THE INNER COURTYARD

Lakshmi Holmstrom, ed. London: Virago, 1990.

by Roshan Shahani

Somewhere in our Scriptures it has been said: "With systematic regularity, a man should beat his Drum, his Donkey, his Slave and his Wife, in order to keep them under control and in working order." In this recently published collection of short stories by Indian women called *The Inner Courtyard* (Lakshmi Holmstrom, ed.), the Indian woman is portrayed not only as a victim of these "beatings" enjoined by religion and tradition, but she is often seen to revolt against the patriarchal world-order and to redefine her own space.

The title—*The Inner Courtyard*—suggests several meanings. It signifies, on the one hand, the secluded, restricted life of the Indian woman who is physically and figuratively relegated to the inner recesses of the patriarchal household. Many of the stories, especially those set in an earlier period, are actually located in this all-women's enclave. Even those with a more contemporary setting present the woman as being closeted within the kitchen, the bedroom or the immediate neighbourhood so that her contact with the outside world is limited by well-defined boundaries, by the traditional *Lakshmanrekha* (the line drawn by Laxman demarcating the boundary beyond which Sita was forbidden to cross). On the other hand, a counterpoint to the claustrophobia of these constrained lives is also provided, for the inner courtyard provides a sense of intimacy, a sharing of experience among the women, and the solace of female bonding. Finally, the courtyard symbolizes the private spaces of the woman's mind, the inner regions of her psyche, the region where she struggles with herself and against the world.

The writers in this imaginatively assembled collection come from diverse cultures and regions of India, thereby authenticating the diversity of patterns of living and thinking. Furthermore, Holmstrom has included both stories written originally in English, and others which have been translated from various Indian languages—Tamil, Marathi, Hindu, and Urdu. This provides the reader with an understanding of the variegated patterns of living in the Indian context, and of the realities of India's multilingual and multicultural situation. A new perspective is also provided by the inclusion of diasporic writing which often draws upon the experience of migration.

A wide time frame is covered in this collection of stories. For instance, at one end of the spectrum is a story written in 1938 and set in a still earlier period—the turn of the century; at the other end is one written in 1989 and presumably set in that decade. Cultural, spatial, and temporal differences perceived in these stories serve to present the complexity and contradictions of what it means to be an 'Indian' woman. The protagonist, the author, and finally even the reader cannot clearly and readily respond or correspond to fixed notions of 'Indianness.' What this collection of fiction does serve to define, is this very fact: that a stereotyping of the Indian woman must give way to a more conscious awareness of the inevitable multiplicity of a society that speaks over 16 languages and practises over eight religions. Besides, in a country which contains overlapping worlds of experience—the rural, landless peasantry co-existing with the sophisticated 'westernized' class, mind-boggling affluence with stark poverty, traditional orthodoxy with Naxalite[1] activity, faith in computer technology with an equally fervent belief in astrology—the ambiguity and contradictions of what constitutes the Indian woman become more and more apparent.

The confusing realities of these interwoven worlds and their impact on the protagonists, along with the specificities of the Indian socio-political developments like colonialism, independence, partition, and migration, form the backdrop to many of the stories. Hence, even while they deal with individual growth, or loss, or triumph, these stories become the collective histories of women scattered all over this vast land. Many of the themes that dominate—mother-daughter relationships, marital discords, problems of spinsterhood, the woman's struggles against social evils—although 'universal' in their implications, are rooted in the specificity of geography and the history of the Indian soil. This makes the Indian reader more consciously aware of what is already familiar because she is treading on 'homeground', even though that homeground covers such an immense expanse. The western reader's response may perhaps differ, for, to many, it is an unfamiliar world that unfolds itself—the issues raised and the problems discussed very remote from the ones she might have to deal with in the western milieu, and yet linked together by a common interest and concern.

One of the themes that predominates throughout the collection is the theme of marriage in all its ramifications. The "universally acknowledged truth" is that a single girl in want of a husband becomes a burden that the entire family has to shoulder. The consequences of lonely spinsterhood, of the family's loss of repu-

tation, of humiliation are threats that loom large over the characters in many of the stories, reflecting a very 'normal' situation in a society which even today does not offer many viable alternatives or possibilities to the unmarried woman. This is seen in Ismat Chugtai's powerful story "Chauthi Ka Jaura"[2] and in Shama Futehally's "The Meeting."

The celebration of the birth of a son and the corresponding lament at the birth of a daughter are also ingrained attitudes in the Indian psyche, and so internalized by women themselves that even the prolonged battles against these notions do not seem to have changed attitudes very radically. The media plays a contradictory role. Conscious, albeit clumsy, attempts have been made by *Doordarshan* (the government-controlled national television network) to change these time-honoured concepts; at the same time, television commercials and Hindi box-office films are subliminally entrenching these hide-bound orthodoxies. Read in this context, Mrinal Pande's "Girls" and Vishwapriya Iyengar's "The Library Girl" assume a relevance and importance far beyond their immediate contexts. In fact, Pande is herself a media person and her views on Indian feminist issues have played a vital role in the contemporary situation.

