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CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HISTORY WITH ROMILA THAPAR

Kalpana Sharma

Eminent historian Romila Thapar, Professor Emeritus at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, was awarded the prestigious Kluge Prize in 2008 along with the Irish historian Peter Brown, who teaches at Princeton University. The Kluge award is often referred to as the American Nobel Prize, as it covers the human sciences for which there are no Nobel awards. In an interview, shortly after she returned from the United States after receiving the award, Prof Thapar spoke about the importance of history teaching, the need for autonomous institutes to govern textbooks and historical research, and the media's interpretation of contemporary developments. Excerpts from the conversation:

In a talk you gave in 2002, you said: "To comprehend the present and move towards the future requires an understanding of the past, an understanding that is sensitive, analytical and open to critical enquiry. "In the light of the November 26, 2008 terror attack on Mumbai and the criticism of the media's reporting of the event, what do you as a historian feel about media interpretation of such events and the absence of context in reporting?

As a historian I am and have been deeply disturbed – and I'm not alone in this – by the reaction to such incidents. Indian identity at the popular level is increasingly being narrowed to the perceptions of what is called the majority community. This is ironic because among historians the perspective has widened out. This is in part due to the expansion of sources for constructing history. In archaeology, for instance, various sciences are giving us dimensions of knowledge that are new, such as the data on environmental factors affecting history. Our attitudes to texts have changed. We now ask incisive questions about the author, and why the text is written the way it is and what is the intention of the patron? One looks beyond the statements for deeper historical understanding. This has led to new perspectives on the past in terms of both evidence and the manner in which it is analysed.

So while the historian is opening up the past, its popular representation is narrowing it down. The kinds of linkages that are made with the past in popular outlets tend to marginalize many communities and cultures that make up Indian society. These linkages frequently draw from political agendas. Inevitably, one begins to ask whether or to what degree that which we've been writing and speaking about in the past 30 to 40 years have at all affected people's perceptions – perceptions of our past, our identities, and values that we hold as important in our lives? Possibly we have been too passive in our response to aggressive political actions. And we have failed to be sufficiently critical of the way the media plays with political agendas in representing what it calls "culture and history". These are themes that need much more open discussion.

We have not internalized our history in the sense that for most people seeing the historical aspect of the world around us is still an experience of the extraneous. Historical analysis is really about an entire society with an accounting of different levels and the way in which they are interrelated, the way in which they disintegrate or integrate, and how these relationships have changed over time. We assume a kind of static past, which is of course the behest of colonial scholarship. This

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is being questioned by historians who are trying to understand the dynamics of different periods and communities, but somehow this questioning doesn't seem to seep into popular agencies like the media.

How much of media projection and the political discourse, which fails to locate events against history, is because of the way generations of Indians, including the post-Independence generation, have been taught history?

It has a lot to do with it. One of the biggest problems with the way in which popular representations of the past are accepted without questioning has to do precisely with the way history is taught. Not just history, our attitude to knowledge is generally still dated. A student is told, "Here is a body of knowledge, learn it and memorise it". The notion that a body of knowledge implicitly means that the person who is approaching it has to question it and understand it and maybe develop it further – that is not something that is implicit in our educational methods. The purpose of education is increasingly, with rare exceptions, a competition involving numbers in an exam which determine the next step. This is not what education should be about.

When we first established the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1971, it was suggested to us that our courses and syllabi should preferably not be a mere repetition of what was being taught in other universities. We were asked to think of new ways of projecting history where our courses would reflect interdisciplinary methods of investigating the past.

My 20 years in JNU were intellectually among the most enriching in my life, because we had a really good bunch of students who came because they felt that since the courses were different, the enquiries would be different. If one can take credit for anything at all it is for those students who are now teaching history and conducting historical research themselves. They are doing it because it is both an intellectual exploration as well as something that is providing insights into the society in which we live. It is through this way of looking at the past that students become curious about the world that surrounds them. If enquiry can be built into a subject it ceases to be just having to learn the same old dreary information and it takes on the challenge of finding out about other aspects – about objects, events, people, behaviour patterns, personalities, policies – a whole gamut of perspectives on what makes society, who makes it and who governs it.

You had spoken of what you called the "blight" of reducing Indian culture to a single identity, in the period leading up to the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Do you feel that this type of ideology has been somewhat diluted today because of other political developments, or do you think we still face the danger of this "blight" returning and attempting to project Indian culture in a monochromatic way?

There are two aspects to this question. One is the political aspect, the use of the Hindutva ideology to garner votes. We saw this displayed in the political mobilization around the Ram Janmabhoomi movement leading up to the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Echoes of this were audible in the debate on the Sethu Samudram. And if groups to Hindutva politics find that they are having problems with electoral support, it may be raked up again. That's one aspect that may at the moment be somewhat diluted, but it's unpredictable.

What worries me much more is the way in which the ideology of Hindutva has inveigled much of the middle class into accepting the idea that we should be only a Hindu country. This is essentially an unthinking acceptance of an ideology that claims to provide an easy answer to a complex problem, namely the modernization of a society that has always had multiple communities, and it is based on questionable and erroneous premises rather than what one expects in this day and age, namely at least a minimum of logical and rational thinking about the problem. The attitude of treating members of other religious communities as the "Other," as the ones who are alien and who will never be part of "us", that is something that I find unacceptable as it goes against the grain of the concept of being Indian. It is also unacceptable because it is historically untenable. Where education has not succeeded perhaps civil society will be the agency to oppose this attitude. But if it isn't opposed it will encourage the kind of politics that can take us to the edge of fascism.

Finally come to your award. You've turned down so many but this Kluge award is different.

The only awards that I've turned down are state awards from governments. Indian society has yet to respect the academic. It seems to me that one of the ways of creating respect is to give priority to recognition from one's peers in a profession and this will require a distancing from government patronage. I have accepted awards from historical associations in India including the Indian History Congress and the Asiatic Society of Calcutta without a moment's hesitation because this was a gesture from my fellow professionals.

The Kluge award, like the Nobel Prize, draws from a private donation John Kluge made his money in media and movies and decided that he would use it to encourage human sciences and humanities. These are not covered by the Nobel Prize. He located a research centre in the Library of Congress, so as to attract the best scholars to one of the leading libraries in the world. Subsequent to that, he established the Kluge Prize.

The selection involves a rigorous process of academic assessment. Nominations are processed through a series of evaluations by scholars in a particular field – in my case it was Ancient History and Indology. The Council of Scholars attached to the Kluge research centre advises in the choice. The rigour of the academic evaluation makes it a coveted prize. ■

Courtesy, *The Hindu*

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REMEMBERING A SOCIALIST PIONEER SELINA PERERA – THE RELENTLESS REVOLUTIONARY

Charles Wesley Ervin

In Sri Lanka the historic leaders of the Old Left still loom large in the pantheon of national heroes. Yet not all the pioneers have received their due credit. One such "forgotten soldier" is Selina Perera. She was a founding member and front-line leader of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). She went to India with her comrades in 1942 to participate in the independence struggle. After the war, Selina chose to remain in India for the rest of her life, fighting for the revolutionary ideals of her youth. I had the privilege of meeting her in Calcutta in 1974. She was a relentless revolutionary who deserves to be remembered and honored.[1]

Formative Years

Selina Margaret Peiris was born in 1909 in Badulla. Her father, reputed to be one of the wealthiest landowners in Uva Province, wanted his children to get a good English education. He sent Selina to the local Catholic Convent school, where she earned a reputation as Badulla's brightest student. After completing her primary education, Selina went to Musaeus College in Colombo, one of the girls' schools that the Theosophists founded in Ceylon to promote a Buddhist revival.

After passing out of Musaeus, Selina continued her education at the local University College. Petite and attractive, she wore large, round wire-framed eyeglasses which gave her a studious look. A contemporary remembers her as "a sweet, sensitive, unspoiled, and intelligent woman."[2] Attracted to the stage, she made her debut at the Royal College theatre playing the lead role in *The King's Wife*, a drama by the Irish Theosophist, James Henry Cousins, who was then professor of English at Madras University.[3]

Selina started her career as a teacher at the Buddhist Girls' College in Mount Lavinia and became its first principal. Yet she was not content simply to teach. Like many educated youth of that time, Selina was awakening to the call of progressive nationalism. The freedom movement in India reverberated in Ceylon. Gandhi launched a mass civil disobedience campaign in 1930. The following year restive young Ceylonese nationalists launched their own Youth League movement to press the fight for complete independence that the local elite refused to support, much less lead. Selina joined the South Colombo Youth League and hosted political meetings at her school in the evenings. She was one of the 'New Women' of the period – independent, educated, courageous and politically active as were Caroline (Gunawardena) Anonypillai, Doreen (Young) Wickremasinghe, Susan de Silva and later Vivienne Gunawardena.

In late 1932 Philip Gunawardena, the father of Ceylon Marxism, also joined the South Colombo Youth League. Philip had become a socialist during his student years in America and then spent the next five years in London working with the British Communist Party, until he was expelled for supporting Trotsky against Stalin.[4] Given his depth of experience and immense charisma, Philip quickly became the driving force behind the South Colombo Youth League. Selina gradually was attracted to Marxism.[5]

Radical Protest

In Ceylon, like everywhere else in the Empire, the British establishment celebrated Armistice Day with jingoistic parades, formal banquets with toasts to Her Majesty, and all the rest. The ladies sold poppies and donated the proceeds to war veterans. Some nationalists complained that the Ceylonese veterans got the short end of the stick. In 1931 Aelian Perera, an ex-serviceman, started a *swadeshi* version of the campaign, in which Ceylonese volunteers sold the *suriya* flower and gave the proceeds to Ceylonese veterans. The South Colombo Youth League enthusiastically joined the next Suriya Mal protest. Selina and her comrades radicalized and took over the committee.[6] "Register your refusal to encourage participation in Imperialist War," declared their manifesto. "Every Suriya Mala is a blow against Imperialism, Fascism, and War." In the context of that time, this was shocking. Nice middle-class Ceylonese women

weren't supposed to be handing out leaflets that sounded like they'd been written in Moscow.

In 1933 a malaria epidemic swept the island. The government response was tardy and more than 10,000 perished in two months alone. The Suriya Mal activists organized their own grassroots relief campaign. Selina trekked from one stricken village to the next, distributing medicine and food. She saw babies sucking the breasts of their dead mothers, and huts filled with corpses. The experience stoked her anger at social injustice and stiffened her resolve to fight for the uplift of the masses.

In the course of this work she became close with a fellow Suriya Mal activist, Dr. N.M. Perera, a handsome university lecturer who had just earned his doctorate at the London School of Economics. He was one of Philip Gunawardena's devotees. A sweet romance soon developed. Their relationship was intertwined with their politics from the start.

