BOOK REVIEWS

WOMEN, RACE AND CLASS IN A CULTURAL CONTEXT

Critical Perspectives of Third World America, 2, No. 1 (Fall 1984).

MANY VOICES, ONE CHANT – BLACK FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Feminist Review, 17 (Autumn 1984).

RASTAFARI: CONVERSATIONS CONCERNING WOMEN

Produced by Eye in I Filmworks, 1919 Fern St., San Diego, CA 92102 (1985).

Carole Yawney

In a racist society such as ours, just how easy is it for white women to relate to Black women as sisters? White women scholars, in their academic world several times removed from grassroots communities, face special problems in this regard. Even a research interest in West Indian, African, or Asian communities does not guarantee that honest, long-term friendships with women from these communities will develop. And one can hardly count upon the collegial environment to provide such opportunities: universities reproduce the racist hierarchy of the real world. For example, at least since 1972 when I first joined Atkinson College at York University, the few full-time faculty who are women have only ever been white. Yet a significant number of our students are of West Indian, Asian, or African origins. Of course, from time to time Women of Colour pass through the ranks of the part-time course directors, but is that not to be expected? The staff at Atkinson reflects more accurately the ethnic make-up of the student body, but one somehow suspects that the power differential between Professor and secretary might itself pose obstacles to social interaction.

When one does strike up such an acquaintance there are more than enough reasons for things to go wrong, ranging from simple misunderstandings which leave lingering doubts to full-scale communication breakdowns. When the connection between white women and Black women seems to unfold ever so smoothly, we need to inquire about the common frame of reference and the terms of discourse which structure the relationship. Are they sensitively negotiated and clearly understood, or is the dominant cultural mode simply assumed to be the appropriate field of interaction? As academics we need to be aware of the extent to which our worldview is culturally Western and class-biased. Judging by the spate of writings appearing in the last five or six years which deal with racism in the feminist movement, we can assume that the embryonic dialogue between white women and Black women is in real jeopardy. The problem is especially unfortunate because it is occuring among feminists who should be more than aware of the limitations of ideology and the imperiousness of cultural assumptions.

Below I will be reviewing two different journal publications which devoted special editions entirely to a discussion of the relationship between gender, class, and race, and how this affects the politics of Black feminists. The content of each clearly reflects the particular social circumstances of their production, so that between the two we have a highly enriching but extremely pointed perspective on the problem. *Many Voices, One Chant* was assembled in London by an editorial collective of Black women who emphasize that they have insisted upon autonomy in preparing the volume. Their contributors include Black women of British, West Indian, African, and Indian origins. *Women, Race, and Class in a Cultural Context* mirrors the social diversity of its California setting, with Chicana, Black, Native American, Puerto Rican, Filipina, Korean, Japanese, Hawaiian and other Asian women represented. Finally, in light of our discussion on the complex nature of Black women's oppression, I will review a recently released videotape on Rastafari sistren in Jamaica which attempts to portray their circumstances fairly, without undermining the cultural significance of the movement: here is a case study which touches upon many of the themes of this article.

Critical Perspectives is a journal ordinarily focussed on ethnic studies of minority groups; the editor-in-chief of this particular issue, Angela Johnson, states in a brief two-page introduction that "we selected culture as a means to tie these entities (of women, race, and class) together, since culture encompasses all racial and socio-economic categories." While some of the items are self-consciously feminist in orientation, most contributions leave it to the reader to attune herself to the implications of gender, race, and class interaction in the lives of minority women. As various women tell their stories in both prose and poetry, the built-in dynamic of the book presses one to reflect upon the complex realities of their struggles. It is generally assumed that their message is self-evident. As such, the volume is less a critique of white feminist politics, and more a sensitive exposé of the conflicting pressures experienced by minority women.

One of the most insightful articles in this respect is written by Haunani-Kay Trask, a Hawaiian feminist, who describes and analyzes her experiences with the simultaneous oppressions of gender, race, and class as she returns to her homeland in order to join the political opposition there. She becomes active in a grassroots movement of cultural revival, the 'Ohana, which is both an on-going spiritual community and an anti-imperialist party. Soon though, she discovers that "slowly, but resolutely patterns of male domination and conscious exclusion of women from policy-making emerged out of the 'Ohana." Other sexist practices, including violence against women and children in the 'Ohana, further confused the situation which, Trask stresses, only intensified the exploitation of women

since they had to deal with gender oppression outside the 'Ohana as well. She poignantly describes her inner turmoil and anguish, finally concluding that: "To be doubly colonized – as a woman and as an indigenous nationalist – means to struggle twice as hard, twice as long. As I fight American imperialism and its agonizing effects on my people, I must work and live with my Hawaiian brothers who would add to the burden of colonialism another burden of sexual oppression and domination. Yet, I will not leave my people . . . but neither will I cede to my Hawaiian brothers the sovereignty of my Hawaiian sisters." This article powerfully reveals the many demands made upon Black women as they confront the various forces which entrap them. Moreover, the similarities between 'Ohana and Rastafari are so striking – right down to the fact of 'Ohana's inner core of "bruddah" (brother) culture so sardonically described by Trask – that they produce an intense sense of déjà vu.

There are at least two dozen items in this special issue of *Critical Perspectives:* it amounts to a book approaching 300 pages. By commenting upon only a few in detail I do not mean to neglect the others, but rather to foster an appreciation of the depth of the volume. One of the recurring themes is the reclamation and repoliticization of language in order to allow women's voices to be heard. In this the collection succeeds admirably. Its contributions range from fiction, poetry, film and book reviews, to scholarly articles. "Mrs. Kim, Aren't You Mad?" is a stylized narrative which vividly depicts the efforts of a Korean social worker who is desperately seeking to help a new immigrant land a job as a maid. On the other hand, there is a thirty-six page essay on the Chicana involvement in the southwest U.S. labour history. One piece by a Black American tourist in the Bahamas which describes her attempts to relate to the local Black maid named "Olive" reminds us once again of the obstacles facing minority women in building international solidarity. Contributions dealing with sex tourism in Asia and Black women organizing in Britain help fill out the cross-cultural framework of this issue. Given the diversity of both form and content, the layout of the book is so evenly balanced that one is simply propelled into reading it from cover-to-cover in one sitting.

This was not my experience upon reading *Many Voices, One Chant.* Even though it is less than half the length of *Critical Perspectives,* it is much denser and repeatedly and more directly questions the politics of the reader. The Black editorial collective, having carefully negotiated their editorial policy within the context of feminist politics, clearly does not assume an automatic understanding of their position on the part of white feminists. In their lengthy overview entitled "Challenging White Feminism," Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, two of the four editors, make it clear that they are dealing expressly with the limitations of white feminism: "True feminist theory and practice entails an understanding of imperialism and a critical engagement with challenging racism – elements which the current women's movement significantly lacks, but which are intrinsic to Black feminism. We are creating our own forms and context." Moreover, the political base of the collective's members in their local community is readily apparent in the number of contributions dealing with on-going Black and Asian women's projects, such as the Brixton Black Women's Group and the Brent Asian Women's Refuge and Resource Centre (a list of Black Women's Organizations in Britain is included right inside the front cover).

There is also a message here for Black feminists. One of the articles analyzes the five-year history of the Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent, which had been intended to unite Black women throughout Britain, but which ultimately was unable to reconcile their diverse interests. Another piece on Asian women represents an attempt to dispel the common stereotype of themselves as "passive, acquiescent human beings" by reviewing their history of political involvement. Probably the most provocative contribution is "Becoming Visible: Black Lesbian Discussions," which introduces yet another dimension of Black women's oppression: homophobia. This condensed transcript of a dialogue between four Black lesbians is the longest piece in the volume. It unfolds like a drama, partly because of the collective style which offers us more than one take on the problem, and partly due to the impact of the dialogue format itself, which enables readers to be present backstage where political positions are being generated and refined. This is the essence of any creative process, what really happens before the sanitized declaration hits the streets. These Black lesbians candidly describe their experiences with both white and Black activists in coming to terms with their sexual orientation. As one of them states: "while my sexuality is a part of me, it's not the only thing. My race and class are equally important and this has an implication for me in the way I organize, politically. If you don't have the same politics as some white lesbians and are seen to be politically involved with Black men, then somehow they patronize you and think you haven't quite made it yet." Later on they discuss their frustration and impatience with Black heterosexual feminists who deny their own homophobia. The issue ends with one last touch: a book review of the Toronto-based feminist journal *Fireweed* and its special issue "Women of Colour."

While both these volumes in their entirety point to the necessity of incorporating gender, race, and class in our understanding of the nature of Black women's oppression and the politics of Black feminism, the videotape *Rastafari: Conversations Concerning Women* represents an actual attempt to reflect the complex situation of Rastafari women in Jamaica without imposing a doctrinaire interpretation. While this particular project was envisioned and directed by Renée Romano, she and her spouse Elliott Leib have previously collaborated on other works concerning Jamaican Rastafari. They have had a long-standing research interest in the Rastafari community and are committed to sustaining these relationships over time. Therefore, to tackle the sensitive issue of the role of women in a male-dominated movement – without alienating its members altogether – requires more than a little sense of that fabled Ethiopian diplomacy. Moreover, the logistics of taking on such a project in Jamaica are not simple: transportation and communication obstacles by themselves might discourage the most avid field worker, let alone focussing attention on the women of a cultural movement which is generally suspicious of outsiders and distrustful of the media. Romano should be congratulated for her diligence in completing the work.

While the final product is a valuable and much-need contribution to the documentation of Caribbean women, it suffers from some inconsistencies and a few loose ends. The video begins with an upbeat stylized geometrics, spelling out its theme to the accompaniment of reggae music. While this flashiness might well capture the viewer's attention, its technological sophistication is uncharacteristic of the cultural engagement we are about to enjoy. At the same time, across the bottom of

the screen, like a message on a tape-loop, there appears a continuous stream of Rastafari aphorisms about the subordinate role of women. These remarks seem slightly out of context. The brief introductory voice-over narrative which follows is a less harsh way of introducing us to the possibility of sexism among Rastafari. However, I was curious about the identity of the narrator, whose American accent seemed out of place in a production with so much Jamaican *patois* that a version with English subtitles is available for non-Jamaican audiences. In fact, with only a few exceptions, we have to wait until the end of the video to learn the names of the participants.

Instead of taking a fixed position on this issue, the director simply lets the participants speak for themselves. For the next hour we meet a wide cross-section of Jamaican women. The non-Rastafari women – the schoolgirls, market vendors, politicians, and housewives – provide us with a social and cultural context in which to listen to the reasoning of the Rastafari sistren themselves.

The sistren comprise a rather diverse group, ranging from one woman who is truly an Elder, to several others with very young children. They all give intense and well-articulated testimonies on the significance of Rastafari in their lives, especially in terms of achieving a powerful sense of identity as Black *African* women. Some of the sistren are shown interacting with their spouses who also contribute to the dialogue. One of the more engaging sequences in the video is a long conversation with a woman who is apparently an ex-Rastafari. At another point we are treated to an on-stage performance of "Black Woman" by Judy Mowatt. The dynamic energy of yet another sistren, taped against the background of a mountain stream, shows quite clearly how Rastafari has "given her life." The penultimate scene is an interview with a Rastafari sistren who lives in Canada. While she clearly expresses some of the contradictions and even absurdities in her experience as a Rastafari, this section is not well-integrated into the rest of the video, for both technical and sociological reasons. It opens up a whole new dimension of the problem – Rastafari sistren in an international context. This would make a good subject for a sequel.

In the end, *Rastafari: Conversations Concerning Women* is more than an account of the situation of Rastafari sistren in a male-dominated movement. It tries to deal with their choices *as Black women* given the economic and cultural realities of Jamaica. When faced with the simultaneous oppression of gender, race, and class, what options appear relevant? This videotape gives us one kind of insight into the complexity of the problem.

UNHEARD WORDS: WOMEN AND LITERATURE IN AFRICA, THE ARAB WORLD, ASIA, THE CARIBBEAN AND LATIN AMERICA

Edited by Mineke Schipper. Translated from the Dutch by Barbara Potter Fasting. London: Allison and Busby, 1984.

Shelagh Wilkinson

This English edition of *Unheard Words* has had a tortuous birth. The original manuscript was edited into a Dutch text by Mineke Schipper and now it has been re-translated. Reading this book, which covers such a diverse area and includes a great variety of languages, one is aware of the effort and expertise behind such a publication. Those of us who teach cross-cultural courses in Women's Studies are constantly aware that the work of the women writers of the Southern hemisphere is unavailable to us because of poor, or non-existent, translations. Even the writing of the Chilean, Gabriela Mistral (the only woman writer to win the Nobel Prize), remains untranslated. The same thing applies to the brilliant work of Clarice Lispector of Brazil. (As Canadian women we are acutely aware of the problem. Ideas, information, the complete works of some authors are lost to us simply because we do not have a smooth system of translation in this country).

