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# LOOKING BACK ON THE WRITING OF *A NICE BURGHER GIRL*

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I have much to look back on *A Nice Burgher Girl* and recall its genesis. Perhaps it's a book that had its seminal beginnings with my hybrid birth, my 'split-inheritance' and my life-long search for an identity and a sense of belonging, of finding my roots through the complex weave of racial strands which make me what I am. It's also an assertion of my identity in a scenario that has become increasingly political in a divisive ethnic community. *A Nice Burgher Girl* is also a tribute and legacy to my parents and my close and intimate family. It's also a book for posterity, of a life and an ethnic group now virtually extinct as a result of emigration and diasporic journeys and the record and witness of the left-behinder who finds value in the life lived in the Island. My marriage into another ethnic minority group has not made me lose my sense of independent inquiry and investigation into my lineage. Nothing can change that. My entrance into a different culture, hierarchy and heritage have enhanced my life, thought and literature, made me non-partisan and unbiased. I have gained immeasurably in my encounter with the multi-cultural context in which I live – perhaps my book is in a sense a political statement on my own personal autobiography the importance of which cannot be minimized, cannot be taken lightly. As time goes, this record and witnessing ceases to be merely personal and extends itself to cover a much wider range of ideologies, philosophies, and psyche-search. The radius is wide, very wide and to my way of thinking, authentic, unique, individualistic. It is my very own life I'm talking of, perhaps even legitimizing in the face of social, psychological and political opposition.

My experiences culled from my travels and my sojourns abroad gave me a wider spectrum and knowledge to add dimension to the book. I played around with time to give my memories a wider perspective which included the experiences of colonialism and insights and revelations of post-colonialism.

I began writing *A Nice Burgher Girl* at a period of time when ethnicity and divisiveness were not the burning issues of the day. I had had a very rich life, a kind of panoramic life, a

childhood full of happenings where I embarked on my own explorations and discoveries both at home and at school. School was Girls' High School in Kandy, a private Methodist School with British missionary principals and dedicated, committed, gifted and talented teachers who belonged to different communities. I was later on to assess that life in poetry and short stories. My parents gave me absolute freedom from the very beginning of my childhood to discover myself and indulge in my exploratory need for adventure. Headstrong and impulsive I must have been but those qualities gave me strength of will and resilience to survive. I had a most wonderful carer in my ayah Mungo – she brought her own rich traditions into my life. I had a vast array of aunts, uncles, cousins. I had my paternal grandparents. I had aunts who were very gender conscious without being aware of it and intellectuals among that close and intimate group who influenced my life and way of thinking. I loved my brother Pat and sister Rosemary dearly. They could embark on any adventure they wished and were also very gifted and talented.

I absorbed everything around me, the ambience of every place I found myself in, the landscape, conversations, the eras and epochs I passed through. To this day I have a very strong visual memory of places, people, events. I have memories that go back to the cradle! I always carry those images in my mind. I also remember and recall conversations and narratives from the past as if I hear them in the here and now and I have found myself to possess powers of intense intuition, even prophetic qualities – flashes of revelatory insight occur again and again in my life. I spent a great deal of my time in childhood and adolescence with my mother. Adulthood too. She was a wonderful story teller (I was the youngest and since my brother and sister were at school and college she must have been lonely). I was able to glean and retain much that was of tremendous importance by the stories she read. She was a great reader. My father was a reader too and since his career in the railway took him to different parts of the island he had a fund of adventure stories to tell us. I had a very colourful lot of relatives. Their own lives were full of

events, happenings, encounters, travels. It was a great sharing of experience and I was both receptive and responsive in my own way. I often heard the sotto voce utterance 'walls have ears and potatoes have eyes' whenever I was present among the adults.

I wanted, in a *Nice Daughter Girl*, to make all the personalities I had met, alive. I didn't want them to be forgotten, consigned to oblivion. Many of them created history and wrote autobiographies or were written about in the history books (Ceylon history) and are still being written about in the history books (Ceylon history). As time passed, I realized that not only did I have my own history and one can of course create a colourful personal history through the power of the mind and the imagination but that I was part of those histories too. My delving into my own life and Daughter background yielded not only a rationale and assertion of an identity but, also gave me tremendous scope for creating that heritage, converting, transforming it into different genres of literature. I was interested in the various main strands that contributed to my inheritance but also the historical background these ancestors belonged to. I was able to be analytic about that whole colonial experience out of which I

was engendered. I was the as yet unknown cipher in that entire genetic code. I found my own phrase to describe myself, the being/writer 'suckled on a breast shaped by the genetics of history.'

*A Nice Daughter Girl* was a book that needed to be written. Things happened along the way. I removed some of the excerpts and published them as short stories in different collections. They have to be included once more when the book is reprinted. My book is more, much more than a purely personal autobiography, possessing descriptions of a lifestyle that have to be preserved in my linguistic visual murals and inscribed and engraved in the alembic transformations of the mind. It's not a book for myself alone - it needs a readership wherever it finds itself.

Perhaps 1983 was a watershed in my life. I realized that *A Nice Daughter Girl* had to be written. That I existed as a human being and not someone labeled as being merely hybrid, minority (non-majority). It's an extension of my vision of the world I lived in, the world I still inhabit. It's my gift, my legacy to my family, my children and a sharing of a heritage with whoever desires to share it. ■

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