The Red Party

In 1935 the British government announced that elections would be held to the State Council early the following year. Selina and her comrades decided that the time was opportune to launch a socialist party. In December 1935 Selina participated in the founding conference of the LSSP. The party brimmed with youthful idealism. She was elected to the Central Committee and served as the party's treasurer.[7] Getting off to a roaring start, the LSSP fielded four candidates in the elections. Selina stumped with N.M. Perera in Ruwanwella. Much to the shock of the establishment, they toppled the wealthy and powerful incumbent. Philip Gunawardena also won in Avissawella, where his family was well known and respected. Gunawardena and Perera used the State Council brilliantly to broadcast their political message to the people and to fight for reforms that would better the lot of the poor.

On 6 March, 1936, Selina and N.M. Perera married. In a sense they were also married to the LSSP. Both had dedicated their lives to the cause. She was a party leader in her own right and had a big influence in his political success.[8] She was regarded as "one of the most able and militant women in the party."[9]

In 1937 a young Australian, Mark Bracegirdle, arrived in Ceylon to learn the planting business. He felt sorry for the estate laborers and contacted the LSSP. The party decided that this callow youth with pinkish Communist sympathies could be put to good use. Selina and her comrades organized open air rallies in the plantation districts at which Bracegirdle would thunder against the Planter Raj. The government issued a deportation order against the rabble-rouser. Selina played a key role in hiding him from the police. The party cleverly turned "the Bracegirdle Affair" into a cause célèbre. When he was finally deported in 1938, Selina was at the jetty to see him off.

All this publicity made Selina's parents anxious. Her father offered to pay for her to go to England and get her degree.[10] Selina and her comrades saw this as an opportunity. They decided that she should go to England, work with the British Trotskyists, and then visit Leon Trotsky at his refuge in Mexico on her way home. And so in 1938 she said goodbye to her husband, family, and comrades and set off on her mission.

Mission to Mexico

Selina enrolled at the School of Oriental and African Studies, which was part of the University of London. She studied Sanskrit and Pali, the language of the ancient Theravada Buddhist canon. In June 1939 she completed her B.A. degree in Indo-Aryan Languages with a Lower Second Class Honors.[11]

Meanwhile, Selina worked closely with the local Trotskyist groups and stayed for a while with Charlie Van Gelderen, who was one of the delegates to the founding conference of the Fourth International in Paris in September 1938. Though vastly outnumbered on the left, the British Trotskyists were engaged in a fierce political war with the Communist Party. Selina and her comrades denounced the crimes of the Stalinists. In the USSR Stalin was carrying out the Great Terror. He staged the infamous Moscow trials in order to eliminate all remaining rivals. In Spain the Stalinist agents murdered the Trotskyists and other leftists fighting Franco. Just as Trotsky predicted, the counterrevolutionary policy of the Stalinists in Spain led to the defeat of the Republic and set the stage for the next world war.

In September 1939 Britain declared war on Germany. Selina had to continue her mission posthaste. Arriving in New York the following month, she made a bee line to the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the American section of the Fourth International, who welcomed her with open arms. The SWP newspaper printed her statement of opposition to the "imperialist war."[12] On 2 November, she briefed the members of the International Executive Committee of the Fourth

International in New York City. Up to that point, the leaders of the Fourth International, including Trotsky himself, didn't know that they even had supporters in Ceylon, not to mention that they led the hegemonic party of the left.

The SWP made the arrangements for her trip to Coyoacán, a suburb of Mexico City, where the Trotskys were living a precarious exile life. When she reached San Antonio, Texas, she sent Trotsky a short letter asking to be met at the bus terminal in Mexico City. "I do not think you will have any difficulty in identifying me, if you look out for a brown-skinned female in a strange costume!"[11] However, she was stopped at the border in Laredo on a visa technicality. Deeply dismayed, she wrote to Trotsky from California four days later: "I was reluctantly forced to abandon my trip to Mexico and forego perhaps the one chance in my lifetime of meeting you."[12] She was right. A Stalinist assassin murdered Trotsky in his home less than a year later. She often told her comrades that missing that one opportunity to meet Trotsky was the greatest disappointment of her life.[13]

Fighting in the Front Rank

Returning to Ceylon in early 1940, Selina plunged back into party work. Following the Trotskyist line, the LSSP refused to support the British war effort. Selina once again became a familiar figure on party platforms. In the State Council her husband and Philip Gunawardena voted against the war budget and delivered blistering antiwar speeches that alarmed the Colonial Office in London.

In June 1940 the Governor of Ceylon issued an order for the arrest of top party leaders. Alerted to the impending repression, the LSSP decided that Leslie Goonewardene should go underground immediately and begin to organize a clandestine apparatus, while the other leaders would court arrest. On 18 June the police arrested Philip Gunawardena, N.M. Perera, and Colvin de Silva; Edmund Samarakkody was arrested the following day. The LSSP called a mass meeting to protest the arrests. The police attacked. In the melee Selina rallied the crowd and led a march to the Welikada prison. "A vanload of baton-waving Policemen jumped on us as we reached Norris Road," recalls one of her comrades, "and having introduced us to the heavy ends of their batons, took several of us into custody."[14] Selina was jailed and later released.

From that point on, "Selina became the principal mass figure around whom the open activity of the party was organized and developed."[15] She worked under the constant threat of arrest. In 1941 she addressed the Jaffna Youth Congress. "Selina made a fiery speech but worded it cunningly to avoid an open denunciation of the British. Nevertheless, she was arrested and charged with sedition in the Mallakam courts and was acquitted of the charges."[16] Later she helped lead a strike at the Rothman's cigarette company in Colombo. When a police officer tried to arrest her on the picket line, she slapped him and said, "That should teach you not to lay hands on a woman!"

In April 1942 the LSSP carried out a well-planned raid on the jail where Selina's husband and the other three party leaders were being held. The prisoners were spirited under cover of darkness to hideouts around Colombo. Embarrassed and infuriated, the government jailed more party members and put Selina under house arrest. The LSSP was in effect driven completely underground.

The Exodus to India

Unable to do much in Ceylon at that point, the party leaders decided to shift their activities to India. This made good sense for several reasons. First, while Ceylon was quiet at that point, India was a volcano ready to erupt. Gandhi was threatening to summon another mass movement to force the British to "quit India." Second, they had co-thinkers in the major cities of India with whom they could seek refuge and join forces. In May 1942 these groups of Indian Trotskyists merged into the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) with its headquarters in Bombay.

In July 1942 Selina and her comrades made their well-planned escape from Ceylon in little fishing boats. While some went to Madurai, Selina and the main contingent continued on to Bombay. She and her husband, assuming fictitious names, rented a flat in Girangaon.

Just a few weeks later, the Quit India revolt erupted in Bombay and quickly spread across India. While the Communist Party opposed the struggle, the Trotskyists gave it their unconditional support. Though the party was small and new to the scene, the government regarded the BLPI as a significant potential threat.[17] They stepped up their manhunt for the Ceylonese fugitives. Detectives who could recognize Selina and her comrades were brought up from Ceylon. The Bombay police were told to look for a woman with a "Rosa Luxemburgian" character.[18] Selina used to go out to demonstrations in various disguises.[19] Using an assumed name, she got a teaching job at a school in Bombay and helped to finance the party with her earnings.

As a result of their interventions, the BLPI recruited a number of youth who needed to be trained in Marxism and Trotskyism. Selina was outstanding in that role. However, even within the BLPI she had to be cautious, knowing that the police were trying to plant spies in the party. The new recruits in her study classes knew her simply as "Margie."[24]

On the Run

In July 1943 the Bombay police, acting on a tip from the Communist Party, raided BLPI hideouts and arrested most of the cadres, including her husband. Alerted to the danger, Selina, Colvin de Silva, Leslie and Vivienne Goonewardene fled to Madras, where there was a strong BLPI branch. Selina and her comrades took up residence at the BLPI "commune," a spacious two-storied house in Venus Colony in Teynampet. She became part of the party executive committee.

During this period an emissary from the American SWP contacted the underground party in Madras. He was a comrade whom Selina had met in the US in 1940. It was a happy reunion. "Her eyes sparkled with immense delight as we recalled her tour and some of the people we knew. She wants to be remembered to all the comrades she had met over here."[25] He also noted that she looked like she had aged considerably. The nerve-wracking life of a revolutionary on the run was taking its toll.

In 1944 Selina participated in the first all India conference of the BLPI, which was held in Madras under the tightest security. Somehow the police got wind of this meeting. The delegates had to disperse quickly. With the police hot on their trail, Selina, Colvin de Silva, and the Goonewardenes went to Calcutta, where there was another strong branch of the party. They settled in the Entally suburb of the city and integrated themselves in the work of the branch.

The move to Calcutta opened a happier chapter in her life. She had developed a close political and personal relationship with Colvin de Silva.[26] In addition, the internal life of the Calcutta BLPI was stimulating. The leaders of the branch were urbane, well-read Marxist intellectuals who were her intellectual peers. The Bengali comrades adored her. They affectionately called her "Sheela." From then on, that became her name, and Calcutta became her home.

No Turning Back

When the war ended, huge political demonstrations against the British took place in Calcutta. In February 1946 there was a mutiny in the Indian navy in Bombay and fighting in the streets. "Selina was highly delighted to find a genuine revolutionary situation in India," recalls Sailen Banerji, a former member of the BLPI in Calcutta.[27]

Selina played an important role in helping the party get important bases in the labor movement, notably with the fire fighters in Calcutta, paper mill workers in Titagarh, pottery factory workers in Purulia, and coal workers in Raniganj. She also patiently trained the young recruits. A visiting British Trotskyist commended her initiative in "the work of giving study groups, classes and lectures, the work of training up new members, candidates and contacts in dialectical materialism, in economics, in the general theory of Marxism."[28] As one of her young protégés later recalled, Selina "guided me towards reading books of great socialist thinkers who weren't always mentioned in the common run Marxist literature."[29]

Meanwhile, in Ceylon the Trotskyists fielded candidates for the parliamentary elections in 1947. Selina returned to help Colvin de Silva with his campaign. However, after the election, she returned to Calcutta. The BLPI had become her mission in life, and her true love. She settled in a modest, little street level flat at 54 Ganesh Chandra Avenue in central Calcutta, next to the law office of her friend and comrade from the London days, Ajit Roy. She supported herself by tutoring Bengalis in English.[30]

The Demise of the BLPI

In 1947 a group within the BLPI proposed that the party merge with the Congress Socialist Party, the large left wing of the Indian National Congress. In their view, the BLPI was too small to compete effectively on the left. If they joined the Socialist Party, they argued, they would be able to win over left-wing Socialists, build up a Trotskyist caucus within the party, and then exit stronger than before. Selina had misgivings. Why merge with the Socialists when the BLPI was starting to make headway, especially in Madras and Bengal?

The pro-entry faction gradually gained a majority in the party, and in late 1948 the BLPI voted to enter the Socialist Party. For Selina, the demise of the BLPI was painful. Nevertheless, she carried out the party decision with energy and discipline. She circulated Fourth International literature within the party and prodded the leadership to take more militant positions. "Sheela Perera went on with dedication," recalled one of her comrades. "As a result, she earned the respect of many leaders

and activists of the Socialist Party."[25] She was elected to the West Bengal executive committee and worked with unions in the Hind Mazdoor Sabha, the Socialist trade union federation.