Writing that originates in non-Western cultures has the problem of publication added to that of translation. It is published by presses that do not have the production and distribution mechanisms of the huge Western conglomerates, and it is Western readers who are impoverished. Those of us who were at the Nairobi Forum were acutely aware of this loss. Western voices have a wide audience; in fact, we seem to inundate the world with our ideas. But in Nairobi many of us heard the voices of the majority for the first time and we left Africa eager for more. So this book which introduces women writers from Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Arabic world is a timely and welcome addition to global networking and should get a wide readership.

The contents of *Unheard Words* are organized according to the five geographic regions mentioned in the subtitle and within each category specialists explore the historical, political and cultural realities out of which the literature grows. Some of the sections include chapters that analyze male critiques of women's writing, while others concentrate on the ways in which women writers are networking within their own country at conferences, workshops or even during political rallies. Four of the sections have chapters about the colonial experience in specific areas and in each an analysis is provided of the indigenous literature (mostly written by men) that was the result of living with imperialism. These chapters fall loosely under the heading "Images of Women in Literature" because each region has a literature that portrays 'woman as colonizer' and 'woman as colonized.'

Each section is prefaced by a list of proverbial tags specific to the region under review. These are mainly misogynist (and often repetitive) – which is the way with the patriarchal, proverbial voice. "Women have no mouth" is a Cameroon proverb (with Aristotelian overtones) which gave the book its title. Mineke Schipper tells us that these proverbs give the reader an easy key to the specific culture under discussion. But the cumulative effect on this reader was just the reverse. Instead of emphasizing the uniqueness of woman's experiences within extremely diverse cultures, these proverbs provided me with an image of woman which is universal. My sister . . . my self . . . silenced. (And given that the illiteracy levels for women in Africa alone are quoted as four times higher than those for

men, our silence need not suprise us).

Mineke Schipper writes the first section of the book, "Women and Literature in Africa," and her methodology sets the framework which the rest of the book follows. This section is historically organized and traces the cultural and political biases of specific African regions as these occur in the writing. Here the chapter on "The Colonial Legacy" provides a comparative analysis of the female characters in many African novels. Women of both races are trivialized and marginalized. The White Seductress myth predominates in the portrayals of Western women; they are rarely given the wife-mother-role. Instead it is the African woman who is stereotyped onto a pedestal and then confined within the traditional, hearth-keeping, home-making myth. Naturally from this colonial legacy a catalogue of depressing facts emerges. Schipper traces the history of a literature that has been suppressed, curtailed and deformed over too long a period. Finally in the 1960's, in post-colonial Africa, the voices of the women writers begin to be heard.

In one chapter Schipper traces the myths and stories of the oral tradition and (as in the West) we find the dichotomous image of woman as life-giving earth-mother and as castrating, terrifying witch. In her analysis of the *griotes*, women narrators and poets of West Africa who have played a key role in the oral tradition of their regions, Schipper explores the beginnings of a female tradition in literature. The lines of drama, poetry and fiction are traced back to the "talent and inspiration of the mothers": back to those women who told the stories and passed on the culture and the history of the tribe. While the socio-economic and political facts of colonization and the effects of this on the writings of a people are well documented, Schipper also emphasizes the equally important tradition of strong, dynamic women who are finally being heard. And the book really comes alive when we hear the actual voices of these women writers.

In each of the five geographic divisions of the book there is an in-depth interview with a woman who is currently writing. Some are in exile, some remain in their country with their writing banned. But all of them speak of the need to write, especially when political activism is forcing them back into the silence from which they have so recently emerged. These are interviews of consistently high calibre that give an immediacy and a vitality to the book. Here we learn about the economic and social realities that inspire the creative work (and that may also prohibit its publication). Reading this material, as an outsider, is an exciting process: through these sections we gain an *entrée* into the actual lives of women as they live them on a daily basis.

Miriam Tlali is the African writer who is interviewed. She is currently a political activist who is selling kitchen-ware door to door in Soweto and writing material that is systematically banned by the South African government. Yet it is ironical that it was the traditional role of woman (in staying at home and nursing an ailing, aged, mother-in-law), that gave Tlali the 'luxury' of time to produce her first novel. Her words echo those of the *griotes:* "women have always been the story tellers in our country, but with industrialization they became the breadwinners too." (Add to this the political militancy of most women interviewed and the miracle is that they have time to write at all!)

Cristina Peri Rossi (from Uruguay, where her poetry is banned) is interviewed. She gives an astute analysis of the political situation of women who are writing in a totalitarian state with a fascist regime in power. She discusses the *reality* of paranoia in Latin America, and suggests that the hallucinatory style which she uses is the only possible response to that reality. This gives new insight into the writings of many South American women, as does her corollary exploration of machismo as the root of female paranoia. Although Mineke Schipper states in the introduction to the book that the reader will not find any feminist analysis or theory in this text, one is continually aware of feminist analysis surfacing throughout these interviews. The writers are unable to speak about their work without some aspect of feminism coming into focus.

For instance, Etel Adnan is the Lebanese writer who provides an in-depth analysis of Arabian women writers and their work. This is the only interview in which we hear that because there is such "reverence for literature in the Arab world and such love of poetry, even women writers share in that respect." They may be censored, as may men, but "they are not censored because they are women." But after writing a long poem in English for a beloved woman who had died, Etel Adnan worked on translating the poem into Arabic with a male poet, (her first languages are French and English; because of this colonial legacy, she does not write in Arabic). He saw that it was a love poem and immediately wanted to use the masculine form for the beloved. Etel Adnan insisted that women have a right to explore and express their feelings for each other; because of her insistence this poem is the first instance of love poetry written by one woman for another to appear in Arabic literature. And surprisingly, it did not cause a sensation: it was broadcast, acclaimed and taken seriously by the critics. This is just one story of the many that are related throughout the interviews that gives a unique and totally unexpected insight into the writing that is being produced by non-Western women. There is a steady recognition that it is the woman-centered writing that is a vigorous and growing component in the literature of each of the countries under review.

In the section on Asia, Tineke Hellwig chooses to concentrate on Indonesia and she too follows the framework of the book noted above. But she includes in this a compelling interview with Mabaneeta Deb-Sen from India. What we hear is an honest appraisal of the risk and the courage involved when an academic woman, who is also a poet, dares to tackle subjects that are taboo in her society. She assesses the professional, political, social and familial ostracism that often results. She speaks of writing in Bengali but she finds that even when using the vernacular she is still unable "to use the first, or even the second" word that comes to her. She must mask her outrage and her passion, a constraint that she feels Western women writers have overcome. The Indian woman is discriminated against by publisher, reader and critic: "Her domestic role dominates her public image as a writer" and this is never the case for men.

Astrid Roemer from Surinam speaks of the connection between racism and sexism. In her writing she refuses to categorize people and will not create stereotypic Third World figures who think only in the clichés of victimization. She wants "to free my people from the collective image – to individualize black people – everyone is welcome to be a bit white or black or whatever. I used to be bothered by the mulatto girl . . . she had to keep *proving* to me that she was really black . . . now I see her as the incarnation of peace between two hostile races." There is an acute analysis of Angela Davis' *Women, Race and Class* (1981) in this interview dealing with the negrophobia and self-hatred suffered by blacks in America. These are

twin strands that Roemer entwines in her own writing but she adds a third – the strength of the black woman and her fight for selfhood.

This fight for self-expression, for autonomy is endemic to the text as a whole and the corollary theme is the exile that women have undergone: exiled from language, from communication, from connecting with each other – exiled even from self.

Cristina Peri Rossi seems to sum it up in speaking of exile as "the great metaphor of the human condition" which she links to the false sexuality that has been imposed on women by socialization and the ensuing "exile" that we suffer from our own bodies. She finds a retrieval of her own sexuality through her writing and this is her way back from exile: "eroticism is very similar to the creative activity." Rossi does not elaborate on this in her interview and one wishes that she would. But her introductory exploration of the physicality of female writing suggests a connection between her theory and praxis and those of a Quebec feminist writer such as Madeleine Gagnon, who wrote "Mon corps dans l'écriture" in collaboration with Hélène Cixous and Annie Leclerc. Rossi, living in exile in Spain, naturally has access to the writing of the French feminists, so perhaps the direction of her writing should come as no surprise. However, it is connections such as these that make the book exciting reading and they occur throughout the text. A specific writer, in speaking of *her* reality and of the experiences which impel *her* writing, sparks an idea which in turn illuminates the lives and the writing of women from around the world.

But this book does have problems: it can only introduce a literature rather than develop ideas and theories and it attempts so much that the reader is left unsatisfied, wanting more details about all of the writing, and especially about the writers who are interviewed. Mineke Schipper, the editor, and Barbara Potter Fasting, the translator, have given us an idea of the range of material that is available from non-Western women, if only we can get at it. A book such as *In Search of Answers* from *Manushi* in India (reviewed in this issue of *CWS/cf*) begins to answer these needs. But *Unheard Words* has to be expanded into at least five books – one for each of the five regions introduced here – exploding once and for all the old Cameroon myth that "women have no mouth."

[1]See the "Women in Translation" issue of *Translation Review*, 17 (1985).

BLACK FEMINIST CRITICISM/ PERSPECTIVES ON BLACK WOMEN WRITERS

Barbara Christian. New York: Pergamon Press, 1985.

Leslie Sanders

Every so often I come across an essay I want to photocopy (with apologies to both author and the law) and give to everyone I know who might be interested in the topic. One of my favorites is an essay Barbara Christian also loves: the American-Barbadian writer Paule Marshall's "From the Poets in the Kitchen." But my new present to my friends will be Christian's own introductory essay in her *Black Feminist Criticism*, a collection of essays Christian wrote between 1975 and 1984.

In this introductory essay, a dialogue between Christian and her ten year-old daughter who wants her to stop reading and come to play, Christian defines how she sees her critical task. "The least we owe the writer . . . is an acknowledgement of her labor. After all, writing is intentional, is at bottom, work." Reflecting on how her daughter's sense of the tradition of the Black Woman Writer will differ from her own, while trying to explain to her why she prefers to write rather than just to tell "Alice" or "Paule" what she thinks of their new books, Christian comments, "As a critic (I now use the ponderous word), I call attention to the form, show how it comes out of a history, a tradition, how the writer uses it. If we, and others don't understand Paule's form, that it *is* a form, we can't even hear what she's saying or how meaningful it is."

Essentially, Christian's concerns are two-fold. First, she wants to show what each writer is doing and thus to elaborate that process of self-definition which she sees as the central theme, particularly of recent writing by Afro-American Women writers. Second, and always in reference to their work, she wants to explore the complex of racism, sexism and class which has shaped the condition of Black women in America.

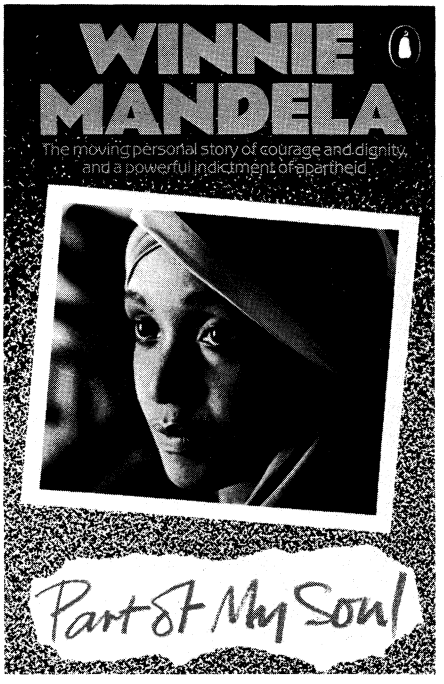
Most Canadian readers will be somewhat familiar with the writers in whom she is most interested: Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, Gloria Naylor and the Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta. If one reads Christian before turning to the writers, one's pleasure and comprehension will be multiplied; if one reads her later, one will want to return to the novels, to see again, to quarrel with Christian perhaps, but always with gratitude for the insights she has provided. Christian is a remarkable critic, a careful and sensitive reader of texts, wonderfully engaged in what she sees her subjects engaged in: women defining themselves.

Some of the essays in the volume elaborate ideas in, or pursue directions that were inappropriate for, Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980). For example, in one essay she explores how Morrison's view of community and nature and the relation between the two creates the distinctive mythic quality in her works. In another essay, she explicates Morrison's working out of how normative social conceptions of class have affected Afro-American women in particular. This essay results in a particularly interesting reading of *Tar Baby*, Morrison's most recent and, given the splendour of her earlier work, least satisfactory novel. Her essays on Alice Walker place the work of this best known of the writers within the tradition Christian is delineating and illuminate Walker's deliberate attention to the range of the Afro-American women's experience. For example, her discussion of Walker's use of the image of the quilt, a woman's art form which creates design and harmony from what was once discrete, suggests a way of viewing Walker's works in juxtaposition to each other as well as of understanding her overt intention.

