

## RURAL HEROINES...

formed: *Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, 1988 and Kumari Jayawardene, "Some Aspects of Religious and Cultural Identity and the Construction of Sinhala Buddhist Womanhood", paper presented at the International Conference on *Women: The State, Fundamentalism and Cultural Identity in South Asia*. March 13-17, 1992.

2 Sabitha herself draws our attention to this when after their first 'encounter' she tells Harris "What sort of woman must you take me for, you don't even know my name...."

3 Sabitha appears mainly in white dresses in this film which is a disruptive signifier in her characterization of a 'loose' woman. I am grateful to Pradeep Jeganathan for suggesting that this colour coding may be an attempt to signify her innocence in the context of the crime that is committed in the film rather than her moral/sexual innocence or purity.

4 All the flashbacks the viewer was privy to were the mistress version of the events, the conclusive one being the episode of the childrens picnic near World's End in the fast encroaching mist. ■

## More on the Gordimer Critique

by S. Sumathy

Neloufer de Mel's comments on Nadine Gordimer in *Pravada* Vol 1, No 1 along with her easy dismissal of Reggie Siriwardena's response to them in *Pravada* Vol 1 No 2 throw up quite a number of thought provoking questions for the modern reader, constantly assailed by the contradictions and biases involved in interpretations. Nadine Gordimer, the South African writer of novels and short stories was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1991 - a prize fraught with contradictions. Dr. de Mel points this out quite forcefully exposing some of the ideological underpinnings of that rather questionable institution.<sup>1</sup> This is timely for it serves in some measure to remove the scales of reverence for prizes, awards etc., from one's eyes. But, while agreeing, by and large, with the criticism she levels at the awarding body, I wish to disagree categorically with the qualifications she makes about the value of Gordimer's works. To lend support to her views she invokes Dennis Brutus - a South African poet - which I think is unfair by Gordimer as well as Brutus. Her discriminatory selection of Brutus's comments chooses to disregard the point he makes about the challenge she (Gordimer) poses at the

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apartheid system in operation. To quote Brutus more fully;

But Gordimer too is making her protest against the system ... The principle characters (in the Late Bourgeois World) both black and white, at the end of the novel are on the edge of not merely an emotional but also a sexual experience. I think the whole novel is by implication a condemnation of white society in South Africa today.<sup>2</sup>

Saying this Brutus proceeds to make the qualification that occurs in the extract de Mel lifts from his writing on protest literature. His article makes more sense and possesses an internal balance in the context of the comparative analysis he makes about different writers and the political and/or subjective stances that transpire in their works. One should also note, importantly, that it's the *Late Bourgeois World* he refers to and not *July's People*. The qualifications he makes are based on subtle distinctions he draws between different writers and also on different criteria. De Mel, on the other hand, takes rather broadbased categories operative in a certain kind of intellectual discourse and attempts to schematize their (writers') works according to those patterns. I think this is what Reggie Siriwardena in his own inimitably simple style implies when he says:

However, the more important questions I wish to raise concern the way in which Dr. de Mel uses her political categories to evaluate Gordimer's work as fiction.

The crucial sentence in Dr. de Mel's critique that invalidates her approach is where she complains that Gordimer's exposure of the political ambivalence of the privileged white liberal 'falls short of what is needed as a *political programme* in South Africa'.

One can write a political programme as a theoretical construct, but for the creative writer there is no substitute for experience.<sup>3</sup>

In her reply to his (Siriwardena's) position she says thus:

Mr. Siriwardena's essentialist emphasis on individual 'experience' implies that only whites can write about whites, only blacks can represent blacks. Does this mean that only peasants can write about and speak for themselves, and that men cannot write about women and vice versa?<sup>4</sup>

This is a misreading bordering on carelessness. The narrative in *July's People* quite committedly progresses from 'white liberal' awareness to a consciousness



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that renders everything, even their own selves and bodies, strange and unknown. At the beginning of the novel Bam Smales' cocksureness does not desert him, even in adversity.

No, I mean it. If we can get hold of a bag of cement we can make a foundation. It'll be much better to drink than river water.<sup>5</sup>

The self same Bam Smales is abject and unrecognizable at the end of the novel in the status of powerlessness.

He heaved himself up. Some surge of adrenalin summoned, sending him, striding out, ... But he walked immediately into their gaze again. He lay down on his back, on the bed, the way he habitually did; and at once suddenly rolled over onto his face, as the father had never done once before his sons.<sup>6</sup>

*July's People* are July's black people - from the Smales's position.<sup>7</sup> But can that be considered identical with the perspective the novel adopts which is open ended in many ways? From the beginning an irony of tone governs/qualifies the privileged position of the Smales's and the sneaking feeling keeps jabbing at one's consciousness that it's the Smales's who will ultimately turn out to be July's People. Yes, it is true, that even when the crucial term 'July's white people' oc-

curs, the novel's focus does not change. Its shift from objective conditions to the subjective musings of the Smales's, particularly Maureen's, keep the central thoughts of the novel sharply focused on them. But this unchanging focus does not in any way valorise the values or privileges of the white family. Also, the novel is unequivocal about the subversive transformation of the relationships between black and white and also white and white. Furthermore, to its credit, the novel is alive to the contradictions involved in the dynamics of black and black and white militancy. De Mel's branding of the questions and explorations of the text as 'failure of perspective' is irresponsible and self righteous. Reggie Siriwardena's reply to that charge is perhaps a trifle too general to make his point valid in the context:

If Gordimer had tried to write fictionally of black experience, she would have come a cropper as surely Neloufer de Mel would, in spite of her intellectual position, if she tried to produce a novel of peasant life in Sri Lanka.

The framework that de Mel adopts to approach a text seems to tend towards categorisation and slot-isolation through the employment of a model based on binary oppositions such as the Caliban-Crusoe yardstick. Even Reggie Siriwardena, despite his obvious attempt

to steer clear of all isms and generalisations does not escape rigid categorisation at de Mel's hands. Models are useful and perhaps inevitable too as long as they remain viable. But once they have said their piece and had their day, they should be discarded. At such a time as now when struggles are increasingly converging (despite problems) and South African politics itself is increasingly exposing manifold ideological and other biases, for writers to carp on a commitment to a political programme already carved out for one and also deeply engaged in its own complexities is unrealistic.

### Notes:

- 1 Neloufer de Mel: Nadine Gordimer: Notes on the White Writer's Burden, *Pravada* Vol 1. No 1.
- 2 Dennis Brutus: Protest against Apartheid - Protest and Conflict in African Literature.
- 3 Reggie Siriwardena - *Pravada* Vol 1. No. 2.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Gordimer, Nadine: *July's People*, Penguin Books, 1982, p.25.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 7 Michael Neill: Twisting the Present - Language and Identity in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*, *Journal of Commonwealth Studies*, Vol XXV. No 1, 1990. In this article the author expresses a similar view.

*Pravada* would like to apologise to readers for the delay in bringing out the March/April double issue which was due, in most part, to the elongated holidays of April and the abbreviated supply of electricity.