In 1952 the Socialists contested the general elections with high hopes. The ruling Congress Party, however, won a landslide victory. Demoralized by the humiliating defeat, the Socialist leaders decided to unite with a breakaway group of dissident old-school Congressmen, forming a new party based on a hodge-podge of Gandhism and Marxism. Upon hearing the news, Selina immediately rallied about 500 Socialist Party members to reject the merger. She became their recognized public spokesperson. But the dissident Socialists had to swim against a strong stream. The Nehru government had won a lot of popular support with its claims to be building "democratic socialism" in India. The dissident Socialists were marginalized.

Abortive Socialist Regroupment

In the aftermath of the 1952 elections several left parties began talking about the need for unity in order to build an effective opposition. On 27 January, 1955 more than a dozen leftist parties met in Bombay and voted to launch the Mazdoor Kisan Party (Workers and Peasants Party) at a future conference.[26] Selina welcomed this initiative, and she and six other Trotskyists were elected to the 20 member Provisional Central Committee.

In Bombay the new front of parties got off to a promising start by taking leadership of the popular movement for a United Maharashtra. But mass work alone couldn't resolve the political differences amongst the different parties in the front. Taking an active role in the debate over program, Selina criticized the fuzzy formulations and semi-Stalinist positions and fought for the Trotskyist line. The discussions dragged on for more than two years with little progress.

As the general election of 1957 drew near, the two largest parties in the front unilaterally mounted their own independent election campaigns. Clearly, the "urge to merge" wasn't very strong. Selina concluded that the regroupment exercise was futile. She called upon all Trotskyists in India to close ranks and form a purely Trotskyist party. "Let us tell them [the other Left parties] that instead of running after illusions of half-baked unity just now, we are consolidating Trotskyists to contribute in clarifying our stand and laying a sound basis of Left unity if it ever comes about."[27]

Fighting for the Party Perspective

In November 1957 Selina convened a conference of Trotskyists in Calcutta. The delegates voted in favor of building a new party that would be associated with the international Trotskyist movement. Selina was enthusiastic. She could finally devote herself to rebuilding a Bolshevik party in India. She promptly made a financial donation to support the production of the internal discussion bulletins.

Some of the Trotskyists, however, waffled on the conference decision, temporized, and wanted to chase after other centrist parties. In the discussion bulletins Selina and her group sharply criticized their proposals as wishful thinking and opportunist maneuvers. Selina defended the fundamental perspective of building a disciplined Bolshevik party, no matter how long and hard that struggle might be.

In 1958 Selina hosted another conference in Calcutta that launched the Revolutionary Workers Party (RWP).[28] The new party declared: "The only revolutionary ideology today in this world has the name of Trotskyism, i.e. contemporary Marxism." The RWP program was based on the original program of the BLPI. Selina was elected to the three member political bureau.

Selina was keen to re-establish the link with the Fourth International that had been severed when the BLPI entered the Congress Socialist Party in 1948. In the intervening years, however, the world Trotskyist movement had been wracked by an ideological crisis fueled by the onset of the Cold War and the unexpected expansion of Stalinism globally. In 1953 the Fourth International split in two. "I don't recall seeing documents at the time," she told me in 1974. "We in India had only a murky idea of what was happening in the Fourth International."[29] Through contacts with visiting Trotskyists, she opened a dialogue with both wings of the Fourth International. Jimmy Deane, a veteran British Trotskyist, advised the RWP to "maintain close and friendly relations" with both factions.[30] Selina and her comrades urged both sides "to seriously consider and find out ways and means to heal up this wound with democratic organizational safety for future."[31]

Though the RWP got off to a good start, there were still those in the party who had appetites for a bigger merger. In Bengal some RWP members started discussions with the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), a maverick communist group that had been around since the 'thirties and

had a pro-Trotsky faction of its own. Selina opposed this initiative. In her view, the Trotskyists in India had wasted too much time and lost too many valuable cadres by trying to find short-cuts to building a revolutionary party. The pro-merger faction, however, prevailed and the RWP merged with the RCPI in June 1960.

For Selina the liquidation of the RWP was the last straw. According to one of her close comrades, "Her lofty dream [of a Trotskyist party] was torn asunder."[6] Selina withdrew to the sidelines. Just as she had predicted, the merger with the RCPI produced an unstable amalgamation. The party was put to the test when the Sino-Indian war broke out two years later. The RCPI majority took a pro-India line, while the Trotskyists defended China on the basis that it was a "workers state." The Trotskyists had to split and start all over again.

Though she didn't rejoin her old comrades, Selina continued to support leftist causes and worked with various unions in the Calcutta area. When the Communist Party split in 1964, Selina was on good terms with the leaders of the wing that became the CP(M), such as Ashok Mitra, who became finance minister in the first Left Front Government in West Bengal in 1977.

The Tragic End

In her later years Selina became more and more depressed. The death of her parents grieved her terribly. She also couldn't seem to resolve her emotional attachments with her ex-husband or Colvin de Silva. She gave money to her students for tuition and lived in virtual poverty herself. Her health deteriorated. Her letters to old comrades in Sri Lanka became less and less frequent, and then stopped altogether.

Selina made arrangements to have her family property in Maharagama donated to the LSSP after her death. She also instructed in her will that her personal savings be donated to social service organizations in India. Was she contemplating suicide? If she was, she wouldn't have been the first revolutionary to do so.

In late May 1986 her neighbors noticed that they hadn't seen Selina recently. They called the police, who entered her flat and found her body. She had been dead for some time. The Calcutta government kept her corpse in the morgue for a month with various pretexts. Finally, her friends and comrades were able to give her a proper funeral. She was cremated at Sahanagar in south Kolkata on 15 June 1986.

In his obituary Sailen Bannerji eloquently summed up the life of his friend and comrade: "Sheela remained in the forefront of a revolutionary party for over three decades. She had to suffer sarcasm and persecution for her political ideology. Disease, old age and grief had taken a harsh toll but her revolutionary self was indomitable. A relentless revolutionary, she was not only an ideal, but a great and rare pioneer."

End Notes

1 Hector Abhayavardhana, who joined the LSSP in the late thirties and knew Selina for many years, was the first to pay homage: H. Abhayavardhana, "Selina Perera – The Forgotten Socialist Militant," *Pravada* 4, nos. 10-11, 1997, 19-22.

2 E.C.B. Wijeyesinghe, *Selected Writings of E.C.B. Wijeyesinghe: Actor and Journalist*, Colombo: 2001, 235.

3 *Selected Writings of E.C.B. Wijeyesinghe*, 235.

4 Charles Wesley Ervin, *Philip Gunawardena: The Making of a Revolutionary*, Colombo: 2001; and C.W. Ervin, *Pilip Gunawardhana: Viplavavadiyakuge Hadagasma*, Colombo: 2005.

5 Sailen Bannerji (Bandopadhyay), "Biplabee Kamred Sheela Perera," *Ganabarta*, 15 July 1986, 16.

6 Vernon Gunasekera, interview with Michael Roberts, 7 July 1966, University of Adelaide Library, Barr Smith Special Collections, Roberts Oral History Project, cassette 41.

7 H. Abhayavardhana, "Selina Perera – The Forgotten Socialist Militant," 19.

8 N.M. Perera acknowledged that he would not have developed into such a successful party leader himself "if I had married any other woman." E.P. de Silva, *N.M.: A Short Biography*, Colombo: 1975, 59.

9 Ajith Samaranayake, "Selina Perera – The LSSP's Link with Trotsky," *Pravada*, 4, nos. 10-11, 1997, 93.

10 S. Bannerji, "Biplabee Kamred Sheela Perera," 16.

11 I thank Nathan Sivasambu in London for getting this information.

12 *Socialist Appeal*, 10 November 1939.

13 Trotsky papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University: bMs Russ 13.1, file 3798.

14 Houghton Library: bMs Russ 13.1, file 3799.

15 Letter from Sailen Bannerji (Kolkata), 14 October 2007.

16 Reggie Perera, "Journey into Politics," *Ceylon Observer*, August-September 1962.

17 H. Abhayavardhana, "Selina Perera – The Forgotten Socialist Militant," 86.

18 Handy Perinbanayagam, a prominent Youth Congress leader, reported her speech and arrest in his newspaper, *Kesari* (The Lion). Santasilan Kadirgamar, *Handy Perinbanayagam: A*

Memorial Volume (Jaffna, 1980), part 1, 93. I thank his son, Robert Siddhartha Periyanayagam, for this information.

[17] Charles Wesley Ervin, *Tomorrow is Ours: The Trotskyist Movement in India and Ceylon, 1935-48* (Colombo, 2006), chapter 4.

[18] Letter from Sailen Bannerji, 14 October 2007.

[19] Lakmali Gunawardena, *Kusuma: A Life in Left Politics* (Colombo, 2001), 1.

[20] Vinayak Purohit, *A Life of Sorfule and Overflow 1927-2005*, (Pune, 2005), Chapter 1, 12.

[21] Hoover Archives, Stanford University, SWP Papers, box. 18.

[22] Hector Abhayavardhana, interview with C.W. Ervin, Colombo, 18 December 1997.

[23] Letter from Sailen Bannerji, 14 October 2007.

[24] Jack Heston Archives, University of Hull Library.

[25] Letter from Sitanshu Das (New Delhi), 24 October 2003.

[26] Letter from Sailen Bannerji, 22 November 2007.

[27] Sailen Bannerji, "Biplabee Kumred Sheela Perera," 17.

[28] *A New Marxist Party is Born: The Policy Statement of the All-India Mazdoor Kisan Party*, 30 November 1955, 7-8.

[29] R.N. Arya, "Reply to Comrade Kolpe on His Report (Orissa)," *Internal Bulletin* (Socialist Party (Marxist)), 1, no. 4 June 1957, part 1, 9.

[30] *Marxist Unity—For Socialism in India. Statement of Policy of the Revolutionary Workers Party of India* (Calcutta, 1958), 3.

[31] Selina Perera, interview with C.W. Ervin, Kolkata, 29 January 1974.

[32] Jim Deane, "On the Fourth International," *Internal Bulletin* (RWP), 2, no. 3, September-October 1958, 11.

[33] R.N. Arya, "An Appeal to the International Trotskyist Conference-Affiliated to the International Committee," 2 May 1958.

[34] Letter from Sailen Bannerji, 14 October 2007. ■

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Selina Perera in the 1930s.

FEMALE LEADERS IN SOUTH ASIA: THE IMPACT OF FEUDALISM AND RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

Devanesan Nesiah

Patriarchy is at the core of virtually all feudal and religious fundamentalist traditions. There have been a few matriarchal societies in centuries past, and some features of matriarchy persist in a few societies that have become, in recent centuries, less and less matriarchal. The scriptures of nearly all major religions appear to lend legitimacy, in larger or smaller measure, to some forms of gender -based disparity. That many liberal scholars and theologians feel the need to engage in feminist reinterpretation of traditions and scriptures underscores the ubiquity of patriarchy in what they are seeking to reinterpret.