At the same time, the overall picture of the lives of these girls and women does not appear totally gloomy and defeatist. A silent, if silenced, protest and subversive support emerge among the women-folk, even though they know that they are helpless against a world that defines them and which they never helped to define. There are stories where the very buffeting by the male world-order instinctively draws the women together in forming a support system of their own. Of course, most of the situations are set within the family-fold, hence this is not an active, vocal, organized support system; it is always hidden, covert, intuitive, whether between siblings as in "Chauthi Ka Jaura", between mother and daughter as in "The Library Girl", or between grandmother and granddaughter, as in Kamala Das's "Summer Vacation" and Shashi Deshpande's "My Beloved Charioteer." Maternity, maternal tenderness, sympathy for the girl-child or the grown daughter emanate through most of these stories, except perhaps in "Girls," where the women have so internalized the male desire for son and heir that they vent their own frustrations on the girl-child; victims themselves, they victimize their own kind. In contrast to this story is Ambai's (C.S. Lakshmi) "Yellow Fish," which depicts a mother's mourning for the loss of her newborn girl.

While, therefore, different and varying portraits of womanhood appear through this collection of eighteen stories, it is not mere coincidence that there is not a single one among them that portrays the male in a positive or supportive role. At best, they are helpless, shadowy, figures; at worst, belligerent, tyrannical, and in two of the stories, brutally cruel. Lalitambika Antarjanam's "Revenge Herself" and Mahasveta Devi's "Draupadi" are exposés of a violent and turbulent world. These two stories dramatize the sexual violence and the brute force of the male against which the woman has to contend. The protagonists in both stories emerge from the inner courtyard into the raw world, and even while in the eyes of the world they are 'fallen' women, they emerge triumphant for they fight to live on their own terms. In most of the other stories, one perceives the underlying socio-political forces at work beneath the personal dimensions; in these two stories, however, the socio-political situations form the very *raison d'être* of the narratives. "Revenge Herself" is based on an actual event in the late nineteenth century, when a woman from the Nambudiri Brahman caste in Kerala left her unfaithful husband to become a prostitute. At her trial she argued that her partners in prostitution should be excommunicated along with her for they were equally guilty.

Mahasveta Devi's "Draupadi," set against the Naxalite movement of the seventies, challenges middle class morality to the core of its being. Draupadi, the peasant woman who has played an active role in the peasant revolt, is caught and repeatedly raped by the police. Her name has obvious ironic implications, for, unlike the mythic world of our epics, there is no Krishna who can work miracles to preserve the woman's modesty. There is, however, double irony here. This peasant woman will not even invoke the gods' mercy. It is her own inherent dignity, her womanly pride and her indomitable courage that are her weapon, her protection and her religion.

One enters a radically different, nonetheless equally real world in the stories which depict transnational and cross-cultural encounters, leading to confusion and conflict in the lives of the women concerned. Attia Hosain's "The First Party," set in the colonial period, depicts a young wife's uneasy encounter with the free, unrestrained world of the *burrasahibs* and *memsahibs*. The tension in this story is provided by the fact that the very traditions of the orthodox world from which the bride has come inhibit her from being able to protest freely against the alien 'western' world, even though this world makes her feel uneasy and miserable. A similar juxtaposition of two worlds is perceived in Anjana Appachana's "Her Mother". This is the story of immigration—the parting of ways between a teenage daughter and aging mother. In a culture where the daughter traditionally leaves home only as a bride, but which is increasingly seeing the phenomenon of girls leaving for the western world, never to 'return' in the true sense of the term, this story holds meaning and relevance to the contemporary Indian situation. The main purpose of these stories is to authenticate the bewilderment of those women who have been firmly rooted in one culture and cannot and will not slip easily into another.

At the other end of the spectrum is the experience of displacement felt by the white woman who has adopted India as her homeland. Rukshana Ahmad's "The Gate-keeper's Wife" draws upon this situation; the kind and compassionate Annette finds that her humane understanding of the pathetic plight of the animals in an Indian zoo has made her ignore the worse conditions of the poor and the hungry. However, this is not a satiric portrait of a modern-day *memsahib*; our criticism is pre-empted by the Indian husband's mockery whereby he makes his wife bear the burden of the colonial past, and "rub[s] in the entire guilt of white nations into her soul...."

It is in "Birthday Deathday," written by Padma Hejmadi (a diasporic writer like Appachana and Ahmad), that a tentative reconciliation between the eastern and western worlds is made possible. The story suggests that the protagonist who has rebelled against tradition comes to the same understanding as her traditionally

married sister. Her insight comes painfully on her "death day." Implicit is the suggestion that she has to be attuned to the wisdom she has left behind in her old homeland and must recover it through a painful struggle.

