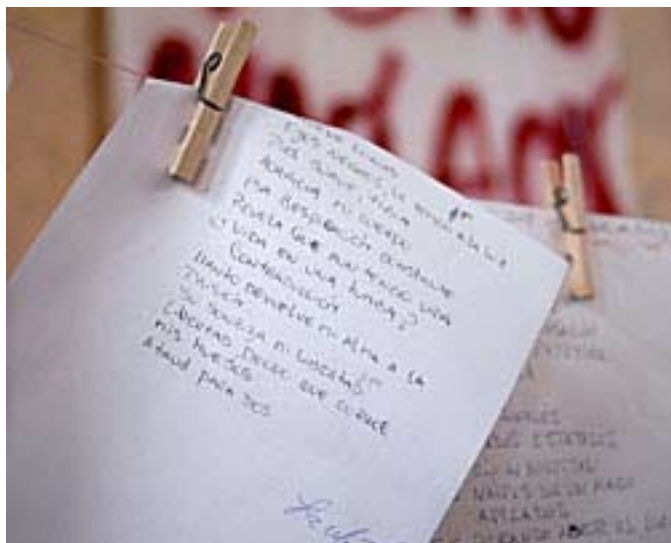
*Shiraz Sidhva, Indian journalist, living in the United States*





# María Medrano: Inside - Outside

*Once a week, for the past five years, Argentine poet María Medrano gets behind the bars of a women's prison near Buenos Aires to animate a poetry workshop. In so doing, she builds a bridge between "inside" and "outside", which has become a vital space for the prisoners of different nationalities.*



© UNESCO/Juana Ghersa

**Poems exhibited at the festival "I Didn't Do It".**

Sunglasses propped on her head, a white iron megaphone in hand, she begins the day by uttering: "Friendship is a sacred name, a sacred thing. It exists only between good people [...] There can be no friendship where cruelty, disloyalty and injustice prevail." Silvia Elena Machado reads aloud one of the posters an independent publisher *Superabundans Haut* stuck on the pink walls of the function room in Unit 31 of the Ezeiza women's prison, located in the suburbs of Buenos Aires.

Every Friday for the past five years, this room hosts a poetry workshop bringing together ten to fifteen inmates. Today, [December 7, 2007], is a day of celebration because it marks the second edition of the annual poetry festival entitled "I Didn't Do It."

A crowd of people follow Silvia Elena across the room. She continues reading the *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, by French writer Étienne de La Boétie: "Between mean people [...] there is no love, only fear. They are not friends, but accomplices." The megaphone is passed from hand to hand, and after

Silvia Elena, who has returned to the prison for the first time after having been freed ten months ago, it is the turn of Laura Ross, an inmate without a foreseen date of release: "Decide to stop being servile..."

Other convicts, other voices, read with difficulty, timidly, encouraged by small pats on their backs from fellow prisoners. Applause resounds. Outside the sun is shining but the prison guards are not authorized to open the door that gives onto the small courtyard.

## I Didn't Do It

"I Didn't Do It" is Bart Simpson's favorite expression [Bart is the 10 year old boy who is one of The Simpsons main characters], which the workshop participants selected two years ago to baptize their first festival. They also gave this title to their first anthology of poems. In the anthology, María Medrano, the poet who, once a week, with fellow Claudia Prado, enters Ezeiza prison with a cartload of books, writes



© UNESCO/Juana Ghersa

**The second poetry festival "I Didn't Do It" just started!**

► “Most women who participate in the workshop had never had any contact with this literary genre. Some of them decided to sign up to ‘kill time’, others, to see what it was all about. But what is certain is that, bit by bit, the workshop has become a vital space [...] They did not want to write ‘tumbera’ poetry [note: tumbera is the term used to designate what belongs to the prison world in Argentina ; la tumba (tomb) means jail], because for them, this language is part of the depersonalization process of which they are victims: when you enter prison, you stop being a person and become a ‘package’ (this is what the guards call the inmates), you receive a new first name, a new surname ‘tumbero’, and little by little, daily language becomes prison language.”



© UNESCO/Juana Ghersa

**The prisoners’ manuscripts “go outside”. They stay “inside”.**

Here, poetry becomes a space of resistance, even if the penitentiary system considers it part of the “non-productive”, cultural workshops, meaning that they do not generate any revenues as opposed to the bread- or stuffed-animal-making workshops (prisoners who participate in these receive a small salary which they can spend themselves or send to their families).

Two years ago, when she read her texts at the first festival, Liz, a young Black woman with small braids cascading down her forehead, was pregnant. Today, she sees her son, Jehová, running among the male and female poets, journalists and visitors who have come in from the outside, while she awaits her turn to share her writings. She says: “I will read something I really like, and hope you will also like it... ‘I love him like the cancer that eats into my flesh.’”