Throughout history, the proportion of women who have risen to be major leaders of polities, societies and religious communities has been small, in South Asia as elsewhere. Given the close links between patriarchy, feudalism and religious fundamentalism, it may seem reasonable to assume that the emergence of women leaders would be more difficult in societies immersed in feudal and religious fundamentalist traditions than in modern liberal democracies. In fact, many eminent scholars have pointed to the sudden emergence of women leaders at the apex in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as evidence of emancipation and lack of gender prejudice in those countries and in that region. But is this what the facts reveal?

In Sri Lanka on the assassination of the Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1959, his widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who had neither been politically active nor held any significant political office previously, was acclaimed leader of the ruling party and became the world's first female prime minister. She repeatedly claimed that her task as prime minister was to carry out the policies of her 'late husband'. She consolidated her political grip, continued as the unchallenged leader of her party, and was prime minister whenever that party was elected to power till she handed over the reins to her daughter Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge, herself widow of the assassinated charismatic political leader Vijaya Kumaratunge. In 1994 Chandrika became prime minister, and went on to be the country's first female executive president few months later.

Curiously, her main opponent in that presidential election was another widow, Srima Dissanayake, nominated in place of the assassinated Gamini Dissanayake. Chandrika, too, consolidated her political position and held office till the completion of her second term as president in 2005. Both mother and daughter were charismatic political leaders, whose rise to the top was very sudden. They enjoyed the support of very large numbers of female voters, but the percentage of female Members of Parliament (MPs) remained abysmally low (of the order of 5%) before, throughout their tenures of office, and after. Neither of them appeared to have been particularly interested in advancing female political representation or other feminist concerns. There are no reservations for women in the Sri Lankan Parliament, but there are moves to legislate for such reservations in local government.

In India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was succeeded by Lal Bahadur Shastri who, in turn, was succeeded by Indira Gandhi, daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru. Unlike Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Indira Gandhi has been deeply immersed in political issues from a very young age. She too consolidated her party and national leadership but was assassinated in 1984, she was succeeded by her son Rajiv Gandhi. Later, he was assassinated. In due course his widow Sonia Gandhi (from Italy) became party leader and was offered the office of prime minister which she declined. She remains the most charismatic leader of her party. Neither Sonia, nor Indira Gandhi before her, had been associated with advancing women's political representation or other feminist issues.

There are no reservations for women in the Indian Parliament and the proportion of women elected has always been 10% or less. That the proportion of women in the Indian Parliament is about double that in the Sri Lankan Parliament may be due primarily to the history of massive involvement of women, young and old, in the Gandhian social and political movements leading to independence. But 10% is not adequate. The major Indian political parties have agreed to a female political representation level of at least 33%, and this is provided for in respect of local government in terms of the Constitutional Amendment of 1992. Attempts to amend

the constitution to provide for quotas in Parliament have not yet succeeded despite agreement in principle by all the major parties. This remains a live issue.

In Pakistan, too, large numbers of women of diverse age groups were involved in the independence movement as well as in the agitation for partition (i.e. creation of Pakistan). Mohamad Ali Jinnah would often have his sister Fatima Jinnah sit with him at public meetings, before and after independence, despite repeated protests from orthodox religious leaders who held that women should not be active in politics nor hold high office in a Muslim country. In 1958 Field Marshal Ayub Khan captured power and went on to establish a new constitution in 1962, replacing the 1956 Constitution which had provided for dual voting rights for women – for the general seats open to men and women as well as for a few seats reserved for women. The imposed 1962 Constitution abolished direct elections to the presidency and to Parliament, and substituted indirect elections by an Electoral College based on local bodies. This effectively permitted manipulation by the incumbent president/dictator. In any case, it was mostly men who would be in the Electoral College. Thus, only six women were elected to Parliament under that Constitution.

Fatima Jinnah dared to contest the field marshall position in the 1965 presidential election. Her candidature generated unprecedented enthusiasm, particularly among women. Even the orthodox religious parties including the very powerful Jamaat-e-Islami, which had repeatedly declared that a women could not hold high political office, supported her candidature. However Field Marshal Ayub Khan manipulated the Electoral College to secure his re-election, though it was clear that the majority of the voters backed Fatima Jinnah.

Women and students continued to play a major role in the agitation for democracy. In the parliamentary elections of 1970, there was over whelming support in West Pakistan for the Pakistan People's Party led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and in East Pakistan for the Awami League led by Mujibur Rahman. Denied the office of prime minister despite winning the Parliamentary majority, Mujibur Rahman led a revolt and East Pakistan seceded to form Bangladesh. In the course of time Bhutto was dislodged and executed and his family fled the country. His daughter Benazir Bhutto returned to lead her father's party and to contest the 1988 elections at which she swept the polls and became prime minister. She was again expelled from the country but returned to contest and win the 1993 parliamentary elections. The military has been very powerful in Pakistan, and military dictators most difficult to dislodge. It looked as if it was Benazir Bhutto who could succeed in doing it. In due course she returned again to contest parliamentary elections and generated much popular enthusiasm, but was assassinated on the eve of the elections in January 2008. Her party went on to win and her widower Asif Ali Zardari is now the party leader and president.

Despite women playing decisive roles in several national and regional elections the number of female MPs in Pakistan never reached double figures pre-2002, nor even during or in the immediate wake of the campaign led by Fatima Jinnah in 1965 or those led by Benazir Bhutto in 1988 and 1993. However there have been some remarkable individual successes. Nasim Wali Khan, widow of Wali Khan and daughter in law of Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, was elected as leader of the opposition of the remote ultra-feudal North-West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan and, even more incredibly, an Irish woman was elected as a member of the National Assembly from another remote region, Baluchistan. The feudal factor in one case, and the related colonial factor in the other, lent legitimacy, overriding the gender factor.

In Bangladesh, since the assassination of Sheik Mujibur Rahman, the effective leadership has been rotating between the military, several male leaders, Sheik Mujibur Rahman's daughter Sheikh Hasina Wazed, and Khaleda Zia, widow of President Ziaur Rahman. In recent years these two women have emerged as the most charismatic national leaders. Hasina is now the prime minister and Khaleda the leader of the opposition. Overall, the direct participation of women in politics in Bangladesh is at least in one respect in advance of that elsewhere in South Asia. Sri Lanka and India have no reservations for women in Parliament. Pakistan has a higher proportion of women (21.1% consequent to the 2002 elections), but most of these 72 members were selected indirectly by the elected MPs and only a few were directly elected. In Bangladesh, as from May 2004, the Constitution provides for reservation of 45 seats for women in a Parliament of 345, which works out to 13%. Unlike in Pakistan, these elections to Parliament are based on popular vote from territorial electorates.

In these four countries particular female leaders have been able to inspire and draw widespread support, especially from women voters. Such leaders as Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Chandrika Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi in India, Fatima Jinnah, Nasim Wali Khan and Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, and Sheikh Hasina Wazed and Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh derived their charisma, at least in part, from their father, brother or husband. These women

have surely inspired and given confidence to other women and helped to break down gender prejudices. These advances are undoubtedly of significance but not on any transformative scale. None of these leaders appeared to have made a major durable impact on the level of women's representation or on other feminist issues. Curiously, in exceptional cases, feudal succession has gone from women to men (Indira Gandhi to her son Rajiv, and Benazir Bhutto to her husband Zardari), and in one case from mother to daughter (Sirimavo Bandaranaike to Chandrika), but the overriding factor in the succession is feudal. Some of these women have also secured the backing of powerful conservative religious leaders who were also, clearly, influenced by the feudal factor legitimizing a particular female succession rather than any commitment to the emancipation of women.

Even in feudal Europe, legitimacy has occasionally been conferred on a particular woman (e.g. Joan of Arc) to play a leadership role generally denied to women. In modern democracies, the rise of women to top political leadership has been slow and the feudal factor has not played, or seems likely to play, a major role. The sudden emergence of individual women at the political apex has not happened in modern democracies outside Asia. Perhaps, with the progressive modernization and democratization of society and the emancipation of women, such sudden emergence of female national level leaders may cease to occur in Asia, too.

Though from the perspective of undermining prejudices against women holding high office, every opportunity for a woman to hold high political office may be welcome, we need to be wary of interpreting such opportunities as evidence of emancipation. It would be much more important to broaden the field, e.g. getting more women directly elected to political bodies at all levels from territorial electorates, whether open or reserved, whether on the strength of women's votes or that of all voters in the territory. The emancipation of women cannot rest securely on a feudal base. At least for a limited period (a few decades?) well designed schemes of reservation could be critically instrumental in advancing the emancipation of women.

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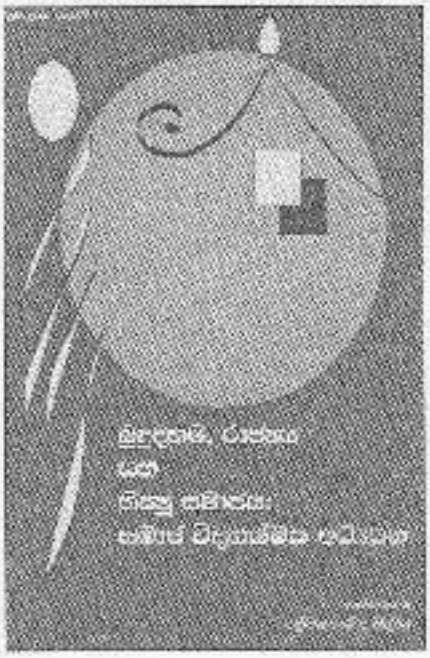

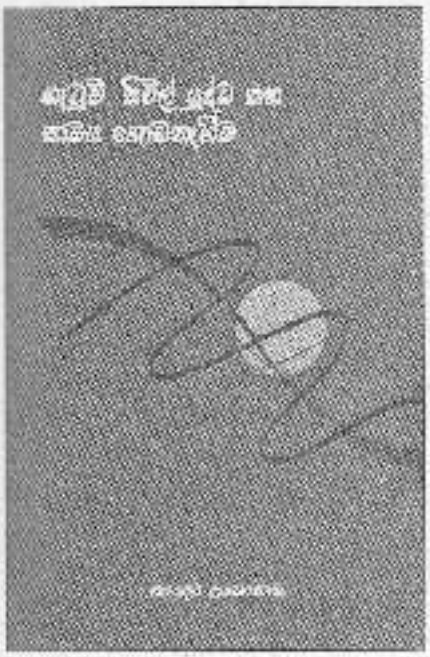

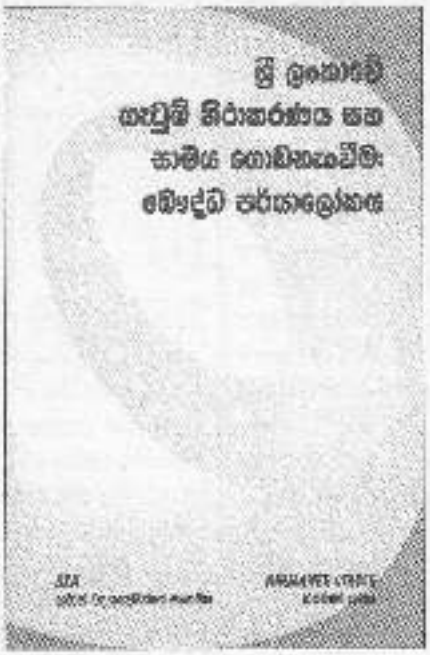

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FROM CAGED BIRD TO EMANCIPATED WOMAN

Sarojini Jayawickrama

"Women's Worlds": The McGraw-Hill Anthology of Women's Writings, edited by Robyn Warhol Down et al.