The concluding story in this collection, "Dusty Distance," is by Suniti Namjoshi, yet another diasporic writer. The desire of the Blue Donkey to be a writer is held in scorn by the male poet whose aggressiveness and magnificent confidence frighten her away. Next she encounters a Beautiful Lady who loves poetry but cannot understand "Blue Donkese" and although the Blue Donkey protests vehemently that she writes in English the Lady insists that their two worlds are very different—"What have a Lady and a donkey in common?" and the donkey turns away ruefully into the "dusty distance."

This fable serves as a comment on *The Inner Courtyard*. These voices—all Indian, all women, speaking in multitudinous tongues, articulating manifold experiences, might not belong to the Highway road of the "Poet" or the "immaculate woods" of the "Beautiful Lady". Yet—whether, they speak English or "Blue Donkese", these writers will not "sadly retrace" their steps into the "dusty distance." Instead, they will speak insistently *from* that distance, whether or not they are heeded.

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[1]The Naxalite Movement was a peasant uprising in 1972 at Naxalbari in Bengal. It was supported by communist revolutionaries, and was followed by similar uprisings elsewhere.

[2]*Chauti Ka Jaura* is the dress worn on the fourth day of wedding celebrations. It was believed that during the preparation of the trousseau, if even one piece of the elaborate dress was cut inexactly, something would go wrong with the marriage.

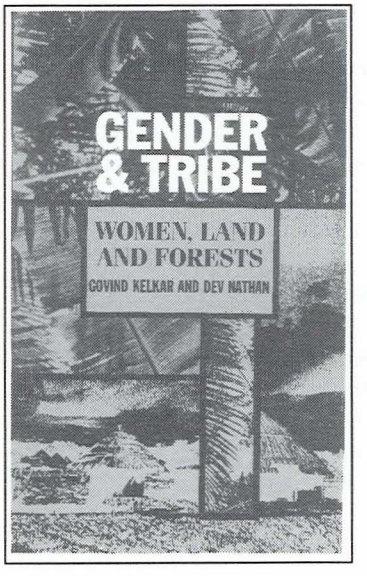
GENDER AND TRIBE: WOMEN, LAND AND FORESTS IN JHARKHAND

Govind Kelkar & Dev Nathan. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991.

by Sujata Ramachandran

This interesting study documents the gender role transformations that occur in a tribal society, and the formation of patriarchy in the present context: the continuing loss of control over land and forests on the part of the Jharkhand *adivasis* (tribals). It further looks at their resistance to this change in the form of a political movement for a Jharkhand state. The authors contrast the greater political and management participation of women in foraging tribes (as the Birhor) with the lesser position of women in the mainly agriculturalist tribes (as Santhal, Ho, Munda and Oraon). Kelkar and Nathan argue that the introduction of settled agriculture within the tribal situation had led to the propertylessness of women, and ensured patrilocality and the political marginalization of tribal women.

They claim that the origins of male



dominance are connected with the struggle to control women's labour and the products of women's labour, not necessarily the labour of reproduction, but women's labour as a whole. Thus, the subordination of women precedes the formation of class society, in the conventional sense. The seeds of gender inequality have been present in *adivasi* society, although not in a developed form of full control over all aspects of a woman's existence as found in caste/class society. It is, however, in the interaction of Jharkhandi society with state formations of the plains—initially with the Mughal Raj and much more so with British colonialism—that this society has evolved in the direction of patriarchy. In this context, the evolution of patrilineal rights and the rise of various taboos against women's participation in some key types of labour such as ploughing are discussed. The study also considers the growing phenomenon of witch hunting as an attempt to establish the authority of men. Gender inequality has gradually extended to general social life and the authors cite the example of the following joke to reflect prevalent attitudes. "Why do women use both hands to wash their face and men only one?" The answer is, "Because women have two lords, singabonga and their husbands."

As yet, women in these tribes have not been completely devalued. The alienation of women's labour within the family is still partial, owing to the continuation of forms of communal property in land, the importance of gathering, and women's control over consumption and income. However, further development along the same patriarchal lines, the introduction of capitalism, and the rapid destruction of natural resources in the Jharkhand region would destroy the existing rights of the *adivasi* women and result in a situation no different from that which comes about in "mainstream" society. The authors conclude that if the ecological balance of the region is to be maintained and the patriarchal intent checked, then economic and other activities have to be organized on the basis of the community, and land rights given to individual women, as well as men, through allocation of means of production.

WESTERN WOMEN AND IMPERIALISM: COMPLICITY AND RESISTANCE

Edited by Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992

by Davina Bhandar

Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance, edited by Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, is a diverse collection of essays detailing the