Some essays in the collection are more general in nature, providing an overview of the tradition and reflections on the his-

tory of Afro-American women as Black, as women and as writers. There is also a marvellous response to Ivan Illich's *Gender*, a paper Christian gave as part of a symposium at the University of California at Berkeley, where she teaches,and a particularly moving, elegant essay on Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* in which Christian both accounts for its neglect and unfolds its subtle beauty.

"By declaring the truth, you create the truth" – Christian quotes June Jordan's recollection of her own childhood church's words. While she uses the quotation in reference to a discussion of Lorde, Shange, Naylor and Jordan, Christian's work is equally engaged in that process – not "definitively" in the critical sense that brooks no contradiction, but rather in the rich and expansive way that suggests possible ways of understanding which then open up others.



WINNIE MANDELA: PART OF MY SOUL

Edited by Anne Benjamin and adapted by Mary Benson. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985.

Susan Bazilli

This book is a collection of conversations between Winnie Mandela and Anne Benjamin, interspersed with tributes from some of Mandela's comrades and letters from her imprisoned husband Nelson Mandela. Both this book and Nancy Harrison's *Winnie Mandela: Mother of a Nation* have been released at a time when the presence of the Mandelas is recognized throughout the world. These books about Winnie also can be seen as her 'coming of age' in a political sense: she is now finally 'out of the shadow' of Nelson, and seen as a political leader and activist in her own right.

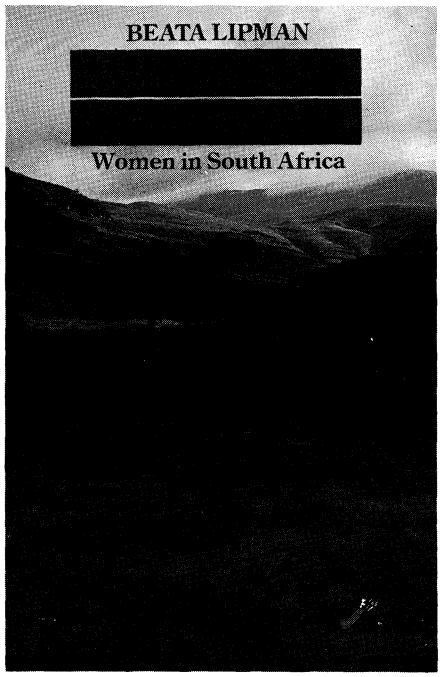
Part of My Soul is a personal story, aptly described on the cover as a "moving personal story of courage and dignity, and a powerful indictment of apartheid." Her political development is chronicled from being, in her own words, "a carbon copy of Nelson, 'Nelson's wife'" to having "ideas and views of my own. I had my own commitment and I wasn't just a political ornament." While no attempt is made to describe the life of women in South Africa in the struggle against apartheid, glimpses are given of the extraordinary battle which women must wage on all fronts: against the state, against the repressive regime, and against men within the struggle – a fight for political autonomy that all women will recognize – from the 'political wife' syndrome to women within the trade union movement. As Winnie says, "Looking at our struggle in this country, the black woman has had to fight the male domination in a much more complex sense. We have the cultural clash where a black woman must emerge as a politician against the traditional background of a woman's place being at home." One wishes that more of this conversation could have been developed.

This *is* a very personal story, and provides a fascinating and intimate look at the life of the Mandelas over the years. But it also provides a powerful window on the brutal repressiveness of the South African state: the prisons; the forced removals; the bannings, arrests, torture, and constant police surveillance; the utter disruption of family life. The very episodic structure of the book itself conveys this constant disruption.

There is a delicate balance that is struck when one is writing about heroes and freedom fighters, about myths and legends, between truth and the acknowledgement of the international importance of how it is conveyed. This portrait raises more questions than can be answered at present. But Mandela leaves no room for questions when it comes to speculation about the future liberation of the people: "There is no room for dialogue in the present political structure . . . You have to use the language they understand: to have peace, you must be violent. That is what they taught me (while tortured in prison). I could never have achieved that alone."

Benjamin's book conveys a sense of Mandela as a woman who has abandoned individualism for the collective struggle: "I have ceased long ago to exist as an individual. The ideas, the political goals that I stand for, those are the ideas and goals of the people in this country." This appears to be an affirmation of her early knowlege: "I knew when I married him that I married the struggle, the liberation of my people." The irony is not lost in the characterization of this story. Mandela advises us not to look for a romance in the story of her love and life with Nelson (her life with him, without him). And yet, the inspiration provides hope, a hope that the name Mandela symbolizes throughout South Africa, and indeed, the world. While reading the interviews and letters, one is aware of the necessary editing process – but the passion and commitment of the people shines through.

These books on Winnie Mandela are long overdue, very timely, and add much to our understanding of the unrelenting repression of the South African state; and the tremendous power and faith of the people in resistance. We are left with the hunger for more portraits of women, for the portrayal of the lives of other women prominent in the liberation struggle: Sisulu, Ndzanga, Nyembe, Baard. The immeasurable contribution of women in South Africa is only just being recognized, and it is hoped that *Part of My Soul* will be the beginning of a series of portraits of the many courageous women who are involved in the struggle.



WE MAKE FREEDOM: WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

Beata Lipman. London: Pandora Press, 1984.

CRY AMANDLA! SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN AND THE QUESTION OF POWER

June Goodwin. New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1984.

Linzi Manicom

The dramatic upsurge in organised resistance to the apartheid regime over the past year has provoked a particular interest in the situation and struggle of black women in South Africa. Contemporary currents in the North American women's movement – such as the critique of racism and a growing sensitivity to the different cultural constructions of gender struggle – are sharpening the focus of this interest and predisposing the development of a more informed solidarity with South African women.

We Make Freedom and *Cry Amandla!* are two of a small but hopefully growing number of publications on South African women which move beyond the mere listing of the oppressive conditions faced by black women under apartheid. These new books impart a sense of how the strictures of the apartheid system are experienced, perceived, suffered and resisted in the everyday lives of women.

The projects of *We Make Freedom* and *Cry Amandla!* are ostensibly similar. Lipman and Goodwin are both visiting journalists who set out to speak with women in South Africa in order to portray their lives and to glean the specific perspective which women bring to bear on understanding the ramifications of apartheid and the struggle against it. Both authors see women as centrally located with community relations and ascribe to them a particular perspicacity. Goodwin, for example, sees women "as representative of more than themselves and close to the heart of society" (p.4). Lipman suggests that the centrality of black women in family and community networks has produced an indomitable will to survive and resist, despite their living "at the bottom of the South African dungheap" (p.2). Both books are constructed around interviews with a selection of South African women who share, in their own words, pieces of their lives and thoughts. The authors add introductory and explanatory sections which set in context and amplify the content of the interviews. But for all these parallels in objective and format, the books are quite distinct. The constellation of interviewees, the explicit and implicit questions posed them, and the ways in which the interview material has been woven together, in each case have produced two different pictures of South African women: they are, at the same time, revealing of the different political orientations of the authors.

We Make Freedom is the more comprehensive and informative of the two books in terms of addressing the variety of contexts and conditions in which black women are regulated and oppressed by the policies and practices of apartheid. Lipman records the voices of women from a range of class and social situations – black women living in urban townships, in precarious squatter camps, destitute rural areas; women in trade unions, in the student movement and political organisations. She interviews, too, a few prominent white women who, in various ways, support black women and oppose apartheid. Some of the black women merely describe their appalling everyday struggles. A woman from an urban township relates her ordeal trying to find private time with the father of her children, a "foreign" migrant worker who does not have the right to live with her. Women who have been removed from their plots of land on white-owned farms to the barren Bantustans tell of the sickness, hunger and death there. Others, community, trade union, and political leaders, talk in more general and reflective terms about the government policies which structure the horrific poverty and repression experienced by so many black women. They also explain how women are organising and resisting.

Two themes that emerge from the views, vignettes and experiences which Lipman has captured will be of particular interest to feminist readers. One is the dispelling of the common misconception that black South African women constitute a socially homogenous group. The division between women in the rural areas and those with urban residence rights results in quite divergent possibilities and issues of struggle for women in these different social circumstances. Women's anti-apartheid organisations in South Africa today are facing the challenge of encompassing and articulating the interests of all black women.

The second theme is the way gender struggle is seen in relation to the liberation struggle. The political leaders interviewed by Lipman tend to see women's liberation as secondary to the overall political struggle for the rights of black people, or as a struggle that might ensue after the apartheid regime has been abolished. On the other hand, there is present in many of the interviews clear reference to the ways in which women specifically are oppressed under apartheid, the issues around which they mobilise, and the very gender-specific forms and quality of women's involvement in political resistance. There is also discussion of changing gender relations, of black women assuming, with enormous courage and capacity, ever more social and political responsibility, and of black men, contrary to tradition, starting to take on more domestic responsibility.

Cry Amandla! is based on interviews with a very much smaller number of South African women. We hear, in fact, few black women's voices – three domestic workers, a middle class administrative worker in a church organisation, and a political activist who worked closely with the late Steve Biko. Thenjiwe Mtintiso, the activist, is as Goodwin proclaims – the heroine of the book – and it is her biography and observations which comprise its main thread. The five Afrikaner women interviewed represent slightly different shades of political opinion but all are firmly within the white ruling group. Goodwin also speaks with a few English-

speaking liberals – a group she sees as politically powerless but influential because of their wealth and international contacts.

Though there are indices of the material and social relations in which these different women are located, Goodwin clearly is less concerned with this aspect than with the women's ideas, views and opinions about apartheid. To demonstrate the divergency in worldviews and mutual misunderstanding between the women of the different social and racial groups, she creates an artificial dialogue or confrontation between the women by trying to represent their views to each other, across the divide of colour and politics that she feels, as an outsider and journalist, she can do. While recording conversations with white women, for example, she projects the comments she knows or assumes Thenjiwe, as a black woman, would have made in response.

Implicit in Goodwin's view that South African women should be talking to one another is the idea that mutual understanding might bring about some change. Her approach also appears to assume that our understanding of apartheid in South Africa will be enhanced by an appreciation of the attitudes and viewpoints of all parties – hence her commitment to speaking with Afrikaner women as the "wives, sisters and daughters" of the "men who rule." The implicit assumption that apartheid can be understood (and indeed transformed) at the level of social consciousness is a questionable one at all times. But for me it was made particularly so by the generalising and grandiose claims of the book's sub-title "South African Women and the Question of Power."

The designation of the static and racially-defined constructs of 'the African" and "the Afrikaner" as "the power centres" of apartheid society oversimplifies the complex social relations that obtain in South Africa. It precludes, for example, the possibility of accounting for the collaboration of certain groups of blacks in maintaining some of the repressive structures of apartheid, such as the Bantustans. Further, to depict the views of so few women as representing those of "the African" or "the Afrikaner" tends toward the dangerous stereotyping at which the South African regime itself is so adept. As Lipman's book brings out so clearly, the experience of apartheid varies considerably across contexts.

While it might be said that all blacks and a number of whites want the end of "Apartheid," what in fact that means and how it might be realised have always been the subject of debate and struggle within broad opposition politics. Goodwin's rather abstract deployment of the term "power/*amandla*" does little to elucidate that question, or how South African women perceive it. There is little direct discussion of political strategy and organisation – which is generally associated with the empowerment of oppressed groups – either of black people in general, or of women.

I would have read *Cry Amandla!* far more easily and rewardingly had it been represented as biographical or as an autobiographical political travelogue – that is, without the analytic, political and feminist expectatioins which the title stimulates and the book frustrates. There are vivid and well-written observations and personality portraits and a powerful and moving verbatim account of Thenjiwe's detention. The perceptions of the white women *are* illuminating and respond to questions in all of us: *how* can they live with themselves while black children are being shot and starved to death? Although it is about apartheid and about some South African women, *Cry Amandla!* is not as useful as *We Make Freedom* for women in Canada who want to understand and show solidarity with the struggle of South African women.

IN SEARCH OF ANSWERS: INDIAN WOMEN'S VOICES FROM 'MANUSHI'

Edited by Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita. London: Zed Books, 1984.

Amrita Abraham

The Emergency imposed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi's government from mid-1975 to early 1977 was to the post-Independence generation of Indians what the Independence movement up to 1947 had been for their parents – a momentous education in politics and democratic rights. It led to a burgeoning of democratic and civil rights groups all over the country and to greater activism on women's rights and the environment. 1975 was also the start of the UN's International Decade of Women and the year in which the comprehensive "Status of Women in India" report, commissioned by the government of India, was made public. Both sparked off debate and some activity.

Though women played a major part in the Independence movement and subsequently in trade unions, peasant and tribal movements, and political parties, a truly *women's* movement in which women's concerns were either central or specifically and consciously recognised alongside other issues, became apparent only after the Emergency. Its most characteristic feature was the development of a number of autonomous women's groups based on issues or localities, and free to set their own agenda, priorities and programmes instead of trying to accommodate themselves within the campaigns of political parties that had until then fathered women's political and welfare organisations.