## Breaking the walls of language as well

A young, blond woman, whose pregnancy is already far along, asks a photographer who has come to attend the festival to take her picture: she wants to send it to her fiancé who is outside and cannot always visit her. She also wants to take advantage of

the presence of a digital camera to see herself because there are no mirrors in the jail.

Through the windows up high we can see airplanes: the airport is only a few kilometers away, which is also the reason why this unit receives women accused of trafficking narcotics. They are “mules”, people who transit towards other countries, who were caught by customs officers with drugs in their luggage. A number of these women are foreigners. They did not understand the details of their sentence.

It is only in prison that they learned Spanish.

In this little Babel, however, they have found a way to partake in the poetry workshop. Around one of the six meeting tables, we hear Polish, German, and Romanian words. One day, María Medrano came to the workshop with poems written in these women’s mother tongues. The prisoners of the workshop had the idea of bringing these texts to the festival, of reading them in their original version and translating them to share them with fellow inmates and visitors.

Carmen, a blond Romanian woman of 52 with a proud and soft voice, remembers that she had cried that day: “Then, I began to translate the text so that others could understand what it says. And today, I wanted to sing it, but I was so moved that I did not dare.” It is not the fear of speaking in public that discouraged her, but rather the memory of her mother, who had passed away in Romania the week before.

In February, Carmen will be extradited, which is the usual route for women accused of trafficking narcotics.

*Soledad Vallejos, journalist for the newspaper Pagina 12 of Buenos Aires, Argentina*

**I love him like the cancer that eats into my flesh  
I hate him as much as the air I breathe  
I desire him as much as I desire death  
I reject him as much as I reject happiness  
Where are you?**

*Liz M.*

## Theatre has to reinvent itself

*World Theatre Day, established in 1961, in Vienna by the International Theatre Institute, is celebrated each year on 27 March, all over the world. The ITI is one of the most important non governmental organizations in the field of stage arts. Currently, there are ITI National Centres in a hundred countries.*

*Traditionally, every year, the International Theatre Institute invites a world renowned personality to write an international message.*

*This year, the famous Canadian Theatre Director Robert Lepage (Quebec) tells us the fable of the birth of theatre to reassure those who fear resorting to technologies on stage.*

There are a number of hypotheses on the origins of theatre but the one I find the most thought-provoking takes the form of a fable:

One night, at the dawn of time, a group of men were gathered together in a quarry to warm themselves around a fire and tell stories. All of a sudden, one of them had the idea to stand up and use his shadow to illustrate his tale. Using the light from the flames, he made characters appear, larger than life, on the walls of the quarry. Amazed, the others recognized in turn the strong and the weak, the oppressor and the oppressed, the god and the mortal.

Nowadays, the light of projectors has replaced the original bonfire, and stage machinery, the walls of the quarry. And with all due deference to certain purists, this fable reminds us that technology is at the very beginnings of theatre and that it should not be perceived as a threat but as a uniting element.

The survival of the art of theatre depends on its capacity to reinvent itself by embracing new tools and new languages. For how could the theatre con-



© Sophie Grenier

**Robert Lepage: by playing too much with fire, we take the chance to amaze.**

tinue to bear witness to the great issues of its epoch and promote understanding between peoples without having, itself, a spirit of openness? How could it pride itself on offering solutions to the problems of intolerance, exclusion and racism if, in its own practice, it resisted any fusion and integration?

In order to represent the world in all its complexity, the artist must bring forth new forms and ideas, and trust in the intelligence of the spectator, who is capable of distinguishing the silhouette of humanity within this perpetual play of light and shadow.

It is true that by playing too much with fire, we take a risk, but we also take a chance: we might get burned, but we might also amaze and enlighten.

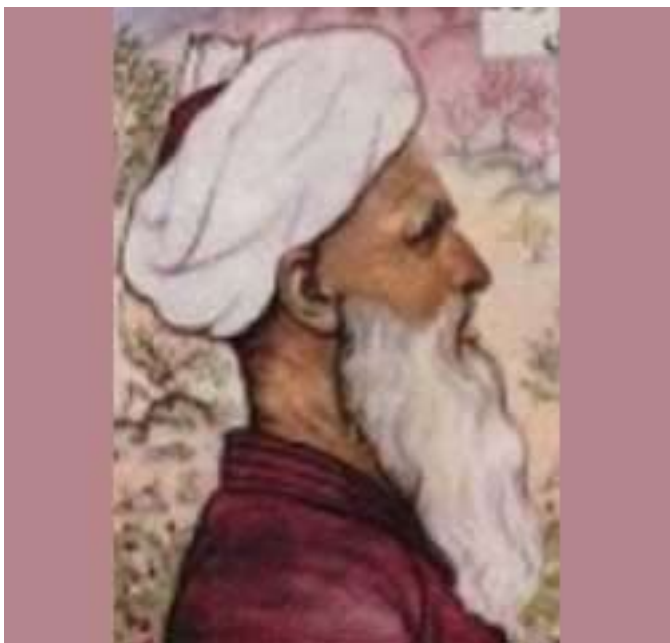
*Robert Lepage  
Quebec, 17th February 2008*