"Women's Worlds" is a compilation of writings in English by women from diverse areas of the world, from different geographical spaces and across time — from the fourteenth century to the present day. Different from traditional women's studies, its focus is not limited to Anglo-American writings. It is a richly textured tapestry of writings from Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, Ireland and the Caribbean and of works by writers of mixed heritage —African American, Asian American, Afro Caribbean and Anglo Indian. It features classic as well as exciting new voices from these geographical spaces and diverse cultures. In this aspect it reflects the global spread of English through colonization and emigration and so traces the impact of colonialism and its attendant dispersal of people, not simply from choice but through compulsion — through slavery and the slave trade and through enforced emigration when, for instance, beginning in 1788, British prisoners were transported to penal colonies in Australia.

It does not claim to be a definitive and all comprehensive work. Aware of its inability to unearth every piece of writing from times as far distant from our own as the fourteenth century, it dedicates itself "To all the women writers who are not represented in this volume". Virginia Woolf, writing as late as 1928, could find no evidence of women writers before the eighteenth century. In her seminal work, *A Room of One's Own*, she creates a fictional character — William Shakespeare's "wonderfully gifted sister" Judith who, frustrated in her desire to pursue a literary career by a society who would not tolerate a woman writer, takes her own life at the tender age of seventeen. Some of these pre-eighteenth century writings may have been destroyed, others simply forgotten or not "discovered", lost and uncatalogued in manuscript archives, early book collections and private libraries.

The anthology is structured chronologically, listing authors by their date of birth, and organized more broadly in periodized divisions — the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century to the present day. Each section is prefaced by an historical overview, erudite and insightful, which helps the reader (the anthology is aimed primarily at students in higher education) to familiarize he/r self with the cultural milieu of the period and gain a broader grasp of the social, material, cultural and historical context. A timeline pinpoints significant events of the time, historical and literary.

Maps of the world, changing and evolving as people's perception of their place in the world changed, introduce the different sections. It is interesting to note that the map of the world in the 1540 Ptolemy edition of *Geographika Universalis*, which precedes the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries section, depicts only England, France and Ireland. England is pictured on its side, suspended between France which is placed above it–since it was perceived as a threat to English power since a time which predated even the Norman Conquest in 1066 - and Ireland, England's first colony - subdued through sheer force and the imposition of the English language–which is placed below it. This depiction is not of the reality but of a perceived reality. The contraction of the world may be attributed to the fact that these three land masses were all that were known to England at the time. Before exploration and Empire, this was the English-speaking world. It was in the seventeenth century, through the advance of colonialism, that the English language began to spread beyond the British Isles.

The head notes to the selections focus on the lives of women writers, the conditions in which they lived and produced their work, and their reception. These head notes emphasize the material constraints as well as the opportunities that the circumstances of their lives offered these women who had to resist the circumscribed roles that the patriarchal societies in which they lived imposed on them. The century introductions and the head notes reflect the current trends in feminist literary and cultural theory and the teaching experience of the editors, all of whom are university academics.

The unique contextualization of the writings in essays titled "Cultural Coordinates" offers the reader an insight into specific examples of material culture that impinged quite dramatically on women's lives. They illuminate some of the references in the writings which the writer composing her writings for a different readership assumed that her reader

would know. They have since become unfamiliar to the contemporary reader perusing them six hundred years later, over boundaries of time and borders. For instance, what it meant to be dubbed a "scold" in sixteenth and early seventeenth century is discussed. It referred to a woman who verbally resisted her husband's dominance, for which "crime" she was publicly punished in humiliating ways, either by being "cucked" or ducked in a ferid pond to the derisive applause of a jeering crowd, or by having a "scold's bridle" attached to her head. Literature of the time often alluded to the "scold's bridle", which was a veritable instrument of torture that was used to punish women found guilty of verbal or sexual transgression. The accompanying illustrations (79-80) convey a vivid image of the cruelty of the punishment endorsed by the society of the times.

"Cultural Coordinates" sensitizes the reader to links and connections which may not have been perceived. For instance, in reading "The Tea Table" (416), we see the link between the ritual of women sitting round a tea table sipping a cup of tea from a fine bone china cup and the institution of slavery and the slave trade. In a wider sense we see its implications in colonialism. In "Needlework" (39), we see that embroidery practiced by women across all class boundaries was not just an art but a form of control; even the very posture of the women when they sat at their needlework, head bent, eyes lowered on their work, spoke of submissiveness. But conversely, the essay discusses how the art of embroidery was used as a subversive act by women like Mary Queen of Scots, who embroidered a panel of a large tapestry known as the Oxburgh Hanging while being imprisoned in the Tower of London on suspicion of treason. It depicted an emblem and above it a Latin inscription "Virescit Vulnere Virtus (courage grows strong at a wound). A copy of this emblem found in the possession of Thomas, Duke of Norfolk, was produced at his trial for treason, as evidence of the threat Mary and he posed to Elizabeth I.

In Their Own Words

The anthology represents the articulation in their "own words", in diverse voices, of women's perception of the world inwhich they live and of their identity in that male dominated world. Their writings express their search for an individual identity and selfhood that was often denied them. Theirs was an identity defined by the men they married or their relationship to men (as wives and daughters). This was particularly so in the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries when they were assigned the stereotypical role as "the angel in the house", which restricted them to the confines of the home, limiting their scope of activity to the private domain, the only world they could inhabit, and stifling the possibilities of fulfilling the rich creative potential within them. But this did not necessarily mean that every woman let herself be imprisoned within these narrow confines. Need, or often desire, led them into the outer world to work in fields, in the homes of others, in domestic service, and in shops and factories, to support themselves and their families. Their homes were located not only in England and the United States, but in places as far away from these metropolitan centres as Zimbabwe, the Caribbean, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and the islands of the South Pacific.

Transcending the Class Divide

The reader is offered a rich selection of writings not only from different geographical spaces far flung around the globe, but from spaces of "difference" within Great Britain and the United States, from women who live in "a world of difference" (the phrase is Barbara Johnson's), working class women, immigrant women and lesbians, whose writings are not always regarded as belonging to the category of "important" literary works. The selections in the anthology move not only across cultural boundaries but across the class divide. Excerpts from the "Turkish Embassy Letters" of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1722), a woman whose life was one of wealth and privilege and who travelled widely accompanying her husband to Turkey when he was appointed his country's ambassador there, are balanced against the perspective on the world of Mary Leapor (1722-46) who laboured in domestic service as a cook's helper:

> With low'ring Forehead, and with aching Limbs,
> Oppressed with Headache and eternal Whims. (from "Crumble Hall, 251).

The daughter of a Northhamptonshire gardener, she learned to read and write in a free school. Wortley Montagu was self-educated, and like most eighteenth century women of the elite social group to which she belonged, she had access to a private library, in her case her father's remarkable one. Leapor did not have the leisure to write nor were the same facilities available to her, but she "scribbled" while the meat scorched, as one of her employers later complained. She had more time to pursue her interests when, on her mother's death, she returned home to keep house for her father. In her poem "Crumble Hall (251-55), where in emulation of Alexander Pope she writes in heroic couplets, Leapor takes us on a servant's tour of the Great House. With her we climb the steep back stairways and enter the store rooms, attic and kitchen where:

Safely the Mice through yon dark Passage run Where the dim Windows ne'er admit the Sun. (253)

This was the domain of women like Leapor in domestic service in these Great Houses.

Wortley Montagu transports us in her letters on "A Visit To A Turkish Bath" (240-42) to a world of opulence and wealth, vastly different from Leapor's, to the marbled baths and its sofas, luxuriously covered with cushions and rich carpets where "ladies of quality" attended by their slaves, eased away their cares and the stress of everyday life in the vapours of the steam baths.

Even for the period in which English was spoken only in England by a mere 5-7 million people, despite the difficulties of unearthing these documents, the anthology presents us with a fascinating selection from women writers from different social strata. They include writers not familiar to many of us — nuns like Julian of Norwich (an excerpt from "The Revelation of Divine Love", 24-25) and Margery Kempe (an excerpt from "The Book of Margery Kempe" 29-32), and those from aristocratic circles of monarchs such as Elizabeth I. Two poems by her, "The Dread of Future Foes" and "A Song Made by Her Majesty" (42) are juxtaposed with the writings of Jane Sharp (active 1671), described as "the first English woman to write a book on gynaecology" (an excerpt from "The Midwives Book" 217-19), and "The Ballad which Anne Askew Made and Sang When She Was in Newgate". Anne Askew was imprisoned in the notorious London prison for her religious beliefs, being a Protestant in a country which remained Catholic until the late sixteenth century despite Henry VIII's break with Rome. She was arrested twice and interrogated about her religious beliefs by the King's Council after each arrest. Sentenced to death, she was tortured in the Tower of London before her execution by burning.(36).

Different Genres

The anthology includes not only selections from the traditional literary genres of fiction, poetry and drama but, since women's writing often transcends these boundaries, it also has essays on philosophy and feminist theory; for instance, Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Women with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects" (366-82), and the articulation of newer voices like Paula Gunn Allen, whose perspective is Native American, and that of bell hooks (1894-95), whose viewpoint is African American. There are letters and selections from autobiographies that reveal very personal facets of the lives of the writers, the material conditions of their lives, the laws, the social structure and the norms and conventions that impact on them. The seventeenth century memoir of Lady Anne Halkett, the correspondence of eighteenth century US First Lady, Abigail Adams, the slave narratives of Mary Prince, Harriet Jacobs and Hannah Crafts, and the "Captivity Narrative" of Mary Rowlandson, who was English born but emigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1639 and was then captured and kept hostage by an Indian tribe. Her narrative became a bestseller and the literary model for the many captivity narratives that followed. These are some of the memorable writings in the anthology. Coming closer to the present times, there are the memoirs of Jean Rhys (familiar to many of us through her "Wide Sargasso Sea") on her life in the Caribbean, domestic handbooks featuring recipes and household advice from Isabella Beeton (nineteenth century), hymns, both patriotic and devotional, lyrics by blues artistes and the newest genre of women's writing in print, the graphic memoir, a selection from Alison Bechdel's "Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic", a comic book format which is an unusual approach to women's autobiography, suggests the richness, the diversity and the time span of the selections, many of which are published in their totality.