The magazine *Manushi*, published alternatively in English and Hindi from New Delhi since 1979, both coincided with and fed the new consciousness and new form of organisation. *Manushi* (Woman) does not call itself a 'feminist magazine', because the term in India is overlaid with the experience and ideas of western women, whereas Manushi sets out trying to understand and convey without western ideological interference, as it were, the experiences of Indian women.

The group of women from Delhi University who founded *Manushi* were clear

from the start about certain things the magazine would and would not do, and in the seven years they have been publishing neither success nor difficulty have altered these objectives. They decided they would not accept funds from institutions or rich donors, or ads which "depicted women in oppressive or stereotype roles," but would finance themselves from small donations and a dual price on the magazine (a highly subsidised subscription rate and a second, higher rate, whichever readers chose to pay). At one time, without office space, Madhu Kishwar, Ruth Vanita and others were producing the magazine from their shoulder bags, writing, editing and putting it together in cafés, on park benches and buses, or at the printing press. Publishing dates have often been erratic. Voluntary help has sometimes been uncertain. Today it is brought out from a small flat in New Delhi that is office, home and meeting place all in one.

Another remarkable decision was to make *Manushi* a forum for women to speak to each other and therefore it has been made available to any woman who has something to say. The result is not only a huge, unique, astonishing correspondence from women (pleas for help, shared experiences, records of personal and collective battles), but articles and reports such as no other magazine has been able to publish. A third crucial decision was that *Manushi* would reach out beyond the educated, the middle-class, the urban. Publishing in Hindi helped, as has the subsidised price and the content that has a strongly, consistently rural focus. A fourth was that anyone who wishes to help produce and distribute the magazine may do so, and many have helped in various ways. Decisions about the magazine are shared by the two editors, Kishwar and Vanita, and those who actually work to bring it out.

Such an approach has made *Manushi* a landmark in the women's movement and in publishing. The collection of articles in this book from *Manushi's* first five years, 1979 to 1983, provides a mosaic-style picture of the lives of Indian women at home, on the land, in mines and factories. Its sections on violence and women's struggles (including the magazine's own fight for survival) serve as a recent history of the movement. It does not pretend to treat definitively any of the subjects it deals with, but it does succeed through surveys, reports, first-hand accounts, letters and comment in setting down many of the major characteristics of those lives today.

Given the vastness of the country, its cultural and social variety and the small points of contact with village life, a 'search for answers' is all anyone can hope to embark upon. Nevertheless, women anywhere reading the book will recognise many individual voices. Of the woman driven to suicide who leaves letters begging forgiveness from her husband, sister-in-law and parents: "I am so ill-starred that wherever I go, something untoward occurs." Or another who finally breaks out of a bitterly unhappy marriage to find life alone it not easy: "It actually takes only one bold step to freedom . . . From then on . . . one becomes committed to what one has begun . . . we discover a strength we did not know to be within us . . ."

The big pictures, too, have a truth beyond time and place, such as a *Manushi* survey of small peasant and landless labouring women in Punjab, the most prosperous agricultural state in the country, and a model of progress for the rest. "Women eat much less than men and they eat last in the family." They work longer hours than men, an average of 15 to 16 arduous hours a day, "and are still considered a liability and burden to their families." "Employment opportunities for them in the midst of increasing agricultural production continues to be severely limited instead of expanding." When they get work it will be at more disadvantageous terms than men. When they bring home their wages they will have little say about how the family income is to be spent and will not be allowed to take part in other important areas of family decision-making. "In most families the major justification for their existence is the ability to produce the requisite number of sons." Most are in poor health, some seriously ill but even during pregnancy or child-rearing they will not get the medical attention or extra diet they need. Discrimination and neglect such as this survey records have as their consequences a high female mortality rate. It is visible in the worsening sex ratio in the population: in 1901 there were 972 females to every 1000 males; in 1981 there were 935 females to every 1000 males.

Manushi's first five years coincide with two major campaigns by women's groups – against dowry deaths (young married women who burn themselves to death because of cruelty and harassment from in-laws and husbands over the size of dowry they brought with them), and for changes in the criminal laws on rape – and these battles are reflected in this collection. But perhaps the most significant story of the women's movement so far has been the battle for property rights.

A major politicial change in post-Independence rural India has been the emergence of a new peasant élite as a result of changes in land rights. Cultivators have been given title to the land they tilled, and during the two decades of the 1950s and '60s have grown in economic and political strength, claiming and achieving a role in government and policy-making. Women have begun to apply this lesson to themselves. *Manushi* relates one long, hard-fought and partly successful battle by landless labouring women to obtain title to the land they cultivated. It is based on the account of a woman, Manimala, who took part in the campaign and was for many years a member of the organisation of young people that spearheaded the campaign, the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini. The Vahini was inspired by Jayprakash Narayan, a politician who in the mid-1970s sought to combine Gandhian and socialist ideas to cleanse Indian political and social life and give it new moorings.

The agitation was begun to get husbands and fathers, all landless labourers, title to the land they had been cultivating for generations in Bodgaya, in the northern state of Bihar. The land, more than 7000 acres, belonged to a religious trust which worked its labour as hard and for as little as did private landlords in the district. During the four-year agitation women were as active as men in mobilising support, in the demonstrations, in refusing to work, picketting the fields, seizing the crop, being arrested, beaten, starved out and, in the last states, shot by the police. Halfway through this struggle women began to make a claim for land in their own names. As Manimala reports it, awareness came slowly, at first over their right to express their views at campaign meetings, and then on matters such as sharing housework and wife-beating. In the end it seemed so obvious that women should have the same right to land as the men they fought alongside. If it was essential for the men who tilled the fields to own land to free themselves from an oppressive landlord, women must have land, too, to free themselves from oppressive landlords, husbands and fathers. In 1981, 1000 acres of land were distributed to the landless, and women in some of the campaigning villages won the right to hold plots of land in their own names.

WOMEN AND REVOLUTION IN VIETNAM

Arlene Eisen. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1984.

THE WORLD OF BURMESE WOMEN

Mi Mi Khaing. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1984.

Penny Van Esterik

Southeast Asian women are of particular interest to Women's Studies because of their relatively high status, in contrast to the traditionally low status of women in the patriarchal systems of China and India. Inspite of the problems of defining high and low status, studies of Southeast Asian women brim with stories of exemplary women with a dominant role in food production and irrepressible entrepreneurial skills. In writing about Southeast Asian women in 1982, I complained about lack of information on Burmese and Vietnamese women (Van Esterik, ed., *Women of Southeast Asia*, 1982). These two books, *Women and Revolution in Vietnam* by Arlene Eisen and *The World of Burmese Women* by Mi Mi Khaing, fill this gap. Throughout both books, we are constantly reminded of the presumed competence of Southeast Asian women. This competence shows in the life stories and accomplishments of individual women and women's groups in both countries.

These two paperbacks from Zed Press differ significantly in their authors' perspectives. Mi Mi Khaing writes a warm, personal account of Burmese women from the perspective of a senior social scientist educated in Burma and deeply committed to Burmese institutions. She touches briefly on women in Burmese history, family, law, domestic life, religion, education, work and politics, but always from an insider's perspective – striving to let the reader glimpse the contours of women's lives through the author's life. Khaing recognizes that her account may be too traditional, too optimistic, and too idealized. Her only ulterior motive in writing the book is perhaps to explain the lack of a feminist movement in Burma.

Arlene Eisen tries from an outsider's perspective to teach the reader about the relation between women's liberation and socialism through the efforts of Vietnamese women's resistance to patriarchy and foreign domination. She explores in detail the roots of women's oppression under feudalism and French colonialism. After documenting the seeds of women's liberation, including the formation of the Vietnam Women's Union, she reviews the recent progress of Vietnamese women in the area of work inside and outside the household, family relations, health care, education and politics. We meet Vietnamese women through the veil of socialist rhetoric which often sounds more western than Southeast Asian in its phrasing and priorities. Her motivations for documenting the lesson of Vietnam include the argument that Vietnam, in resisting American imperialism, demonstrated the need for revolution inside the United States and other western countries.

Reading the two books together emphasizes the variety of life styles within mainland Southeast Asia, and the devastating effects of war on women's lives. For Burma's independence in 1948 and subsequent transition to socialism followed a different route from Vietnam's. While leaving the inevitable scars of colonialism and nationalist struggle, these did not fall disproportionately on women. In fact, Mi Mi Khaing's Burmese women seem to carry on through these turbulent years, managing households and markets with equal grace, scarcely missing a puff on their green cheroots.

Economic independence or "collective mastery in the economic field" is the foundation of women's liberation in Vietnam. Eisen documents the change in women's work patterns: "In 1961, only 20% of the waged labour force in North Vietnam was female. By 1982, women constituted more than 45% of the labour force of all Vietnam, including the armed forces." In the socialist economy, economic producers, including women, make decisions about agricultural and factory production, and receive pay from the collective for their labour. However, there is still a tendency to undervalue women's work and sex segregation of jobs still occurs. The entrepreneurial skills of Southeast Asian women are hard to still, and the Women's Union has had difficulty convincing women to give up their own market businesses.

In Burma, bazaar trade is still very much the domain of women, and women vendors manage very complex trade circuits to maximize their profits. The People's Shops set up by the present socialist program are unable to compete with the traditional bazaar sellers. Only those who cannot make profits on their own initiatives would accept a salary to sell for the government. The importance of self-employment for women is measured both in economic and social terms. As an elderly vendor argues, she lives and eats out of the money she makes vending, and feels that even a small margin is worth working for as she is living the life she likes. In addition to documenting women's work in rice production, Khaing discusses women in domestic service. Her sensitive treatment of servants, however, lacks any suggestion of class analysis.

Another clear contrast between the worlds of Burmese and Vietnamese women comes from differences in their social organization. Vietnam's patrilineal, patrilocal system combined with patriarchal Confucian ideology works to devalue women and insure their submission to fathers, husbands, and sons. Changes in divorce laws and the abolition of polygamy have begun the transformation from this feudal ideology, but Eisen records the persistence of subtle assumptions about the "in-born" incapacity of women, and their subordination in the home.

The bilateral Burmese emphasize equally maternal and paternal relatives, and value their "daughter-jewels" equally as their "son-jewels." The traditional importance of women is reflected in their inheritance and family laws. Thus Burmese women have the weight of tradition behind them and have less often fought for a special protective legislation.

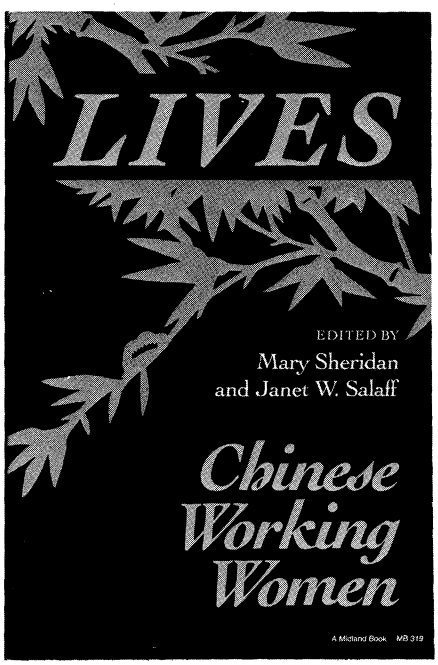
Another contrast lies in the ideological underpinnings of women's lives in the two countries. In Vietnam, Confucian ideology is rejected as part of the feudal past. Eisen documents how women's labour in achieving a national liberation and socialism gives birth to women's liberation. Vietnamese cadres explain the rights of "collective mastery" in the political field and within family and community. Readers may be more struck with the horror stories of past oppression of Vietnamese women than with the power of new ideologies to guide women's lives.

Burmese women orient themselves around Buddhist ideology, supporting the monastic tradition of Theravada Buddhism and accepting the potential glory of men without question or revolt. For their veneration is for the ordination tradition and the teachings, not for men, *per se*. The existence of "pon" or potential

glory of men, as a characteristic of past and future Buddhas, does not seem to diminish women in their own eyes or in the eyes of men. The order of "Buddhist nuns" is active in Burma, providing social services, and training in meditation, a practice which is extremely important for lay women in Burma. Khaing demonstrates the power of Buddhist ideology to influence both the construction of gender in Burma, and the meaning of women's daily lives.

The books can be faulted for very different problems: *Women of Burma*, an optimistic and idealistic book, deserved better editing and more attention to citations and sources. In *Women and Revolution in Vietnam*, Eisen's historical and political research is impressive, but her political biases are painfully obvious as she documents Pol Pot's incursions into Vietnam in gruesome detail – without comparable attention to Vietnam's invasion and continued occupation of Cambodia.

Both books provide fascinating glimpses into the lives of exemplary women, and broaden our understanding of how different historical experiences shape the lives of Southeast Asian women.



WOMEN IN CHINA: A SELECTED AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Karen T. Wei. Westport, Connecticut and London, England: Greenwood Press, 1984.

WOMEN IN CHINA: BIBLIOGRAPHY OF AVAILABLE ENGLISH LANGUAGE MATERIALS

Lucie Cheng, Charlotte Furth, and Hon-Ming Yip. Berkeley, California: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1984.

