

GENDER AND NATION

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Women and the Nation's Narrative by Neloufer de Mel, Social Scientists' Association and Kali for Women, 2001.

Neloufer de Mel's *Women and the Nation's Narrative* sets out to examine alternative ways of imagining the nation in 20th-century Sri Lanka from the intersecting points of view of gender and nationalism. Covering a span of time during which the Ceylonese/Sri Lankan nation underwent processes of rapid transformation and turmoil, from the struggles against British colonial rule to the insurgencies of the north and south in the 1980s and 1990s, she unravels the narrative of how women were incorporated into the post-colonial nationalist project in many diverse and often contradictory ways.

The book is, first of all, a credit to scholarship, in a world in which academic research sadly often lacks integrity and seriousness. All those who know Neloufer de Mel have watched her work on this book over the years, and its publication is the result of a labour of love and commitment which must be acknowledged at the very outset of any comment on the book itself.

Women and the Nation's Narrative contains much original research and documentation which reveals unknown and unexpected information and perspectives on individuals, events and situations, casting a new light on our own knowledge and experiences; for that reason alone, this book is one which will be read and re-read by many. It also, as is the case with the best of research, opens many doors for more in-depth work on any number of the issues it focuses on, and is thus also a path-breaking and pioneering venture.

This particular scripting of the narrative of gender and nationalism is a great challenge to the reader because of its multi-disciplinary character. It is at once history, political science, literary theory and social and cultural theory. Neloufer de Mel's narrative weaves and interweaves the many strands of these varied disciplines together, providing a backdrop to the action and activism that marks the paths taken by women from different ethnic and social backgrounds as they survived and triumphed over the borders and boundaries placed on their lives by the nationalist project. It is a celebration of difference, and of transgression, that constantly and concurrently links us to the past and to the present. It is clear that imbued in the text is not only scholarship and erudition but also a commitment to evolving forms of what the author refers to as 'lateral cosmopolitanism' among women, a form of modernity that would enable women to be both different and equal. In doing so, she makes a very significant and unique contribution to current feminist theorising on the ways in which women are both of, and not of, the nation.

Many feminists have described the modern nation-state as the central site of hegemonic masculinity. The unequal status of women in modern society as well as the conflicts and tensions generated by sometimes overt and at other times covert discrimination against women across class, race and other boundaries has led to the understanding that a critique of sexism and hetero-sexism in modern society is critical to our conceptualisation of modernity. Luce Irigaray has described the process of social mediation in contemporary society which sharpens the defining lines of citizenship for women as 'hom(mo)-sexuality' (Irigaray, 1985), while Etienne Balibar analyses the modern political community as emerging from "practical and ideological sexism as a structure of interior exclusion of women generalized to the whole society" (Balibar, 1994).

In modern society, sex-based difference and gender-based difference both contribute to the marginalisation of women and of their ability to act on their own behalf. When sex-based difference intersects with other forms of difference – class, race, language, sexual preference and so on, the levels of discrimination are further exacerbated. As women struggle to challenge this marginalisation, we confront a contradiction: on the one hand we are different from men because of our sex. We live in a patriarchal society that often denies the existence of this difference through, for example, a stated commitment to equality and individual freedom, and yet limits our capacity to exercise that freedom in many ways. On the other hand, as we forge collective identities in order to confront this discrimination, we erase some of the differences between us at specific moments of time and become a part of the universalised phenomenon 'women'. It is this contradiction that Neloufer de Mel addresses as she leads us through the lives and experiences of different women, in different moments of time, in the history of our island.

Two key concepts on which the author pins her primary analysis of the gendered narrative of the nation are those of 'sufficient modernity' and of 'lateral cosmopolitanism'. 'Sufficient modernity' is the concept with which male nationalist leaders of the anti-colonial and post-colonial periods encouraged the emergence of a 'modern' woman – educated, employed, with legal rights and with a fair degree of mobility and independence – while at the same time they constrained her autonomy and right to self-determination within the confines of family and identity. Thus, as Neloufer de Mel points out, Annie Boteju could become a female performer, subjecting herself to the public gaze as a part of the much-sought-after 'modern' life and lifestyle; yet, her agency as an active participant in the modernising and nationalist project was hemmed in by her sex, and she was thus called on not only to play the role of the exemplary and 'ideal woman', but to actually 'be' one. Through

the exploration of 'lateral cosmopolitanism', Neloufer de Mel examines the many connections and linkages that women involved in their own struggle for identity and affirmation have evolved, in order to maintain contacts and develop strategies for collective and collaborative action across social, political and cultural divides. Using these lenses, Neloufer de Mel investigates the role of women, as individuals and as collective actors, within the post-colonial and nationalist frameworks that have shaped our post-1948 history, looking at both gender and nationalism as shifting sites of control and of struggle. She has four principal avenues of inquiry: the manner in which nationalism constructs normative ideas about human sexuality, the issue of 'sufficient modernity' which emancipates women but at the same time makes them vulnerable to exploitation, violence and abuse, the contestation between individual and collective identities and the tensions between nationalism and the internationalism or trans-nationalism of the women's movement which leads to lateral cosmopolitanism.

Using several outstanding individual female characters as the pivotal points on which she pins her discussion and analysis of a particular moment in Ceylonese/Sri Lankan history, Neloufer de Mel gives back to them and to us their rightful place in the history of our country. Learning about these women and their lives, through the elaborate background tapestry of contemporary history – not only of our island but of the sub-continent as a whole – we understand the significance of their individual actions not only as acts of daring and courage but also as acts that challenged and continue to challenge, to this day, the boundaries defined by hegemonic masculinity as the 'national' interest. In addition, in each chapter Neloufer de Mel offers us her own insights into literature and the arts in the post-colonial era, positioning each of her women 'characters', Annie Boteju, Anil de Silva, Jean Arasanayagam, Dhanu and Juliet, within a context that makes their experience a part of that broader discourse. The book covers the evolution and

progress of a variety of social movements, from Sinhala/Buddhist nationalism of the anti-colonial era to the Tamil nationalism of the 1980s, from the left-wing and labour movements of the 1940s to the women's movements of the 1990s, constantly moving back and forth between the broader historical context and the personal and individual lives of the women she focuses on. Neloufer de Mel discusses the ways in which states of emergency or periods of social turmoil create an environment in which women are encouraged to transgress the normative and to become active participants in shaping their social and political destinies. These transgressions are sanctioned by the male hegemonic discourse that determines that the struggle at hand calls for the involvement of women; it is also therefore controlled and contained within the parameters defined by a male leadership. In her book, Neloufer de Mel details this betrayal but also documents the many creative ways in which women, individually and collectively, continue to subvert this masculinist agenda, by living their own lives in defiance of social norms and also by transforming the roles ascribed to them, for example as mothers, in radical ways.

If there is a fault in the book, it lies in its density in terms of actual information and documentation. The wealth of information contained in each chapter calls on the reader to have an equal interest in Ceylonese/Sri Lankan and Indian history, in post-colonial literature, in cultural and social theory, in feminism, in the study of social movements, in issues of sexuality and transgression and this, I am afraid, is a rather daunting prospect. The complexity of the issues that are discussed is sometimes equally daunting. Yet, in the final analysis, the book grabs our attention and interest because this very complexity of both information and analysis. *Women and the Nation's Narrative* is indeed a rare work of scholarship that challenges its readers and that will hopefully inspire a new generation of researchers and scholars towards further exploration and study of the issues that form its focus. ■