## Rudaki, the Sultan of Poets

*« Since the world rose from darkness, no one yet, on Earth, has regretted to have devoted his life to study », wrote Abu Abdullah Rudaki (858-941), rightly considered the founder of Tajik Persian literature.*

*Supported by Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Kazakhstan, Tajikistan submitted a proposal to UNESCO for the celebration of Rudaki's 1150th anniversary. The UNESCO Courier pays tribute to Rudaki on the occasion of World Poetry Day (21 March).*



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**Abu Abdullah Rudaki.**

The man whose name means “small stream” in Persian Dari, Rudaki, was born in 858 near Panjakent, 200 km north of Dushanbe, Tajikistan’s capital. At the age of eight, he recited the Qur’an by heart. Later, his fame as a fine poet, brilliant musician and singer having reached Bukhara (today in Uzbekistan), he was invited to the court as official poet. He spent a large part of his life in the service of the Samanid dynasty (875-999).

Capital of the Arab Caliphate’s first great independent State, Bukhara was considered the centre of Tajik culture. The Samanids encouraged the develop-

ment of the sciences, architecture and poetry written in Persian. The population was known for its level of instruction, Islam having contributed to a wide distribution of sacred texts. According to the Persian philosopher, writer and doctor, Avicenna, the Bukhara library possessed “books of which numerous people even ignored the existence”.

### The poet of inaccessible simplicity

A link between two epochs, Rudaki succeeded in merging the Pre-Islamic musical and poetic traditions, Iranian Tajik song and radically new forms of Arabic verse into his art. Rudaki wrote in new Persian (Dari). The Persian having existed until then had to adopt, after the Arab conquest of Central Asia and the spread of Islam, Arabic writing.

The verses of the « Sultan of Poets », as he was called, are imbued with his faith in human reason, in the wisdom of experience, the will to master knowledge, and the doing of good and justice. The terseness, the simplicity of his poetic expression gave birth to a new literary style, known as the Horasanian or Rudaki style, which dominated Persian poetry during several centuries. Still during the Middle Ages, scholars would qualify the style of the poet as “sakhle moumtans” (inaccessible simplicity).

Celebrating nature, man, his noble feelings and his ideals, he broached questions of philosophy and ethics, attempting to improve the mores of his time

► by the power of the poetic verb. He was the first, in Persian poetry, not only to contemplate man but also to place him at the centre of his art: ordinary man, man on earth, “earthly” man who thinks simply and clearly.

Rudaki excelled in different poetic genres: rubai, ghazal, qasida, kitia, masnavi and other gallant lyrical poems. But of his entire work, only the qasida, *The Mother of Wine*, and some forty roubais (quatrains) remain. The rest is made of panegyric, lyric and didactic fragments of works, such as the poem *Kalila and Dimna* and five other texts.

After having served more than 40 years at the Samanid court, the poet fell out of favour, towards the end of his life, because of his sympathies for a rebellious people, the Qarmates. And because he is known to have died a blind man, some believe that his eyes had been pierced before he was banished from the court. He spent the rest of his life in poverty. He died in 941 in Panjrud, the village of his birth.

*Moukammal Odinaeva, Lola Olimova, Tajik journalists*



© Foteh

Rudaki's statue in Panjakent, Tajikistan

Next month

## International Year of Planet Earth

***Building safer, healthier and wealthier societies around the globe by using the knowledge of the world's 400,000 earth scientists more effectively is the main goal of the International Year of Planet Earth - Earth science for Society- launched on 12 and 13 February at UNESCO.***



A joint initiative of UNESCO and the International Union of Geological Science (IUGS), the year encourages scientists to work on ten broad themes particularly relevant to society: health, climate, groundwater, the oceans, soils, deep earth, megacities, hazards, resources and life.

*The UNESCO Courier's* next issue will be devoted to the International Year of Planet Earth.

© UNESCO/NOPD Isidro Magana

New Orleans after Katrina, in September 2005.

# Partners

*UNESCO devotes the month of March to women by organizing a series of conferences, exhibitions, concerts and film screenings to celebrate 8 March, International Women's Day. Among the events: an exhibition of 1000 post cards, in cooperation with the international network "PeaceWomen Across the Globe"; an Ivorian evening with the singer, dancer and percussionist Dobet Gnahoré, in cooperation with the "Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie" (OIF); and an exhibition presenting the life of the world's first female film director, Alice Guy, in cooperation with the association "The Friends of Alice Guy Blaché".*



© Anna Jaillova

## PeaceWomen Across the Globe

In 2005, 1000 women from some 150 countries were collectively nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Thereafter, the organizers of the campaign "1000 Women for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize" created an international network of women working in different fields linked to human security. The purpose of "PeaceWomen Across the Globe" is to contribute to the emergence of a worldwide peace movement.