Women: the Dispossessed in Society

The impact of law on the position of women in the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries is exhaustively discussed in the historical overview (7-13) and the "Cultural Coordinates" essay which precedes this section. The essays discuss the manner in which the law operated in this age to define marriage, making the woman an unequal partner. It is possible only to give a brief sketch of the complex web of laws that governed the lives of women, making her completely dependent on her husband. The doctrine of coverture, which applied to all women whether they belonged to the nobility or the middle or lower classes, asserted that husband and wife were one person at law. It meant that a woman had no legal rights to anything including her own body. Amazingly, six hundred years later, a woman's rights over her own body are still at issue. Reproductive rights and abortion rights are still vigorously debated, the latter being one of the key issues in the recent United States presidential election.

T. E., in "The Lawes Resolution of Women's Rights" (1632), wrote that every woman is an infant", lacking power "even in that which is more her own". In his view a woman hardly had an existence independent of her husband. "A woman" he states in the confident voice of male authority, "glittereth but in the riches of her husband as the moone has no light but in

the sunne's". The infantilization of women has resonances of the colonial strategy of imposing an infantilism on the "native", practiced to exercise continuing control over the inhabitants of a country occupied by the colonizing power; it underlines the link between colonialism and the systems of domination imposed on women. For women in many countries the movement for national independence was synonymous with the struggle for women's rights.

Since the doctrine of coverture that prevailed from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries invested the husband with sole rights to his wife's property including her body, there was room for domestic abuse, and there is evidence that wife abuse was prevalent and condoned by society. Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, quotes from Professor Trevelyan's "History of England" where, under the heading "Women", he describes "wife-beating" as "a recognised right of man, and was practised without shame by high as well as low. . ."Coverture was aimed at consolidating property and power and impacted strongly on the kind of marriage girls of marriageable age, particularly from the nobility and the affluent classes, entered into, marriage rarely being based on love, being closer to a business merger. The anthology contains two selections from the seventeenth century diaries of Lady Anne Halkett (97-100) and Mary Boyle Rich (103-10), women who resisted their families' dictates on their choice of marriage partners. To quote Trevelyan again, he speaks of the fate of "the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parent's choice"; she "was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room without any shock being inflicted on public opinion... "The effect of the doctrine of coverture was exacerbated by the law of primogeniture which deprived the second son of a family from inheriting property and wealth. Both these women's choice of marriage partners were men who would not have brought financial benefit into the marriage. Aphra Behn in her play "The Rover", published in 1677, like the diarists of the seventeenth century, asserts a woman's right to choose her marriage partner.

The writings of women of this period express a desire for ownership, not only of material things but even of their children: in the event of a husband and wife separating, the woman was denied custody of their children. She was denied even the right to make a will. Even the wages a married woman brought home were the property of her husband. Before 1730 women were expected to write only on theological themes and on their experiences of piety. Any interest in the material world outside the family was viewed with suspicion or even overt hostility. A woman who showed such an interest was labelled a whore or even worse (13-14).

Many of the works that express, implicitly or explicitly, a desire for some form of ownership do so through the language of mourning as we can see expressed in some of the early women's writing published in the anthology. Women's desire for power, for property, for access to education, and for the liberty to speak their mind freely, are expressed only on the threshold of loss and death. It is as if a woman is allowed to declare herself as an individual person only at the moment or in anticipation of the moment in which she ceases to exist. It is as if the possibility of approaching death removed the prohibitions on public expression by women (13). Elizabeth Joceline's "The Mother's Legacie to Her Unborne Childe"(83-6) and the extract from Dorothy Leigh's legacy book, "The Mother's Blessing" (81-3), are representative of the legacy books written for children to have as a mother's death. Women dying at childbirth being a common occurrence at this time, Joceline and many other mothers had a premonition of their deaths and these legacy books very poignantly express a desire of the women writing to produce something of their own a woman's wish to lay claim in some way to her children (the father's property by law), even from beyond the grave. "These books are a kind of will, a willing of deeply personal intellectual property" (13). The excerpt published is the letter Elizabeth wrote to her husband and attached to her book. It articulates the gendered set of expectations she has for her child.

Politics of Location

The writings featured in the anthology show us that the fictional Judith Shakespeare was not the only woman writing in this early period, although Virginia Woolf's perception was That woman then who was born with the gift of poetry in the sixteenth century was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself All the conditions of her life, all her own instincts were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain.

Woolf's passionately held conviction was that the society women lived in, and the material circumstances of her life, were what impacted most strongly on her ability to write. She argues in *A Room of One'sOwn* (1929) that to be a successful writer, a woman needed her own space, a room of her own, and had to be financially independent and had to have 500 pounds a year (about 40,000 dollars today), an independence that few women had in Woolf's time.

Adrienne Rich, one of the most important writers of the twentieth century, echoes similar sentiments (1558-9). Her belief was that poems and essays (she writes in both genres)

are products of a specific time. She began to date her poems as a way of indicating that there was a "politics of location", that what can be written and is written is very much contingent on the material conditions of the society in which one lives, the "importance not only of a person's personal history but also of her situation within a nation's history and her life experiences — whether of privilege or of oppression" (1191). Diane Wakoski, writing in the late 1980's, who sees herself as a distinctively American poet, says "[It] is usually written in the context of one's cultural myths, and often with reference to gender and race or ethnic origins" (1674). Through presenting the perceptions of women writers of different ethnic origins, situated in different social and cultural milieus, and writing in different periods of time, the anthology makes manifest that it is the material conditions of everyday life that impacted most strongly on women's ability to release the creative impulse in them and give expression to their concerns, their needs and interests and, furthermore, that there was a "simultaneity of profoundly different lives and modes of expression across women's worlds".

"Women's Worlds", traces the extension of the world of women's writing, the expansion of its horizon as social upheavals changed the configuration of societies through dispersal of people and the shifting of populations through the initiation of the slave trade in 1441, colonization, the movement of people from England and Ireland to North America, armed conflicts like the two world wars of the twentieth century, and the Russian Revolution of 1917, which led to the dwindling of the male population, giving women - though temporarily - a different role to play in society, emerging out of the confines of their homes to work in hospitals and factories. The women's suffragette movement of the nineteenth century, the independence movements in Africa, the Caribbean and Asia and the attendant decolonization, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the civil rights movement and the anti Vietnam war campaigns, are some of the significant movements that had an impact on women's writing, the impetus for women who were moved to write on issues which arose out of these upheavals. By the end of the nineteenth century, English educated Indian born women, such as Pandidita Ramabai Saraswati, were writing back to the colonizers, presenting their own perspective on their world (1152).

Breaking Taboos

The anthology traces the trajectory of women's writing through the fourteenth century to the present day where its scope extends to encompass subjects that had been taboo like rape, incest, and lesbianism. Diane Wakoski gives expression to her perception of American poetry: "American poetry is always about defining oneself individually: claiming one's right to be different and often to break taboos", inflecting this significant aspect of twentieth century writing. Maya Angelou, in her autobiography *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, writes of being raped by her mother's boy friend that led her to stop speaking for six years. The excerpt published here (1530) recounts the process of the gradual recovery of her ability to speak.

We can contrast the writings of the seventeenth century diarists Joceline and Leigh with the writings of Margaret Lucas Cavendish (1623-1674) who the editors see as "one of the first writers in English we can call a feminist or protofeminist", to see how far women have travelled on that difficult path of liberation. She protests that we are kept as birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses not suffered to fly abroad. . . we are shut out of all power, and authority by reason we are never employed either in civil or marital affairs, our counsels are despised and laughed at, the best of our actions are trudden down with scorn by the overweening conceit men have of themselves and through a deep despisement of us.

The first woman writer in English to write mainly for publication, she reiterates in her writings the power struggle between men and women. The two selections from her writings included in the anthology attest to her feminism. The reader's attention is focused on the fact that she is a woman and she complains about the way her sex influences her writings and their reception. She was considered eccentric, partly for her taste for extravagant and theatrical dress but more for her intellectual taste and she gained a reputation for madness as she did not conform to the current norms of her society. In an age when women were primarily encouraged to spend their time on the pursuit of piety, Margaret's interest was natural philosophy (science). She read widely on the subject and wrote learned essays on it. In 1655 she presented her "Philosophical and Physical Opinions" (1101-1102) to the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, hoping for recognition. She gained some of the recognition she sought when, after "fierce debate among its membership," The Royal Society of London invited her to visit that prestigious institution to observe two of the most prominent scientists of the seventeenth century, Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke, conduct their experiments. She addresses her epistle "To the Two Universities," beginning "most famously learned", and concluding with the words:

> I hope this action of mine is not unnatural though unusual for a woman to present a book to the university, nor impudence, for the action is honour, although it seems vainglorious, but if it be, I am to be pardoned, since there is little difference between man and beast but what ambition and glory makes.

The apparent tone of humility and self-deprecation is subverted by the sting in the last few words.

Skimming over the contents page of the anthology (where the nationality of each woman writer is given), one finds that in terms of nationality, up to the end of the seventeenth century, writers formed a fairly homogeneous group. They were mainly from England, a few from Ireland and Scotland and some from America, reflecting the fact that English was limited to the British Isles and to America, having spread to the latter when English speakers from England and Ireland settled there.

The "New Domestic' Woman" vs. the Adventurous Woman

The picture changes as one enters the eighteenth century and colonialism dispersed people and spread the English language to Africa, the Caribbean and Asia. The century was the high water mark of colonialism. England having gained a monopoly on the shipment of enslaved people from Africa in 1713. The age is normally perceived as the Age of Enlightenment, being defined by its political and philosophical currents - the literary giants of the age being Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. It was also a period of intense political turmoil in the world. It was the Age of Revolutions in both America and France. Behind this benign image of liberalism was its dark underside, colonialism and slavery, which the editors aptly term "this morally reprehensible enterprise" (225).

Despite the expansion of the known world the trend was to imprison women in the small world of domesticity. Conduct manuals and educational treatises sketched the outlines of a female identity. These popular writings, created of course by men, defined the concept of a "proper lady" and attempted to create an ideal of femininity. The "new domestic woman", as Nancy Armstrong called her, had above all to be an efficient, industrious and frugal housewife. She had to be "discreet, self effacing to the point of near invisibility in public . . . extremely modest and chaste". One of the best-known conduct books creating this ideal woman was Dr. John Gregory's, titled "A Father's Legacy to His Daughters" (1774). It defined the parameters within which women were supposed to live:

> she cannot plunge into business or dissipate [herself] in pleasure and riot as men too often do under the pressure of misfortunes.