LIVES: CHINESE WORKING WOMEN

Mary Sheridan and Janet W. Salaff. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Margo S. Gewurtz

A sure sign that an academic subject has reached the "take-off" point is the appearance of specialized bibliographies. That two such, each entitled *Women in China*, appeared in 1984 is evidence of the new maturity of Women's Studies as an integral component of Chinese Studies. As both bibliographies are devoted primarily to English language sources, it is evident that the compilers wish to bridge the gap between Women's Studies and area studies.

Both bibliographies cover books and articles published up to 1981-82, but the Cheng *et al.* is the more comprehensive with 4,100 entries compared to only 1,100 for Wei. However, the Wei volume is extensively annotated whereas Cheng's volume has only occasional and then very brief notes as to content. Both are organized by topic and cover similar areas from economics, education, health and family planning to politics, law, the arts and so on. The Wei volume, although claiming to encompass China from the earliest times to the present, deals almost entirely with the twentieth century. It also has curious omissions. For instance, the two entries for Prof. Richard W. Guisso of the University of Toronto both refer to the volume of essays on women in China he edited in 1981, omitting his very important 1978 biography of the T'ang dynasty "Empress" Wu Tse-t'ien. Both these items are cited in the Cheng work. While both books have author indexes, and Wei has a title index, neither has a subject index, so that the researcher has to be imaginative in finding titles. If, for example, one is studying the development of the nursing profession, there are at least three or four sections of each bibliography where relevant references can be found. Nevertheless, these are extremely valuable research tools and, although the Cheng volume is cearly the better of the two, both deserve to be part of any serious research collection.

The third item under review, *Lives*, edited by Sheridan and Salaff, shares with the bibliographies a desire to contribute to Women's Studies, particularly for those unable to work on primary sources in Chinese. The value of this volume to the non-specialist is greatly enhanced by Andrea McElderry's masterful survey of the historical background of Chinese women from the late nineteenth century to 1949.

Lives is a remarkable collection of fourteen biographies of working-class Chinese women, much of it in their own words. The biographies range over several generations, from those born in the dying years of the Manchu Qing dynasty that ended in 1911, to those born and raised in the period after World War II. They also encompass three very different societies within the Chinese culture zone, namely, the China Mainland, both before and after Liberation, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Thus the biographies presented are extremely varied in scope, yet each makes fascinating reading and all are deeply moving human documents.

The studies here represent original case materials collected in the course of field research at different times by different researchers operating in varied socio-economic settings. Hence, they are without a common goal or methodology, although each researcher employed the "life history" method as part of his/her own work. Conscious of the disparate nature of their materials, materials which were originally pieces of larger, self-contained puzzles, the editors evidence a great concern for methodological issues, and the validity of the "life history" method. Three of the fifteen chapters are devoted to these issues, and while these discussions are helpful in locating both the academic and actual contexts for the lives herein presented, they seem unnecessarily defensive, for the issue is not, as the editors make clear, how "objective" the researchers were or how "typical" or "representative" these individual lives are, but whether or not these original source materials serve as "a document to stimulate further inquiry." The editors

editors rightly stress the "thematic" uses of these life histories as documents intended to challenge stereotypes, especially that of passive Chinese women, and to generate further research. In that respect, the book succeeds admirably, and can be read profitably by academic specialists, undergraduates and a broad public interested in "the meaning and experiences of women's work."

The majority of these lives were compiled by Western-trained social scientists, but several are translations of Chinese biographies from the 1940s and the 1980s. These present us with "model lives" chosen by the authorities for broad publicity because they were seen as "ideal types" worthy of emulation in the process of revolution and reconstruction. As such, they conform to a tradition of Chinese official biography succinctly explained for the non-specialist in a fine chapter by Jerome Ch'en. While revealing important factual data about actual social conditions, such biographies are equally significant for what they reveal of cultural norms and values, both the "what is" and "what ought to be."

These disparate lives all reveal the depths of struggle of modern Chinese women against an ancient system of patriarchal family authority. The continuing power of that family authority for contemporary women whether in Taiwan, Hong Kong or the People's Republic is one of the major themes that emerges from this volume. Especially revealing is the concluding chapter by Mary Sheridan on a farm woman in Sichuan province, West China, with whom she lived for extended periods between 1981 and 1983. The negative implications for women of the reemergence of the family farm as the basic economic unit in the post-Mao reforms that dismantled the communes is disturbingly apparent. Women work harder than ever, have a weaker support network and are not considered "head of household" unless they are widows or their husbands must work and live outside the village for extended periods. Despite these new realities, Sheridan's depiction of the changed attitudes of the younger generation, who share decision-making and domestic labour to an unprecedented degree, gives cause for hope. This chapter, like so much else in the book, raises again the debate over the relative importance of structural or cultural change in the transformation of women's lives.

All three volumes under review make research on Chinese women both more compelling and more manageable for area and non-area specialists alike. Those seriously interested in Women's Studies on a global scale can now, and indeed must, absorb Chinese women into their concerns, and there is clearly a very great deal of work yet to be done.

MOSCOW WOMEN: THIRTEEN INTERVIEWS

By Carola Hansson and Karin Lidén, translated by Gerry Bothmer, George Blecher, and Lone Blecher. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

Frances Beer

Moscow Woman is an impressive document that has reached us by a somewhat oblique route. In 1978 two Swedish women travelled to the Soviet Union, a trip they had frequently made before. This time they went with a particular plan in mind: to interview anonymously a number of Soviet women, tape the interviews, smuggle the tapes out of the country, and turn them into a book which would provide an accurate picture of what life is really like for ordinary women in Moscow, and how they feel about it. Not surprisingly, delays were involved. The tapes had to stay behind when they left, and did not reach Sweden for six months; the interviews then had to be translated and were finally published in Sweden in 1980. Now an introduction has been added by Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, author of several books about Soviet women, and the text has been translated into English by Gerry Bothmer, George Blecher, and Lone Blecher. The interviews are interspersed with short passages that summarize some of the main themes to have emerged from the authors' talks: "Women in the Work Force," "Salaries and the Cost of Living," "Birth Control and Abortions," "Divorces," and so on; also included is a 12-page spread of photographs. The commentaries and pictures provide depth and coherence to what might otherwise feel a little like a string of unconnected conversations.

Lapidus' introduction presents important background material about the course of women's liberation – which began as a cornerstone of revolutionary doctrine – in the USSR as it became ossified in mid-flight during the Stalinist period. Women were encouraged, and often required by the shortage of men and by financial constraints, to join the workforce. But the changes that are essential if working women are to thrive – effective and available birth control, dependable nursery and day care facilities – never materialized.

Although the women's voices in the interviews are distinct and individual, their cumulative message is depressingly similar. Over and over we are presented with a catalogue of difficulties encountered as working mothers try to combine jobs with raising children and keeping their homefires burning. Over and over we hear of husbands who drink heavily, who cannot – do not feel they should – relate to their young children, who after work watch TV and read the newspaper as their wives, who have also returned from a full day's work, prepare supper, do the washing up and laundry, and look after the children. The male half of the population seems in this respect to have been utterly untouched by the revolution.

Additional burdens arise in these women's daily lives from the acute housing shortage and the difficulty in obtaining material necessities such as food and clothing. Undoubtedly the Western press has gloated unduly over the long lineups faced by iron curtain consumers, but it must be at the very least a drastic inconvenience to have to wait in three lines – one to choose, one to pay, one to pick up – for your groceries if you also have to go across town to collect your child from day care and then head home by public transit in rush hour to a one or maybe two-room apartment to begin on your second job of the day.

What seems abundantly clear is that the agenda for improving conditions for women – though they are seen as an essential component in the work force – has not survived as a priority of the Soviet government. The circumstances of health care in general, and of maternity care in particular, are perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this indifference. While abortions are encouraged – 4 out of 5 pregnancies are aborted – contraception information and supplies are desperately inadequate, as is sex education itself. The experience of childbirth is described in almost universally negative terms; the

option of anaesthesia is rare and fathers are excluded from the delivery rooms. Women's health services are evidently not officially recognized as in need of improvement. And as the state seems comfortable with this second-class treatment, so do the Moscow men. Although most households depend economically on two incomes, the concept of sharing just does not carry over to housework, fully 75% of which is done by women alone. Although men share some of the harder work (grocery shopping, floor waxing), tasks such as cooking, washing, and ironing are performed by 1% or less of the men alone.

More disturbing than this male assumption that housework is women's work is the fact that it is evidently shared by the women. Repeatedly they describe themselves as overextended, frustrated, exhausted; yet these feelings are accompanied not by a commitment to change, but by resignation, even fatalism. They are still bound by the traditional stereotypes themselves: men's education and careers are 'more important,' girls should be brought up to be feminine (gentle, tender), boys should be brave and strong, etc. In fact, despite the differences between their world and ours, the tune starts to sound awfully like the same old song: a tradition of male supremacy perpetuated by the state, which the male half of the population is only too happy to enjoy and the female half accepts out of a combination of low self-esteem and social conditioning. What emerges from these interviews is not the foreignness of life in Moscow, though it may be more difficult to get yourself a pair of designer jeans, but how much is shared by women anywhere who are trying to live with patriarchy. The interview form is particularly effective in establishing the sense of kinship that emerges as the book goes on, and the high quality of the translation is a tremendous asset here: each woman's voice is clearly heard, their responses are both natural and personal.

Hansson and Lidén aim to cover a representative range of occupation and station – a party-member professor (who is clearly at the top of the heap), an editor, a data programmer, a draftswoman, a number of students, a chambermaid. Yet as their book allows each subject to come through as an individual, whom we get to know, it provides a context for Blackwell's subsequently published *Women and Russia: Feminist Writings from the Soviet Union*, a collection of essays edited by the exiled dissident Tatyana Mamonova, which represents a more defiant point of view, and a more politically active population. On its own, *Moscow Women* stands as powerful evidence of the grounds, and the need, for a solidarity amongst women that transcends national boundaries.

WOMEN AND RUSSIA: FEMINIST WRITINGS IN THE SOVIET UNION

Edited by Tatyana Mamanova. Translated by R. Park and C. A. Fitzpatrick. Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1985.

Hilda Kirkwood

Tatyana Mamonova, the chief editor of this collection, has included an autobiographical note which is not the least interesting of the stories in this book. Her education in the U.S.S.R. was achieved by overcoming what looks like a series of insurmountable odds. She was exiled with three of her colleagues for the publication and distribution of ten copies of the first issue of this anthology in 1979. It was, of course, *samidzat* – and therefore illegal. This expanded and translated version was published in England the following year and is now available here. Meanwhile Madame Mamanova has come from Paris, where she now lives, to work on a doctorate at Radcliffe College, Massachusetts. She might as readily have suffered the fate of her friend and fellow writer Kari Unksova, harassed by the KGB and separated from her family.

'Samidzat' – the invented word not found in any Russian dictionary – was coined in the fifties by a Moscow poet to describe a "self-publishing house;" as such, the subversive mode of publication is not only dis-approved by the authorities but almost invariably leads to real trouble. For a group of women cut off from the rest of the feminist world to publish such an anthology – the social/political section of which is highly critical of present conditions – was an act of considerable courage.

The feminist movement has not been in existence for long in Russia, and it is interesting that Mamonova says that it was through her access to the Western press – "thanks to the diplomats" – that she became convinced of the importance of the feminist movement: the feminist movement in Russia in the early part of this century had been blacked out. Several books about the woman question had appeared in the U.S.S.R. in the sixties when Krushchev opened the windows after the suffocation of Stalinism. It was then that Ekaterina Tershkova became the world's first woman cosmonaut.

The editors of *Women and Russia* have kept in mind that "equality sought by feminists (everywhere) is not an arithmetic equation, for men and women are not identical." Ignoring this obvious distinction has sometimes led to a boomerang effect, as in certain labour laws where the needs of child-bearing women are ignored. This mistake is by no means confined to Russia. As Valentina Dobrokhotova says in the section "Working Women:" "Officially the state expresses concern for women's health and statistics designed to prove the many efforts of the state are staggering – but in real life, something quite different staggers you. You sense that the functions of a woman's body have been completely forgotten – functions without which the life of society would simply come to a halt."

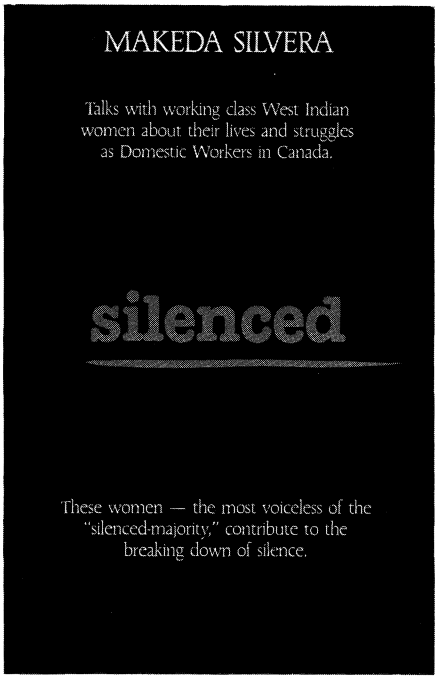
Writing equality for women into the constitution and realizing it in practice are not the same thing. The U.S.S.R. has the highest female labour rate of any modern society; the percentage of women in the professions far exceeds our own. But women are still concentrated in low-paying jobs. There are many women doctors, but the heads of clinics are men. Health care is rough-and-ready, particularly in obstetrics. In the section "Women, Birth and Family," some of the women's accounts of their experiences of birth without anaesthetics and the horrors of the abortion clinics are anything but pretty reading. (Abortion has been legal in Russia since 1968).

