

## OPENNESS .....

be undertaken by aid-receiving regimes. She also made the remarkable point that the old notion of the sovereignty of nation-states is no longer relevant in the current world context. To quote Ms. O'Neill: "The international community has an obligation to act for the relief of human suffering." She also invoked her Prime Minister's statement at Harare: "Canada will not subsidise repression and stifle democracy." Intervention in the internal affairs of aid-receiving countries? Let us have no misconceptions about the nature of the emerg-

ing global politico-economic order. So far, they have made the economic decisions; they will in the future make decisions about political reforms as well.

The point, however, is that Ms. O'Neill and her colleagues in aid-disbursing agencies appear to conceptualise democracy in the developing world solely in terms of what they and their electoral constituencies conceive as democratic. They do not yet think that it is the right of people in aid-receiving countries to know how these decisions are being arrived at and trans-

lated into economic and political programmes. The right of people to be informed of economic policy-making is obviously not included in their concept of good governance, accountability and re-thinking the state.

The Sri Lankan Government, foreign donors and the international financial agencies must accept that it is the people's fundamental right to participate in making the economic and political decisions that regulate their lives and that, for this purpose, full disclosure is absolutely essential. **P**

## LETTERS

### BLACK AND WHITE

While congratulating you on your first issue of *Pravada*, may I ask for a small corner to dissent from Neloufer de Mel's critique of Nadine Gordimer? To begin with, I wonder how adequate the blanket term 'liberal' that she uses as a characterisation of Gordimer's political position, which includes acceptance of the necessity of black majority rule in South Africa. Further, Gordimer in her fiction not only, in Neloufer de Mel's words, 'problematizes the space that white South African liberals occupy' but also explores the contradiction of being a white South African Communist (*Burger's Daughter*).

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. She criticises Gordimer for 'marginalising the

black experience in South Africa'. This criticism would have been legitimate if the novelist had written about white people's relations with each other, ignoring the reality of apartheid - which, of course, no one can accuse her of doing. 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' (her emphasis). Without making a 'manichean dichotomy' between art and politics, I must suggest that a political programme is one thing and a novel another, and that one cannot judge the latter by the demands one would make of the former. One can write a political programme as a theoretical construct, but for the creative writer there is no substitute for experience.

Neloufer de Mel herself quotes Nadine Gordimer as saying that the one thing the white person 'cannot experience is blackness — with all that implies in South Africa'. If Gordimer had tried to write fictionally of black experience, she would have come a cropper as surely as Neloufer de Mel would, in spite of her intellectual position, if she tried to produce a novel about peasant life in Sri Lanka. In these circumstances, does her criticism of Gordimer amount to anything more than saying that the latter made the mistake of being born white in South Africa? If we want the black experience rendered creatively in literature, we must go to black writers; let us not demand from Nadine Gordimer what she has, wisely, not attempted to do.

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#### *Neloufer de Mel responds:*

I have read with interest Mr. Siriwardena's criticism of my article on Gordimer, and welcome the opportunity to make some comments in response, especially as Mr. Siriwardena raises broader issues which go beyond my particular piece.

First, two clarifications of the terms I use: My use of the word 'liberal' follows the many critics who have referred to

Gordimer throughout the years as one - a description she has never contested.

'Marginalizing' a particular group implies more than that group being completely left out or excluded from a work. In fact, the more insidious form of marginalization takes place when a group is included but in a devalued way, when it literally inhabits the margins of the text. Generally speaking, this phenomenon is more trou-

bling when it is evident in an entire *oeuvre* and not just in a single text.

Thus the criticism of Gordimer for marginalizing the black South African has little to do with whether her books contain black people or not, but how they are portrayed. As illustrated in my article, *July's People* provides a good example of how the black

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South African villager - July's own people - are described in ways which, despite the powerful irony that operates in the book, reinforce racist stereotypes of both black and white. In fact the villagers are shown to be without language and dependent on the white man for his practical engineering skills and prowess at hunting.