One need hardly comment on the double standards here. He counsels women against wit, "the most dangerous talent you can possess", and encourages female modesty, "which I think is essential in your sex, [and] will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company especially a large one". These were the strictures and rules women had to abide by in the patriarchal society of the eighteenth century. Conduct books like this and medical manuals helped to foster the ideal that women were happiest at home. By 1800 most women of the middle rank were literate, although the type of education they had access to was quite basic. While literacy rates among women increased dramatically during the eighteenth century, erudition in women was frowned on. Unlike in an earlier age when a small group of aristocratic women gained an education wide in its reach embracing all the subjects that men had access to, the scope of education narrowed; subjects like Latin, Greek and mathematics were considered too "masculine" to be taught to women and moreover women were not expected to display their erudition publicly.

Education was not aimed at stimulating the mind and encouraging a spirit of inquiry but at creating a satisfied and fulfilled wife and mother. The school curriculum for girls was therefore tailored to suit this circumscribed sense of their potential. But women's minds transcended these imposed limitations on their mental universe (see Cultural Coordinates, "Bluestockings"). Despite this stifling intellectual environment, there were women who ventured beyond these boundaries and in their writing shattered these fetters, not restricting their work to theological themes as they had been compelled to do in the earlier period, but experimenting in all genres. A hitherto uncharted territory was journalism. Eliza Haywood created and published "The Female Spectator", the first periodical for women actually edited by and published by a woman. Balanced against the "new domestic woman" was the adventurous woman, ready to move out not only from the confines of their homes but to locations outside their country. Some of them travelled out of economic necessity, like sailors' wives who preferred the hazards of life on shipboard rather than the physical security of life at home devoid of financial security without the support of their husbands' wages. Others like Eliza Fay (1756-1816), excerpts from "Original Letters from India (348-58), travelled with

her husband to colonial outposts like India where he had been called to practise law, but later undertook more trips to India alone in the hope of making her fortune there. The intellectually curious like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (whose writings have already been discussed) seized the opportunities yielded of travelling to the expanding world to learn about other societies and cultures.

Women's writing moved out of the domestic space of home, motherhood, children and family life, subjects which were regarded as the only spheres women were competent to write on, and shifted to the public arena, as the anthology demonstrates so comprehensively through the writings it has selected for inclusion. It features the writings of Abigail Adams (1744-1818), the second first lady of the U.S. She had no formal education and was mainly self-taught, but expresses her very individual views clearly and forthrightly on many matters. In her letters produced here as excerpts from "The Adams Family Correspondence", titled "The Nature of Women's Experience", "Remember the Ladies", and "Education in the New Republic", the first to a cousin, the latter two to her husband, she asks that the female perspective and the importance of female education be considered (281-83). The eighteenth century was a period when women made a significant contribution to the emerging genre of the novel. Sarah Fielding, Anne Radcliffe who was the innovator of the gothic novel, and Frances Burney are some of the writers featured in the anthology, a mere handful of the 446 works of prose fiction published between 1696 and 1796.

Narratives of Slavery

From the nineteenth century onwards the English speaking world could no longer be considered ethnically and culturally —homogeneous, but the common link they had was a language— the English language which they used to express their different ways of perceiving the world and what it was to be a woman at the time. The nineteenth century women writers —were a heterogeneous group dispersed all over the world. They were British, American and indigenous women of colonized areas, black women in the United States who did not have the same rights as white women, and white women who moved to the edges of the British Empire. These women came from different class positions and held widely divergent views on the burning issues of the day. The many women working on the sugar plantations in North America and the Caribbean were denied any education so that their lives are largely unchronicled in print, but fortunately we have access to one or two voices; for instance, the narrative of Mary Prince, born a slave in Bermuda and sold three times by the time she was twelve years old, moving from there to Antigua —and then to England as she was passed from one "master" to another as a commodity of sale. Her "story"— was transcribed by the abolitionists, by Susan Strickland to whom she narrated it, and it was published in London and Edinburgh in 1831. This mediated version resulted in a certain amount of dilution of its impact and cast doubt on its authenticity, for it was while she was in the service of Thomas Pringle, the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, that, at his request, Prince narrated her story to Strickland. The suspicion arose that the story was "doctored", that the abolitionists may have influenced her to soft pedal certain aspects, for instance the sexual abuse she was subjected to which is merely hinted at. About the man referred to only as Mr. D she says (as transcribed by Strickland):

> He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes were too full of shame. He would then come to beat me (429).

This was perceived as being too shocking for her audience and is not, therefore, explicitly stated. Other aspects were believed to have been exaggerated; for instance the physical torture,

> Mr. D — has often stripped me naked, hung me up by the wrists and beat me with the cowskin, with his own hand, till my body was raw with gashes.

to further the abolitionist cause. Nevertheless, the "History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave: Related by Herself", published in its entirety in the anthology (419-38), makes memorable reading.

Through the writings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the anthology contrasts different perspectives on the institution of slavery, a dark phenomenon that came to the fore during these periods. Anti-slavery movements succeeded in the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire only in 1833. The journal of Janet Schaw, a Scottish woman who travelled from Scotland to the West Indies with her brother who was the manager of a sugar cane plantation in St. Christopher, reveals a perspective on slavery which is disturbing in its complete lack of understanding and insensitivity to the suffering of the enslaved African workers on the plantation, an attitude which was quite typical of the age - the journal begins in 1774 and her class—a class of

privileged Scots who had amassed wealth from plantations which depended on the exploitation of slave labour. It is titled "The Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being a Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies" (262); an extract is published in the anthology, "A Visit to Olovaze" (264). Speaking of the manner in which the "Negroes", both men and women who are stripped naked to the waist and whipped by their driver who walks behind them holding in his hand a short whip and a long one, this is what she says:

> When one comes to be better acquainted with the nature of the Negroes, the horrour of it must wear off. It is the suffering of the human mind that constitutes the greatest misery of punishment, but with them it is merely corporeal. As to the brutes it inflicts no wound on their mind, whose Natures seem made to bear it, and whose sufferings are not attended with pain beyond the present moment (265).

The dehumanization of the slaves is striking and offends a reader's sensibilities. Moreover the tone of superiority reveals her social and racial prejudices. The journal carries a date prior to the narrative of Mary Prince, and the impact of it is even more shocking in its complete insensitivity to the suffering of human beings when we read it after reading the harrowing details of the physical, mental and sexual abuse documented in Prince's narrative.

Sojourner Truth's narrative in the anthology was dictated by her to a white secretary, Olive Gilbert. Truth gave herself that name to express her dedication to sojourning in the land speaking God's truth. It also presents a speech Truth made at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, which came to be known as the "Ar'nt I a Woman" speech. One version of it published here is the report that was published in the "Anti Slavery Bugle" of 1851. There is greater immediacy in the version of the speech (609-11) as "Recorded in Reminiscences of Frances D. Gage", a feminist activist who was the president of the meeting. Gage's version attempts to capture Truth's own words and the cadences of her voice. The very fact that the convention was held and that Truth, a black woman, succeeded in speaking at it against much opposition from the audience attests to how far women particularly black women, had "sojourned" on the path to real emancipation. Once she was legally free, Truth spent her time speaking against slavery and for universal human rights.

In the United States, the nineteenth century was the time when anti-slavery sentiments and the abolitionist cause gained momentum. The anthology features the writings of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an activist in the cause of women's rights and the abolitionist cause. She is best known as the prime mover of the American women's suffrage movement because of her co-sponsorship of the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 (Cultural Coordinates, 824-85), where she and other members who attended the convention drafted the "Declaration of Sentiments" (817-18) which parallel the "Declaration of Independence", to "argue for equal financial, social, and political rights for women". "The Declaration of Sentiments" states:

> The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this let facts be submitted to a candid world.

Among these facts are:

> He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable rights to the elective franchise.
> He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.
> He has made her if married in the eyes of the law, civilly dead.
> He has taken from her all right in property even to the wages she earns.

As a suffragist, Cady Stanton voiced a belief "not only in the ability but also in the necessity of women's legal control over their inalienable assets (their bodies and minds) and their alienable ones (their money, labour and property)".

The document was signed in 1848 by 68 women and 32 men, all delegates to the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, now known as the 1848 Women's Rights Convention. The most radical of the resolutions was the ninth, that it was the duty of women to secure the vote for themselves, and it was passed by the convention after vigorous debate. The anthology quotes Charlotte Woodward, a factory worker from Waterloo New York, one of the youngest signatories to the convention, who said:

> Every fibre of my being rebelled, although silently, for all the hours that I sat and sewed gloves for a miserable pittance which after it was earned, could never be mine. I wanted to work but I wanted to choose my task and I wanted to collect my wages.

What she says is reflected in the "Sentiments." Of the three hundred or so who attended the convention, Woodward was the only one alive in 1920 to see the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution which removed restrictions on suffrage for women, declaring that the "right of all citizens shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex". It encapsulates the victory of women suffragists who had fought for so long to gain the right to have a voice in the formulation of laws to which they were compelled to submit. It is these incremental but significant steps by which women gained equality of rights with men that the anthology traces.

A Wider World of Women's Writing

"Women's Worlds" extends the horizon of earlier anthologies, including in it not only the work of canonical women writers like the Brontes, George Eliot, Jane Austen, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Shelley (excerpts from "Frankenstein which could be considered an early work of science fiction 579-606), but also those of Sojourner Truth already referred to and the fictionalized autobiography of Harriet Jacobs who escaped slavery in North Carolina and attained emancipation for herself and her children. The latter is titled "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" and excerpts are featured in the anthology (793-813). This wide spectrum of writings spanning ethnic and class divides are featured in the anthology to afford us a rich sampling of the writings of the nineteenth century.

Representing the twentieth century to the present day, the anthology features the writings not only of mainstream writers, primarily from England and the United States such as Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood (Canada), Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer (South Africa), Alice Munro (Canada), Sylvia Plath, Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison, but also the writings, both poetry and prose, which articulate the voices of Sarojini Naidu, Cornelia Sorabji, Anita Desai, Nayantara Saghal and Bharati Mukherjee from India, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein from Bangladesh, Bapsi Sidhwa and Sara Suleri from Pakistan and Anne Ranasinghe and Yasmine Gooneratne from Sri Lanka. The Caribbean too is represented in the poetry and prose of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, Oliver Senior and Grace Nichols. Many of these Asian and Caribbean writers do not live in the country of their birth but have moved to different locations.

A Global Framework

The prolificacy of women's writing in the twentieth and twenty first centuries reflect the global spread of English and one has to perceive women's writing within a global framework. Some key events in this period, such as the two World Wars, decolonization, and other equally significant events already identified, looked very different from women's perspective. "Within anti-colonial movements women saw their struggles as being waged not just against an external power but also against native patriarchal structures". This is the age that saw the dismantling of received ideas about gender and society. The 1960's was "the decade of rebellion against entrenched gender rules and race-based social divisions". The writings included in the anthology reflect these concerns and we see many black writers engaging with these issues. The writings of women from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean challenged the western colonial stereotype of the colonized woman as a passive victim. Women like Sarojini Naidu, who was called "the Nightingale of India" and won critical acclaim for her poetry, took part in anti-colonial and nationalist movements, becoming an activist for Indian independence and entering the public domain of Indian political life. Her poetry created a uniquely Indian landscape and persona, her subjects being the typical Indian gypsy and bangle seller, romanticized figures who nevertheless appealed to the Indian readership long fed on a colonial diet where the subjects of poetry were the pastoral shepherds and shepherdesses who roamed the English countryside or the golden daffodils or the cuckoo which heralded the English springtime.