One half of this collection is devoted to social/economic issues, most intelligently discussed by writers of very diverse backgrounds. The other half is written by creative writers and ranges from the legendary stories of heroines to contemporary poetry. A most impressive level of journalism is achieved without diminishing its diversity. Contributors are drawn from every section of the vast Soviet Union, from Central Asia to Armenia: in this it is breaking new ground. On the creative side, O. Kurbangaeva of Alma-Ata in Central Asia contributes a story in which she quotes a lovely poem about a liberated lady of the

Middle Ages, a warrior who led her Forty Maidens into battle. She has her counterparts in Western history, such as Joan of Arc or Boadicea. These Russian women writers seem well aware that the feminist struggle did not begin yesterday: they tell us of those who rebelled against the influence of the Koran long ago.

There are many questions raised here to which no society has clear answers. It is obvious from these varied accounts that many aspects of the public life of women has far to go, and is still much more primitive in health care, for example, than what is taken for granted in the Western world. Great strides have been made in this century.

There is much more here for those who want to know about this huge and powerful country and its women, about the military character of the economy, the hardships of family life, and so on. Since the understanding of one another's political and personal difficulties and some real communication is essential to everyone's survival, I can only recommend that everyone interested in the welfare of women everywhere read this unique record.



SILENCED: TALKS WITH WORKING CLASS WEST INDIAN WOMEN ABOUT THEIR LIVES AND STRUGGLES AS DOMESTIC WORKERS IN CANADA

Makeda Silvera. Toronto: Williams-Wallace Publishers Inc., 1983.

Himani Bannerji

Paolo Freire, in a book called *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, used an expression to describe the political culture of an oppressed people – he called this a "culture of silence." According to him, the poor people of Brazil had developed a whole "culture of silence," partly as a result of oppression and partly as a protest, hiding from the "other" all that is significant about the "self." Not only in Brazil but everywhere, he felt, that the oppressed groups "cultivate" silence, they make silence itself, perfected as art or culture, the only thing that they are willing to communicate about themselves. A profound thought though this is, and curiously moving, it struck me as being unlikely, coming as I do from the experience of being a member of one of the most "invisible" groups among the cluster called the "visible minorities." Nowhere in the Canadian media, or in Canadian politics, conducted either by the left or the right, have groups such as mine, the South Asians of Toronto, any appearance of having a voice or being subjects of their own actions. The currency in the stereotypes of docility and "femininity" is so strong that a current strike conducted by the workers of a factory called Super Plastics, involving a large number of Asian women, has not been highlighted by either the unions or the women's groups in Toronto. Even as these women are trying to be heard, this silence on the part of those who are in a speaking situation will continue to perpetuate the myth of the "culture of silence."

To this myth of a "culture of silence" I want to counter-pose the notion of a "culture of deafness." Notions such as people's silence, it seems to me, are largely produced in social spaces inhabited by those who are close to the power source, who are engaged in major forms of ideological production. Between their news rooms, living-rooms, and computer rooms and the world of those who live directly below them, producing that material world which is the basis for the dominant culture, there is such a fissure that they can not hear those voices that are continuously rising all around them. Any non-white woman can testify to the enormous frustration suffered by her in Canadian society which is so thoroughly a product of racism, sexism, class discrimination and imperialism. If you are a Black woman – and a working class Black woman at that – whose job is, on the one hand, directly monitored by the Canadian state and, on the other, outside of the province of unions, you know that you can talk all you want, but nobody will hear you. In fact, your isolation and the legal conditions of your work will effectively ensure your silence: for talking too much you could not only lose your job but actually be deported. So it is not that Black women in the direst straits are *silent* but, as Makeda Silvera points out so effectively, they are *silenced.*

Makeda Silvera's book on Toronto's Black Caribbean domestic workers is consciously named *Silenced.* As she points out in her preface, she has given thought to the difference between "being silent" and "being silenced." She has also come to the conclusion that not only do these women know how to speak, but that what they say is worth hearing. She, therefore, does not make any attempt to patronize them by speaking on their behalf, a well-intentioned blunder that mars so many pieces of work on working class women. Who, after all, can tell their stories as well as the people themselves? This book, in story after story, gives us a taste of life that fiction would find hard to rival. And why would anyone who wants to be politically involved with the struggle of these women impose the same silence on them which has been imposed by the state, economy, and racism? So without doctoring the interviews, Silvera lets the speaking voice of her subject come through:

> *. . . when I just came here the kid's friends would just come home and they would say something funny – I didn't hear it, but I could feel it. Now the older girl never really came out and say anything about my colour – she is older and she understands why I'm Black – but the little boy will ask me. One day he ask me, "Why are you Black, Angel, and I am white?" I ask him the same question and he does not know, so I say, "listen, God didn't make us all the same colour. You get your complexion because of the different climate that you live in. My people weren't from Jamaica, they were from Africa. They are dark – some have straight hair and some have curly hair – but they are all dark because of the climate . . ." He says "I can't see how come you are Black and I am white." I say, "We all have one God and skin doesn't make any difference. When you cut your*

skin, what comes out?" "Blood," he says. "The same thing that comes out when I cut mine. I got everything like you it's only the skin that's different."

Makeda Silvera does not write in the third person persona of the sociologist or social observer. By not doing this she does herself a favour both as a writer and a political person: her commitment to the women she spoke with comes through most clearly in this way. By retaining as full a speaking voice of the women as possible, she adds to the richness of the texture of the book and, by according a subject status to them, she validates her own subjectivity as a political participant in the struggle against sexism and racism, or what has been called by Pratibha Parmar in her attempt to describe the situation of South Asian women in Britain, "sexist-racism" (*The Empire Strikes Back*).

This book is an attempt to broaden the basis of feminist theorization inasmuch as it is an entry into the everyday and mundane aspects of exploitation. Innocuous little households in the wealthier parts of Toronto take on the look of labour camps where, suffering all kinds of indignities, including the dangerous one of rape, the women have very little recourse to justice under the continuous threat of deportation. The power of the Canadian state that procures these workers on behalf of the Canadian ruling classes is all-pervasively present and all-mighty an influence on the lives of the women. Whereas the state is fully active in keeping the women locked up in their unbearable situations, it is never vigilant about enforcing the pay they had been contracted for. Here are two situations, one describing the power of the immigation authorities, the other a typical complaint from each one of the women. The first is the story of an underpaid woman, who is not given enough to eat and is called "Blackie" for the convenience of the family! When this woman tries to leave her employer for, hopefully, a better one, this is how she has to deal with the state:

Well, it comes a time when I couldn't take it any longer . . . I got the job and that gave me enough time to go to Immigration and tell the lady that I was leaving. The Immigration officer I saw wasn't happy when I told him I wants to leave the job. When I told him the reasons, he said that he was sure that I would work it out with the lady. I wasn't sure what he would do to me, because he kept asking me about Jamaica and my children. I beg and plead with him ask him to give one more chance. I told him that I found a new job. I told him that I was sure that I was going to get along with the people. He sit across from me and look at me, and tap his pen on the table for a long time. Then he said, "I will give you a chance, but I don't want to see you here again."

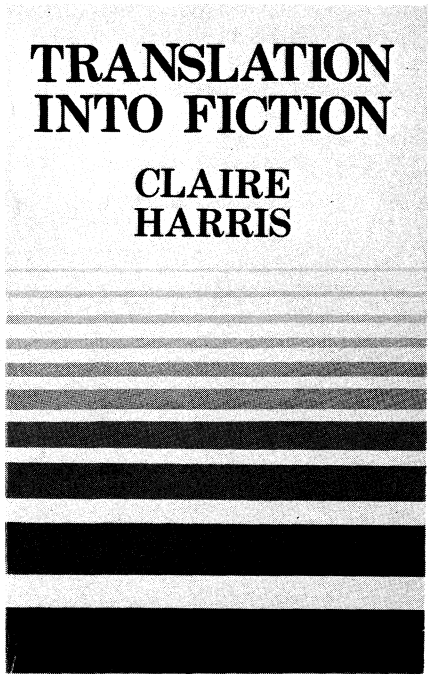
This humiliating and sadistic story is the other side of having to accept without a murmur whatever pay the employer chooses to give. One is too afraid to ask the proper regulations from the Immigration authorities:

For even on my days off I end up working. On this job I am not getting what Manpower say we should get. I get $350.00 a month because the lady say they want to see how I work out first. She say I am on a year probation, then if I pass, I will get the regular amount. I never hear of this law yet, but maybe it pass by Immigration and they didn't tell us.

It becomes apparent even from these tiny fragments, and overwhelmingly from the book itself, that it is impossible to reconstruct effectively the concrete everyday life of women, at any level in society, without understanding the constitutive relationship that exists between gender and class and, in the case of a country like Canada where class is constituted through race and ethnicity, the interweaving of race as well with these. There is a remarkable gap in Canadian Women's Studies in the area of work related to either class, race or ethnicity. This is perhaps an indication of who is in charge of the production of feminist discourse; these issues do not appear to be of a pressing interest to them. This signals the political disempowerment of the kind of people about whom *Silenced* is. The original inhabitants of Canada, who are now relegated to the "reserves," the non-white women with their long contribution in the Canadian scene of production, working class white women, none have made it to the level of producers of feminist politics and creators of discourse.

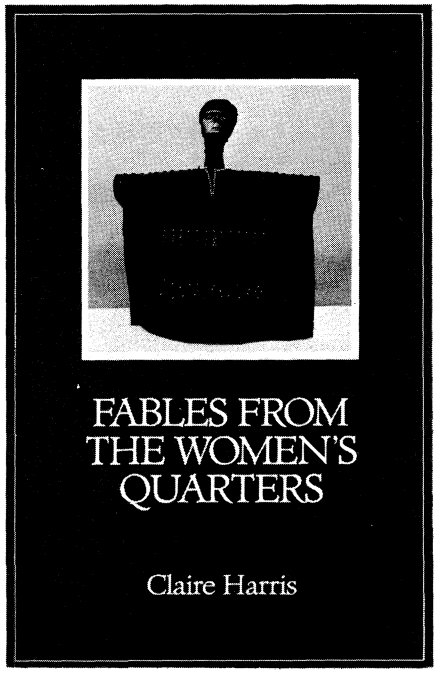
In connection with the above statement, it occurs to me that feminists, like any other group of radicals, are prone to ideological abstractions, which is how I see this category called "women." They first empty it of any sociological and specific experiential content, and then fill it with whatever seems to be a pressing problem from their own vantage point – which passes for a universal one. Their own vantage point, with a very tiny exception, is white and middle class, and often academic to boot. Either the woman in the dominant feminist talk has no face at all, or if she does, it is that of the dominant women. Feminist theory, if it is to be worth anything, must straight-forwardly confer a real face to the woman who is being talked about. Without this specificity, like all ideological sleight of hand, the much vaunted universal category called "women" becomes only a way for the sub-dominant members of the Canadian society to smuggle in their own power struggles. The fundamental conflict of interest between the black domestic workers and their female white employers, the basically imperialist construction of the metropolitan perception which is as much a male's as a female's legacy in the western developed nations, can not simply be dismissed as peripheral to the main business of understanding and combatting patriarchy. Makeda Silvera's book helps us in identifying this problem and in helping in the task of concretizing the experiences of different kinds of women.

In the history of Canadian Womens' Studies this book is the first to offer a book-length, analytical documentation of the experience of Black women. Also it makes a great contribution in supplying us with material to address the topic of women and work in the patriarchal and racist organization of the Canadian state as shown in its immigration and labour laws. One hopes as a reader and a teacher in Women's Studies, that this book is the beginning of a series of books about the issues raised by Silvera. Hearing women speak in their own voices, in what is not the approved English of the Manpower English classes, might sensitize us to better hearing. For very long now, both in politics and social sciences, it has been considered that to speak is to speak in a particular type of language in a given format. The message has been that, in order to qualify as a speaker, one must have graduated from the school of dominant discourse. But we know that a vast world lies outside that of a sexist-racist-classist discourse, and that it is a world with, not alternative, but oppositional forms of expression – leading to popular, oppositional forms of politics.



TRANSLATION INTO FICTION

Claire Harris. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Fiddlehead Poetry Books and Goose Lane Editions Ltd., 1984.