For me the crucial issue is Mr. Siriwardena's central premise that a writer must not be expected to write about what is outside his/her personal experience and milieu. There is in this view, a valorizing of experience over and above all else. However commonsensical as this appears to be, it is untenable when examined closely. Not only is it difficult to identify what an adequate experience of some situation is - (should it always be personal, and if so, does it not preclude the imaginative?) - but it is also clear to us that not everyone, including creative writers, who 'experience' something can describe it effectively.

Then we say, in the same commonsensical way, that the writer is 'too close' to the material.

Thus when Mr. Siriwardena states that 'if we want the black experience rendered creatively in literature, we must go to black writers (and) not demand from Nadine Gordimer what she has, wisely, not attempted to do', he does not pay enough attention to the fact that being black is not sufficient to be a credible and successful writer of that milieu. Nor is it necessary to be black to write about black people.

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? Surely, Mr. Siriwardena who has written a play about Bukharin knows that this is not the case - that the creative writer has the freedom to write about other 'experiences', classes, milieu, races etc. Moreover, my article discusses the issue of the responsibility of

the writer who lives in troubled socio-political contexts to do so.

What we know of course is that this is not easy and that a complex and credible representation of these categories requires years of learning ways of behaviour, ways of speaking, forms of thinking and feeling, and of unlearning others. Thus the failure of a text to achieve this does far more than reflect the weaknesses of a writer. It points to the problems and complexities of representation itself, which however, often make for the poignancy and power of a work.

It is in this context then that I finally reiterate the emphasis of my article on Gordimer which focused on the predicament, even dilemma of the writer in troubled socio-political contexts which is required to explicitly and continuously express moral outrage at what is happening, without being propagandist or escapist, and whose characters are often read as prototypes of race, class and gender.

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## BODIES OF WAR

From the vantage point of Colombo, the war in the North-East seems distant. Yet, the bodies of that war intruded even in the recently "pacified" south: in the daily wail of military ambulances and in the constant news reports of 'victories' at the front lines. Recently, a political debate foregrounded these bodies. Replying to President Premadasa's charge that the "Vadamarachchi Operation" had been poorly executed, Lalith Athulathmudali claimed that while only 910 soldiers had died in battle during his tenure from 1979-1989, 2500 soldiers had perished after he left office. It is worth pausing a moment to reflect that this debate turns on a body count, as does every newsreport about the war: "4 army personnel and 40 Tigers were killed in a clash yesterday." This ideological framing, I suggest, is a condition of our age of Capital, and the place of the body within that regime. The dead bodies of war.

Where does the "body" come from? What is its history? That remarkable historian of modernity, Michel Foucault, suggests that the 'body of man'—the essence of humanity—is a cruel irony of our time: 'he' is invented in an epistemic rupture that rescues 'him' from the brutal punishments of public torture, only to be carefully disciplined in schools and armies; prisons and asylums. It is thus that bodies are made docile for a life of labour under a regime of Capital. Technologies of the body are central in this episteme: marking, classifying, indexing, and counting. Counting the dead bodies of war.

Even though I've always taken Foucault very seriously, I've also sometimes felt troubled by the argument that 'humanity' was not to be valorized. After all didn't I feel love and anger, joy and pain, fear and terror; was I not, beyond anything else,

a human being? And yet, in this time of war, I have no doubts about Foucault.

Where, in the regime of Capital, does humanity exist? Day in day out, we are told of body counts. How many the state has disciplined and trained to kill; how many the Other has. The number of bodies that have been maimed: the walking dead. How many the Other has killed, how many the state has killed. Dreams of Victory will not save the body; dead or alive they will be counted. But not as human beings, as we've been taught they should be; no, just as numbers that will decide who will win. There is no other conclusion in this "festive season." The myth of 'humanity' is the cruellest joke to them all: we will count bodies until the very end of this regime of Capital.

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