Promote the visibility of PeaceWomen in their work, connect PeaceWomen across the globe, strengthen solidarity among them and increase their knowledge and competencies are some of the aims of this international network.

## Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie

The "Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie" (OIF) brings together fifty-five member states and governments and thirteen observers, on five continents, which share the same language: French. Spoken by 200 million people, French has the status of official language, alone or with other languages, in 32 OIF member states and governments.

For the past 35 years, "la Francophonie" works in favour of peace, democracy and human rights.

On 20 March 2008, the OIF celebrates the *International Day of "Francophonie"*.





## ► The Friends of Alice Guy Blaché

Known as the world's first female film director, Alice Guy-Blaché was born in 1873, in France, near Paris. She died in 1968, in Mahwah, USA. She directed her first fiction short, "The Cabbage Fairy", in 1896, with the support of one of the pioneers of the French film industry, Léon Gaumont.

In 1906, her first full length feature film "The Life of Christ", included 300 extras! Alice Guy-Blaché directed and produced more than 600 films including comical, suspense, opera, documentary films and historical drama.

Thierry Peeters, her great grand son and the association The Friends of Alice Guy Blaché see to it that the memory of this great lady of the cinema is kept alive.

© Régine Blaché-Bolton

Alice Guy is known as the world's first female film director.



## Short history

*Established by the United Nations in 1977, "International Women's Day" owes its origins to the protests of women, particularly in Europe, who demanded, at the beginning of the 20th century, the right to vote, improved working conditions and gender equality.*

*19 March, the last Sunday of February, 15 April and 23 February are among the key dates for International Women's Day.*

*But where then did the 8th of March come from?*

1910: in Copenhagen (Denmark), hundreds of participants gather at the Second International Conference of Socialist Women (the first having been held in 1907) and decide to organize an annual day for women to bolster their efforts to achieve voting rights.

1911: a day for women is celebrated in a number of European countries and in the United States. But this celebration occurs on 19 March, in commemoration of the revolution of 1848 and of the "Commune de Paris".

1913: Russian women celebrate their first International Women's Day on the last Sunday of February, by organizing clandestine gatherings.

1915: As the First World War rages, a huge gathering of women is held in The Hague (Netherlands) on 15 April. Participants include over 1 300 women from over 12 countries.

In 1917: Women labourers take to the streets and declare a general strike announcing the Russian Revolution. The date was 23 February.



© Michel de Bock

**8 March is celebrated all over the world.**

- ▶ After World War II, 8 March begins to be celebrated in a number of countries, before being

recognized by the UN as International Women’s Day in 1977.

19 March, the last Sunday of February, 15 April, 23 February are among the key dates for International Women’s Day. But where, then, did the 8th of March come from?

Ask Julius Cesar and Gregory XIII!

Before the Revolution, Russia had not yet adopted the Gregorian calendar, introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 to mitigate the errors of the Julian calendar, which owes its name to the Roman emperor who had chosen it 46 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. The Gregorian calendar is used today in the large majority of countries.

In 1917, 23 February in Russia thus corresponded to 8 March in the other European countries. It’s as simple as that!

J.Š.

## Zoom

*Elizabeth Blackburn, Ana Belen Elgoyhen, Ada Yonath, V. Narry Kim and Lihadh Al-Gazali are the Laureates of the L’ORÉAL-UNESCO Awards For Women in Science 2008.*

**Elizabeth Blackburn  
(United States).**

For the past ten years, five Awards of 100,000 dollars each, reward annually five outstanding women scientists from different regions of the world. With this year’s awards, 52 women from 26 countries have been recognized.







**Ana Belen Elgoyhen (Argentina) to the left and Ada Yonath (Israel) to the right.**

The 2008 International Jury, presided by Gunter Blobel, Nobel Prize in Medicine 1999, is composed of 18 members recognized by the scientific community. Professor Christian de Duve, Nobel Prize in Medicine 1974, is the Founding President of the Awards.



**V. Narry Kim (Republic of Korea) to the left and Lihadh Al-Gazali (United Arab Emirates) to the right.**

The L'Oréal-UNESCO partnership also includes a Fellowship programme allowing post-doctoral students to pursue their research in a host laboratory located outside their country of origin. They are worth a maximum of US\$40,000 over two years and are also attributed to 15 young women, three for each of the following regions: Africa, Arab States, Asia/Pacific, Europe/North America and Latin America/Caribbean.



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