FABLES FROM THE WOMEN'S QUARTERS

Claire Harris. Toronto: Williams – Wallace Int'l. Inc., 1984.

Dionne Brand

Claire Harris is one of the best poets in the English language in Canada. Certainly in the Americas. Amid the useless verbiage, the inarticulateness which passes for poetry, the bankruptcy of meaning and the floating *angst* which marks much Canadian poetry, Harris is precise and has an envious command of language, no doubt derived from that strict British colonial education visited upon so many of us who grew up in the colonial Caribbean. Ironically her theme, born into it as she was, is bound up in the contradictions of that very language: the history of it, the political movements which it leaves its mark upon – whether that language be imperial English or imperial Spanish – and the effects of those movements on what is called the Third World. Don't be mistaken, that 'Third World' is *here* too, out there in Alberta where Harris has lived for the last two decades. What do you call a poetry rooted in Africa, watered in the middle passage, sprouted in the Caribbean, grafted and full grown across the Alberta moonscape?

Claire Harris was born in Trinidad, studied in Ireland, Jamaica and Nigeria. Her first poems were published in Nigeria in 1975. These biographical facts indicate something of the terrain of this poet's work. A terrain marked by slavery and colonisation by the British, resistance by African slave ancestry search, identification and liberation by those of us living and struggling in these times where old colonialisms and new colonialisms abound. The invasion of Grenada, the impending invasion of Nicaragua, the precipice of the right, the new fascism, the old murders. In the midst of this, Harris' concerns, as she says, are "How to be true to the Black self: to the female self, how to reflect accurately . . . " To finger the old murders and the new fascism is part of the task of this poet's work: "Our challenge as poets is to restore the sense, the ability to perceive, of the real self; to use language, image and form in original ways in the service of this goal . . . we seek wholeness in the landscape" (from Harris' essay "Fostered Alike by Beauty and by Fear" in an anthology forthcoming from the University of Calgary Press).

Claire Harris' two recent publications, *Fables from the Women's Quarters* and *Translation into Fiction*, span this task. In the latter she writes:

When I was
a girl
I turned away
from the sane and delicate
dreams of girls
wanting more
and less . . .

This:
I did not close
myself in rooms
hurled
in my/your circles
I searched
the earth
from trains and buses
from carts
in films and books
to find myself
always here
stripped to skin and sex
the mythic
ballooning in the mud dragging at my feet
drawn curtains/flight
a luxury
history denies me

"Stripped to skin and sex." How else to describe, how profoundly to describe the point from which a Black woman maps the landscape which she must recover from white and male hegemony. As Harris believes this recovery is inescapable and necessary, "flight" is a luxury, history is insistent. Only one outcome is possible, Harris writes:

I dream of a new naming
new words new lines
shaping a new world
I ride it
as at a durbar
barelegged through wide fields
of baobab soaring in the wash
of midnight
I am real
when my long
Arabian stride breaks through
daylight I cling to the black
truth race
bareback towards the light
dream hooves churning
the yellow lies
I make anew the shape
of things

I wonder if it is possible for anyone else but 'us' to understand the gravity and hope of those lines. And perhaps it is that seriousness, that intentness on the world which distinguishes Black poets, particularly poets with Harris' elegance. We are not distanced observers of the world but actors in it; we make no pretensions to "objectification" precisely because it is the objectification of humanity which allowed our enslavement and continued oppression. For us it is through identification that we continue to build resistances. And identification begins where written

history fails – in memory. The keepers of every Black family's memory is its grandmothers:

I think of these grandmothers
who
were dream
and dreamers
they were the waking toward
a child crying
in its sleep
the moving toward
the man warm
in bed
in fact
they were more than these
they were women
who said
I am
then there was nothing
promised them

Perhaps in no other culture but Black culture is the relationship between grandmother and grandaughter so intimate, so sacred and so vital. The passing on of history needs the memory of women, and attention to detail which is the survivor's tool, the truthtelling whose owner is the oppressed:

She would not join the cluster around the radio
instead in her bright cluttered room
while she cut our pale Sunday dresses
from ancient rustling skirts
she unfolded the harsh past in whispers
as if it were a secret hidden
in sibilant layers
in her lexicon men were trees
women were the dark volcanic earth
where they worked they listened
wearing a wild sunniness like a disguise

Our grandmothers taught us everything, things such as "you can't eat flowers child," so that we could plant food. For Harris those who did not teach us went mad and still taught us something else.

There was another
who went whirling through
the green streets of that town
in silk underthings
she danced
a greeting
from the centre of the heart
her hair a tangle
of hibiscus and ixora
her dreaming face gone before
they say that daily
I put her on in some small way
my face/my smile/even
my silences grow more
like hers

In *Fables from the Women's Quarters* Harris takes up this theme, now hers, then her foremothers. Again her line from *Translation* resonates: "stripped to skin and sex." Four major poems carry the theme: "Nude on a Pale Staircase;" "Where the Sky is a Pitiful Tent;" "Policeman cleared in Jaywalking Case;" and "Seen in Stormlight." They move from apprehending the black self, the woman self in the first poem to detailing the inhumanity in the second and third, and to recovering and visioning in "Seen in Stormlight." The title of the book itself – *Fables from the Women's Quarters* – tells us who passes on these histories, giving them the authenticity of truth telling.

In "Nude on a Pale Staircase" Harris juxtaposes the experience seen from the women's quarters to that from the other, to which the woman is summoned. In the women's quarters she uses fat lines, the mouth full and poetic, the woman spilling the full descriptions of that woman place where women control the language of events, critique the display of masculinity, as their bile rises at having to choose without real choice.

The corresponding response on the opposite page is delivered in the presence of a 'he' whom "she knows/ . . . does not/see her." The lines are thinner, as the woman does not own them and does not own the place, "Uprooted/dry pressed/ between the pages of his/culture/the rough cut of her/ foreigness/ is faded to nuance/ he approves." In that place the woman must exist in an eternal image of vulnerability and stasis. The sparseness of the lines in the response, their articulate inarticulatness and their inevitability is what Harris calls in the end "cool perfect/ and without feeling."

Harris uses the oppressive symbol of European art's 'nude' to show at once the oppressiveness of Euro-American activity in the new world, in the geo-political as well as the gender-political sense. On the other hand, in the lines from the women's quarters, things change, custom and ritual persist, the woman escapes but exchanges the family compounds for a "strangling boredom of this solitary woman's life" in the metropolis. In the women's quarters, waiting turns to rancor and a well-placed cynicism.

There is so much in "Nude on a Pale Staircase"! It is not only the life of this woman/nude but, coincidental to that colonial drama, other dramas are raised. The first in the "The sudden radio hauls her to alarm *Massacres in Assam* from her childhood a memory of blue bottles encrust swollen lips." On the radio, the woman hears the other/same colonialism still being fought. On the radio, in the metropolis, the same disembodiment of the oppressed is obtained as "The voice slides from disaster to music as soothing as a lollipop." And this disembodiment disembodies her too, now walking along a street in the metropolis where she is as invisible as photographs of the dying in newspapers and on television screens.

A steeliness, a quiet and running rage is stored and pulsates in "Policeman cleared in Jaywalking Case." The strip-searching and detention of a fifteen year-old black girl in Edmonton causes Harris to write

Look you, child, I signify three hundred years in swarm around me this thing I must this uneasy thing myself the other stripped down to skin and sex to stand to stand and say to stand and say before you all the child was black and female and therefore mine listen you walk the edge of this cliff with me at your peril do not hope to set off safely to brush stray words off your face to flick an idea off with thumb and forefinger to have a coffee and go home confortably Recognize this edge and this air carved with her silent invisible cries Observe now this harsh world full of white works or so you see us and it is white white washed male and dangerous even to you full of white fire white heavens white words and it swings in small circles around you so you see it and here I stand black and female bright black on the edge of this white world and I will not blend in nor will I fade into the midget shades peopling your dream

In blank verse, Harris' declamatory voice rings a warning. The poet stands as witness against the violence which is "white washed male and dangerous"; the poet, "black and female bright black on the edge of this white world", stands as witness to this inhumanity; the poet stands as *griot* who commits the act of racism to memory for later redemption. Harris as "remembrancer" (as she sometimes calls herself) contrasts this cold act against a Black woman-child, who has no protection, no kindness from the Alberta landscape, with another:

Once long ago the loud tropic air the morning rushing by in a whirl of wheels I am fifteen drifting through hot streets shifting direction by instinct tar heel soft under my shoes I see shade on the other side of the road secure in my special dream I step off the curb sudden cars crash and jangle of steel the bump the heart stopping fall into silence then the distant driver crying "Oh Gawd! somebody's girl child

she step off right in front of me, Gawd!"
Black faces anxious in a fainting world a
policeman bends into my blank gaze
"where it hurting yuh? tell me!"
his rough hand under my neck then
seeing me whole "stand up, let me help
yuh!" shaking this head the crowd
straining on the sidewalk the grin of the
small boy carrying my books then the
policeman suddenly stern "what you
name, girl?" the noisy separation of
cars "eh, what you name?" I struck
dumb dumb "look child, you ever see a
car in plaster of paris?" dumb "tell me
what's your name? You ever see a car in a
coffin!" the small boy calling out my
name into such shame But I was released
with a smile with sympathy sent on in the
warm green morning Twenty years later
to lift a newspaper and see my fifteen year
old self still dumb now in a police car
still shivering as the morning roars past
but here sick in the face of such vicious
intent

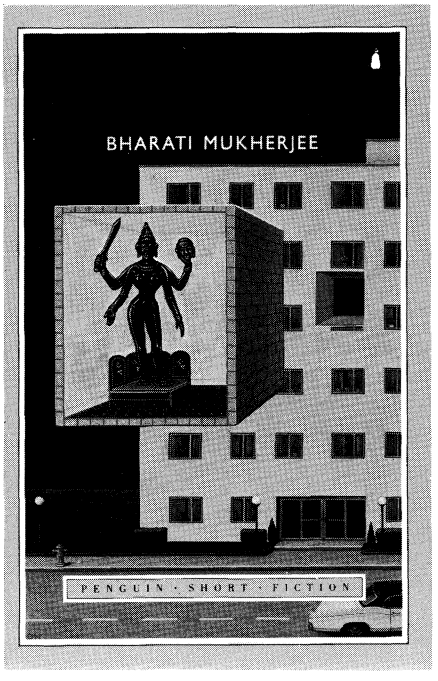
Harris sharply contrasts the soft handling and the care she once received close to home with the racist brutality experienced by this teenage girl in Alberta. It is everywhere, this cruelty, which is why here or there it resonates in our poetry; the present landscape only adds another nuance, another intricate knot to be untied. Harris is good at untying knots, at exposing the terror.

Black poets must use everything at their disposal to reconstruct the truth, the past, the details. In "Where the Sky is a Pitiful Tent," Harris uses an oral account of the massacres of native people in Guatemala beneath the verses of the poem. The truth of both accounts – Harris' poem and Rigoberta Manchu's narrative – is the poem's strength. By using account, Harris acknowledges the unwritten resistance of native peoples in Guatemala against the military dictatorship. The commonplaceness of the massacres is mirrored in the reappropriation of the day-to-day musings of the poem.

Lastly, "Seen in Stormlight" makes the journey back to ancestors. For every Black poet must return to come forward, must break the vision of us which we did not make, must witness as Harris does so beautifully, must reclaim history:

And the drumming of spent thunder
fades into silence . . .
Now morning glimmers in the air
And that whirling night
and those strange carvings seen
in stormlight
so they hung in lightning glare
so recorded

The Africa Harris sees is is a real one, not the Africa of European myth, though certainly the Africa of European plunder. It is not the Africa of the kidnapped returned after these four, five centuries either – though some of it must be for Harris, looking at it with new/old eyes. But, it is the Africa which turns in its own revolutions, new and old and Harris, its remembrancer for we kidnapped, sees it in a storm. In this stormlight she pieces together the *orisas*, the traffic jams, the markets, the singing, the *bobol*, the prayer, the struggle to live. In a note at the end Harris says: "Still it was familiar as places seen in a dream 'no wild and unheard-of melodies/no tunes that rise from the blood/ no blood calling from the deep places' but then unlike Rilke, black, I was no romantic." The return confirms two things for Harris and for us. The first that, yes, our memories held out beyond slavery, there was such a place where we began and the second, that after identification of the locations and events of our suffering we must make new locations, new events, new offerings to our infinite humanity.



DARKNESS

Bharati Mukherjee. Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1985.

Elizabeth Sabiston

Darkness is the first collection of Bharati Mukherjee's pungent, trenchant short stories of immigrants being assimilated, for better or for worse, into the Canadian "mosaic" or the American "melting pot." It is to be hoped that readers will not have long to wait for the next collection.

It would be temptingly easy to see Mukherjee's stories as semi-autobiographical projections. But in reality what is astounding about them is the sheer variety of voices she employs: male-female, saints-sinners, visible minority – white, old-young, Moslem-Hindu. Her "Indians" come from Bangladesh, Goa, Calcutta, Bombay, and settle in Iowa, Upper Montclair, New Jersey, upstate New York, Toronto, New York City, Florida. They become psychiatrists, housewives, tandoor chefs, engineers, university professors, "imaginary assassins," illegal aliens.

In her Introduction she compares herself explicitly to V.S. Naipaul and implicitly to Bernard Malamud, to whom she dedicates the book. It is not a book about an immigrant's experience, but rather about the immigrant experience as "a metaphor, a particular way of partially comprehending the world." Thus, she says, the book she would now like to update is not Forster's *A Passage to India*, but the American Jewish immigrant Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*. Immigration has long been viewed as a symbol of the North American experience, and North America itself has embodied the dream of renewal, of resurrection.

The writer who most sprang to mind while I was reading these terse, economical little parables, however, was not Naipaul or Malamud or even Roth, but rather the American regionalist short story writer Flannery O'Connor *(Everything That Rises Must Converge)*. Each story carries a sting in its tail; the reader suddenly slips over the edge of the apparently comforting everyday reality into "darkness." Mukherjee also shares O'Connor's slides into mysticism, albeit Hindu rather than Catholic. Like O'Connor, she specializes in the finely chiselled, but charged miniature and the book deserves the accolade of its epigraph from Henry David Thoreau: "Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short."

The title, *Darkness*, works on both the

literal and metaphorical levels. Its meanings are explored most cogently in the story, "Hindus," where, we are told, the Lebanese as well at first receive "brave New World overtures," but finally are swallowed up by "the gathering of the darknesses shared." The darkness to which North American society consigns them is an expansion of their own visible invisibility. At first the heroine, Leela, tries to treat Manhattan "not as an island of dark immigrants but as a vast sea in which new Americans like myself could disappear and resurface at will." By the time her interracial marriage to a film-maker has broken up, and she tries to repudiate her "roots," exemplified by a deposed Maharaja whose *Memoirs* she is reading (she works as an "Administrative Assistant" at a publishing house), she suddenly realizes that assimilation is only an illusion, and "I was reading about myself, blind and groping conquistador who had come to the New World too late."

The final tale, "Courtly Vision," is a kind of coda to *Darkness*. Its purpose is to distill the nature of art, which is prophetic. The "Courtly Vision" brings to life an old Mogul painting from approximately 1584 A.D., "Emperor on Horseback Leaves Walled City." On the surface, it seems to have nothing to do with the contemporary focus of the other stories, but in fact it illuminates them in retrospect. The emperor who leaves his walled city is the first of many emigrants to follow, setting all at risk for the dream of conquering a new world. The European invasion lingers threateningly in the person of Count Barthelmy, and in the Portugese priests, Fathers Aquaviva and Henriques, the Christian missionaries seeking to impose their virginal Madonna and white baby on a sensuous, dark people whose richness is shadowed forth in the mango tree – "Excessive, unruly life – monkeys, serpents, herons, thieves naked to the waist – bloom and burgeon on its branches." We are strongly reminded of the scene in the film version of *A Passage to India* where Miss Quested stumbles terrified from the erotic Hindu sculptures while monkeys chatter at her mockingly in the jungle.

The emperor's final command to his court painter is heard by the verbal artist, Bharati Mukherjee: *"Give me total vision . . . Tell me how my new capital will fail . . . Transport me through dense fort walls and stone grilles and into the hearts of men."* This vision of movement, past, present and future, is consonant with that of her other role model, Walt Whitman, the great American poet-as-seer. As she writes in the earlier story, "Angela," "Reading portents requires a special kind of literacy."

Angela, or the Angel, the adopted girl from Bangladesh, is the survivor while her Iowa sister Delia lies in a coma, a death-in-life. She will work with handicapped children in a burn-centre, having been savaged herself, her nipples cut off, as a child: "Only a doctor could love this body." Mukherjee underlines the sexism of both societies, violent in the parent culture, more subtle in the adopted. But Angela at the end relives the childhood terror, what Conrad called "the horror, the horror!" in *Heart of Darkness*, as leeches feed on the blood of her breasts, rather than babies on her milk.

Mukherjee's immigrants share a kind of fellowship in that they all come from "the same subcontinent of hunger and misery." For the most part, they are more comfortable in New York, or Iowa, or even Montreal, than in Toronto, where the shadow of the British Raj seems omnipresent. It is clear that Mukherjee, unlike many newcomers, prefers the American melting pot to the Canadian mosaic, seeing the latter as the symbol through which "the country proudly boasts of its opposition to the whole concept of cultural assimilation." Clearly, this is not a definition of multiculturalism most Canadians would accept, but it points to a weakness some of this third population of Canada has felt viscerally: the reduction of ethnicity to what one scholar, Dr. Jamshed Mavalwala, has referred to as "the eating and drinking syndrome": "No individual lives in Canada *only* to indulge in 'ethnic food' and 'ethnic dance'"[1] as expressed in Toronto's annual Caravan.

As one of Mukherjee's characters comments, if one is mugged on a New York subway it would just be for the money, not a racial assault. Another says, "And for Pakis, Toronto was hell." On a tropical spice island off Africa, the half-European Ratna Clayton, married to an Anglo-Canadian, dreams of the days when "the World According to Hsü" "was one." As she wonders, "Why did continents have to collide? Why did they have to move to Toronto?" For Ratna, "Other people's revolutions could not shock or dismay," whether in Quebec or on a Francophone spice island. Because of Ratna's affinities with the French-colonized Africans, together with her recollection of Hsü's prehistoric one world, she is sure that "No matter where she lived, she would never feel so at home again."

The central concern in several stories is the situation of Indian women caught between two cultures. Here Mukherjee comes down squarely on the side of North America. Successful Indian male immigrants, like Sailen Kumar in "Visitors," send back home for Indian wives in parent-arranged marriages. As his new wife Vinita soon realizes, Sailen has specified a bride who can be easily integrated into American society, who can produce a son who will play in Little League games: ". . . it wasn't so much a son that we wanted as to assimilate, to be a *pukka* American." It is no wonder that North America causes such young women (coming from a tradition where women can be punished by being beaten with men's shoes), to question their status and their marriages.

Nafeesa Hafeez, in "The Lady from Lucknow," commits adultery with an American male from the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. Adultery seems to her the ultimate assimilation, after baking chocolote sludge cookies and serving as a host family for a "foreign" student.

The dominant metaphor of the story is Husseina's broken heart, a metaphor Nafeesa took literally as a child of four. Discovered in adultery with James Beamish, she learns that Mrs. Beamish, from Saskatchewan, is just another version of the *memsahibs*. Nafeesa discovers, as did Emily Dickinson, that "Not with a club the heart is broken." Mrs. Beamish treats her as a thing, "something that 'men do' and then come to their senses while the *memsahibs* drink gin and tonic for their faces." Reduced to an object, she finds that her heart is broken after all: "The pain in my chest will not go away. I should be tasting blood in my throat by now."

Vinita, in "Visitors," tempted by an Americanized Indian graduate student at Columbia, first retreats into the safe cocoon of her protected existence. But, as she comments, "The new world forces you to know what you really want," and by the end what she wants is to "run off into the alien American night where only shame and disaster can await her."

The male side of the coin appears in stories like "A Father" and "Nostalgia." "A Father," with its sudden rush of violence between parent and child, is one of the most effective (and most O'Connor-like) pieces. Mr. Bhowmick

tries to make "small trade-offs between new-world reasonableness and old-world beliefs," but he cannot overcome an atavistic worship of the goddess Kali, "the goddess of wrath and vengeance." He makes a small grotto for his statue of Kali, pictured on the cover of *Darkness*. The goddess's red tongue sticking out seems to mock him, in the midst of the world of K-Mart, Master Cards and his wife's sickening attempts at French Toast. Ultimately his daughter Babli, university graduate from Georgia Tech and electrical engineer, seems to be transmogrified into the goddess Kali. He recognizes that she is pregnant and is ready to welcome the father of this illegitimate child, but Babli has evidently discovered one branch of North American feminism as part of her revolt against the patriarchy: "Who needs a man? . . . The father of my baby is a bottle and a syringe. Men louse up your lives." According to her, Indian arranged marriages resemble cattle breeding: "Matching bloodlines, matching horoscopes, matching castes, matching, matching, matching . . ."

In "Nostalgia," Dr. Manny Patel, psychiatrist married to an American from Camden, New Jersey, feels "the paper-cut-sharp pain of desire" for an Indian "goddess." Goddess soon becomes whore as he recognizes that she is only bait serving to enlist his aid for a restaurant maitre d' with relatives wanting to settle in the United States. On the one hand, Dr. Patel represents an American success story, compared to the older waves of American immigrants like Mr. Horowitz; on the other, he is prey to the same demons or "invisible presences," "gods and snakes," as Mr. Bhowmick in the "darkness" of early morning. Mukherjee expresses satiric doubts in two or three stories about the great American hope in the institutions of psychology and psychiatry to dispel the outer darkness that awaits.

Most of Mukherjee's Indians are well-educated, resolutely middle-class, and upwardly-mobile. Her young wives are reminiscent of Betty Friedan's bored, educated, middle-class Westchester housewives. Leela in "Hindus," for instance, is a Bengali Brahmin who sees herself above maharajas in terms of the Indian pecking order. We catch only a glimpse, in "Tamurlane," of those who are poor not only because they are immigrants but also because they are poor.

Mukherjee is more effective in experiencing the sexism of a society that has consistently betrayed its women, than in treating the situation of the poor. In "The Imaginary Assassin," the saintly Gandhi is seen almost as George Orwell saw him, an extremist in his celibacy and self-abnegation: "A man with his head in the clouds does not see the shit pile at his feet." "The imaginary assassin" sees "Gandhi, the celibate" as "the biggest rapist in history," because he was "the enemy of women, the destroyer of their men."

In one of the most intriguing stories, "Isolated Incidents," Mukherjee turns the tables completely by analyzing the dynamics of racism through Ann Vane, well-meaning and frustrated civil servant who assesses violations of "Human Rights," a phrase which the immigrants took "too literally." The psychology Mukherjee describes is that which Gunnar Myrdal exposed many years ago in *An American Dilemma* with respect to Blacks: scapegoating. Ann, would-be poet, envies the Hollywood success of her schoolgirl chum, now rock star Peppi Paluka. Peppi is another kind of immigrant, like Donald Sutherland and Margot Kidder, a successful Canadian in California. Peppi arrived in Hollywood equipped with Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, but determined not to emulate them. Ann realizes that "Sometimes you had to leave the safe and sober places of this world,"but fails to draw the parallel to the troubled new immigrants in Canada.

We are looking, then, at two kinds of immigration. From the American success story, "You could come home again and again" in triumph, contrary to Thomas Wolfe's dictum, but those who took flight from their own lands can never return. Preoccupied with her promised lunch at the Courtyard Cafe, Ann fails to heed the call of immigrants like Mr. Hernandez, who tells her, "You people cannot feel, that is the problem;" racism is rooted in feeling only for oneself.

Mukherjee's major contribution, however, is not the dissection of three culture clashes, but rather of the human struggle for recognition of one's identity. India, too, we are told, was once an empire-building nation and shares the European guilt. Mukherjee's phrasing and images characterize her people in human terms recognizable all over the world; Angela's smile "charged with static," the working Mrs. Bhowmick cooking her whole menu on weekends, the ex-Mrs. Patel nervously fussing with placemats, grace resembling "a black tropical bat." Conflicts between man and woman, young and old, immigrant and old settler, are universal, and Bharati Mukherjee succeeds in lighting up many of the corners of the darkness that surrounds us.

[1]"The Individual in a Multicultural Society," *"The Canadian Alternative,* ed. Hédi Bouraoui (Toronto: ECW Press, 1980), p. 87.

MY COUNTRY IS THE WHOLE WORLD

Cambridge Women's Peace Collective. London: Pandora Press, 1984.

FACING THE NUCLEAR AGE

Susan Goldberg. Toronto: Annick Press Ltd., 1985.

Deborah Jurdjevic

Among the wilderness of contemporary concerns (I saw one glossy magazine this week discussing semiotics, hermeneutics, deconstruction), the Cambridge Women's Peace Collective has isolated a single crying voice. The voice speaks against war and for community through the identities of woman: through Sappho in the sixth century before Christ, who knows that she would rather see the sparkling face of her lover than "all the dazzling chariots and armoured/hoplites of Lydia," through Christine de Pisan who, in *Le Livre de la Paix,* reminded the Duke of Guyenne, fourteenth-century ruler, "blessed and holy are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the Sons of God," through Kazue Miura, switchboard operator in the central telephone exchange at the time of the A-bombing of Hiroshima, whose greatest suffering came at the moment that she was forced to confess to her fourteen year-old daughter that there was nothing she could do to protect her child against the continued lethal effects of radiation.

This voice, echoing through the centuries, is deeply human. Its witness to the possibilities of peace and the certainties of war recognizes the contrasts upon which our lives are founded: the contrast between reality and appearance, the con-