Rukeya Sakawhat Hossain, born to an upper class Muslim family in a small village in what is now Bangladesh, wrote articles on women's subjugation in patriarchal society in various Calcuttajournals. She was motivated in her writings to raise consciousness about oppressive social customs imposed upon women in the name of religion or tradition. In her short story, "The Sultana's Dream" (1317-24), she offers a utopian vision overturning the practices of her society. In a carnival inversion of roles she imagines a world where men are veiled and in purdah, sequestered in the zenana, and women rule.

The richness and the sheer volume of the writings in the anthology preclude the possibility of discussing each of the writers individually or in depth. One can only be selective in one's analyses, identifying just a handful of writings that may be seen as being representative of certain trends in each age and of particular life experiences of women. Reflected in the

wonderful array of writings that has been selected runs distinct threads which intersect. Some of these have already been touched upon — the global spread of English which extended the number of women who expressed their thoughts, concerns and aspirations, their struggle to make society accept that human rights are universal and are women's rights too, their struggle for empowerment, the bonding of women across racial, class and sexist divides and their endeavour to breakdown these constructed barriers of prejudice. It demonstrates the manner in which with succeeding waves of decolonization, "the instrument of Empire" became a potent tool in the possession of women of colour from Africa and the Caribbean and women from Asia, Latin America and other non Anglo American writers who began to "write back" to the Empire, resisting their representation as passive and oppressed objects, wresting control over their lives, investing themselves with agency, defining their subjectivity, and representing their "worlds" in their own words.

Two Sri Lankan Writers

Many of the Asian and Caribbean writers do not live in the country of their birth but have moved to different locations. Both Anne Ranasinghe and Yasmine Gooneratne share this diasporic experience. Ranasinghe, of German birth, became a citizen of Sri Lanka in her adult life in 1956 and has been living there since, whereas Gooneratne's life has followed this path in reverse. Born in Sri Lanka, she has lived much of her adult life in Australia.

The only poem on the Holocaust and the genocide of six million Jewish people and perhaps the only poem by a German born writer in the anthology, is Anne Ranasinghe's "Auschwitz from Colombo". Like many another writer featured here, she was compelled to leave the country of her birth. Being Jewish, the accession of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany in 1933 and the entrenchment of Nazism placed the lives of Anne and her family in danger. She was sent by her parents to the comparative safety of England in 1939. They were unable to follow her there as they had planned, being murdered in Chelmno, Poland in 1944 as she learnt much later. Her life experience is varied. She has inhabited diverse cultural and geographical spaces - Germany which she left as a teenage girl, England where she trained as a nurse working in many London hospitals in war service, and now Sri Lanka where she has lived since her marriage to a Sri Lankan professor. Her viewpoint is multilayered, where she brings her cultural past to bear on her cultural present, illuminating and reading into it a complexity of meaning.

If, to use Ranasinghe's words, one's mind were to "skim over the surface of things," the poem appears to be a simple contrast between the Auschwitz of the 1930s and the Colombo of the 1980s. Though one of her relatively early poems, it shows Ranasinghe's consummate skill in the power of evocation. The scene shifts from Colombo to Auschwitz and back again, weaving back and forth to different periods in time. She subtly conveys the sense of an underlying violence in the city in her opening lines. The burning tropical heat of a March day in Colombo is invested with sinister undertones; "white fire", "vehement trees burst into flame", "the searing winds" do not simply etch a visual scene but creates an awareness almost visceral that beneath the seeming calm of the city where there is only a searing wind stirring the dust, there lies an incendiary situation, explosive, Sri Lanka during the mid 1980's, a time when violence was endemic and human lives were being incinerated on burning tyres. The reference to Sri Lanka's colonial history links the present home grown violence to the "vile deeds", the violence attendant on the forcible imposition of power on a people by a foreign invader. The questioning mind is provoked to ask whether there is any difference between the two.

The juxtaposition of these scenes with "that winter" in a German city with its "tree[s] leafless" and frost flowers encrusting "hostile window panes" when Nazi violence was unleashed on "Kristallnacht" on a defenceless people, is quite startling. Ranasinghe moves to the inhumanity of Auschwitz. She vividly presents the horrific murder of children who were stunned by heavy wooden mallets, then cruelly "Garrotted and then impaled, On pointed iron hooks".

Her mind takes refuge in ". . . the unechoing street, Burnt white in the heat of many tropical years". In a deliberate act of forgetting she "skims over the surface of things", temporarily blotting out the memories of the past, erasing the memory of what happened in Auschwitz. Skimming over the surface of things is on two temporal planes for simultaneously her mind refrains from probing beneath the "surface of things" in the present, in Sri Lanka. But the haunting fear is ever present that beneath the surface calm is violence waiting to be unleashed. As beneath the ancient dust lies a history of violence, so does the "unechoing street" mask the violence waiting to erupt in the present (mi-1980s Sri Lanka). The unusual image of the mind "skimming over the surface of things" being likened to the wind "that stirs but slightly the ancient dust", ends this powerful poem.

"Auschwitz from Colombo" is a piece of writing packed with meaning and complexity which links the violence of 1980s

Sri Lanka, the genocide in Auschwitz and the vile deeds that resonate in the colonial history of Sri Lanka. In this aspect her poetry reflects the trends in twentieth and twenty first century women's writing which draws connections between seemingly unconnected things as in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" (1636-38) where a father's abuse becomes analogous to the murderous fascism of Nazi Germany, or the poetry of Diane Wakoski. In her poem titled "Overweight Poem", the man she desires is described through the metaphor of food:

> biscuits with honey running down into the deep crevices
> Thick dark bread-cut into fresh chunks and butter waving over the terrain
> Red berries and yellow cream
> Am I thinking of these things or you?

Marilyn Chin imagines connections between her Chinese and American ancestries (1944-45). Toni Morrison, in her short story "Recitatif," traces a history of class and race relationships in the story of a friendship between two American girls, one black and the other white. In Jumpha Lahiri's short story, "Mr Pirzada Came to Dine," a young Indian girl living in America is confronted with the complex issues of identity and affiliation against the backdrop of the 1971 war for Bangladeshi liberation, news of which filters through the daily television news bulletins and the visits of Mr. Pirzada living in exile from his home which was soon to become Bangladesh.

The writings in the anthology are not structured in terms of the nationality of the writers for, firstly, in the words of the editors, "such division might suggest that women from a given nation share a common experience when differences of race, class and era are in fact profound." Secondly, to convey "a sense of the simultaneity of profoundly different lives and modes of expression across women's worlds". In other words, specific concerns are not confined to or common to the women of one particular nation or one ethnic group, or those speaking one language but cross all these boundaries and intersect.

Yet another poem by a Sri Lankan writer included in the anthology which I would like to comment on is Yasmine Gooneratne's "Peace Game", not simply because Ranasinghe and Gooneratne share a nationality but, more importantly, share certain concerns as in the two poems included in the anthology. Gooneratne, like Ranasinghe, has lived in different cultural milieus and has written in many genres, poetry, short stories, and novels. Her work expresses the diasporic writer's experience of migration and the cultural contradictions and tensions implicit in living between East and West. The personal and the political intersect in her writing as in the poem featured in the anthology where Gooneratne comments on the social and political overtones of a game she played with the children down the street where she lived. "The Peace Game". The game becomes an allegory for war/peace, where the contending factions do not have "an equality of arms", not battling on a level playing field. She problematizes the concept of peace. Like most writers of the postmodern period, Gooneratne questions the validity of definitions–the impossibility of nailing down language, restricting a word to a single meaning which closes off all other possibilities, a question Toni Morrison discusses in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1612-17). Gooneratne's poem is open ended:

> We called the entertainment 'Peace' Or 'War' — I can't remember which . . . (1655).

Many Englishes

Through its selection of writings the anthology demonstrates the growth and evolution of the English language itself, how it changed, metamorphosed by "native languages and competing colonial tongues" when enslaved Africans imported to work on the Caribbean sugar plantations learned the language on shipboard from their captors and fellow slaves during the dreaded Middle Passage from Africa to the Caribbean, invigorating English with a rich infusion of expressions from their own languages. Or when, on the abolition of slavery, indentured South Asians who replaced them on the plantations cross pollinated the English language enriching it with words from their own dialects. Many Englishes have evolved for these other tongues have inflected English with their own rhythms and words "but it is still English, recognizable as a distinct language" (General Introduction, xliv).

"Women's Worlds" offers us the poems of Grace Nichols from Guyana to demonstrate how English has metamorphosed into something different from standard English. Nichols interweaves Creole and English and devises a "nation language" with its own rhythms and textures that capture the spirit of Afro-Caribbean culture. Her poetry is evocative of the alienating experiences of Caribbean migrants to English cities as well as the rhythms of Caribbean culture. She herself moved to England in 1977 and spends much of her time there. In her writing she changes the syntax and grammar of the sentence, which is itself an act of resistance to colonial power.

Her first poetry collection, "I Is a LongMemoried Woman", traces the history of slavery and rebellion through the experiences of an Afro-Caribbean woman. She overturns the negative representations of the black woman, celebrating her difference from the English and western norms of beauty, in a tone of voice tinged with humour in "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping" (1872). In its presentation of the writings of such diversity, "Women's Worlds" inflects the bonds that bring these writers together: they are all women, women writing in one language. Often their concerns are the same; they are intent on carving an identity for themselves in a patriarchal world, gaining acceptance for themselves as independent women, not simply as wife, daughter or mother. But the anthology also makes evident that the category of woman is not a homogeneous one as succeeding waves of feminism have calibrated by identifying the differences. The concerns that impinge on the life of a black working class woman who is struggling to find money to feed her family and nurture them are not the same as those of the white middle class woman who wants to shatter the glass ceiling at work. Nor are the concerns of the white heterosexual woman the same as those of a lesbian. These writings demonstrate how gender, class and race intersect in imposing systems of domination on them.

In "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance", bell hooks speaks of her mother's struggle to combine her work as a maid in the home of "white folks" and the role of nurturing mother: she creates "homeplace", a space of resistance to white domination. Homeplace was "a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racial domination", bell hooks imagines domestic space as a potential place for political resistance. She illustrates how the personal is the political. Speaking of her mother she says:

> Looking back as an adult woman, I think often of the effort it must have taken her to transcend her own tiredness (and who knows what assaults or wounds to her spirit she had to put aside so that she could give something to her own)... in many post-slavery black families, it was a gesture parents were often too weary, too beaten down to make. Those of us who were fortunate enough to receive such care understood its value. Politically our young mother Rosa Bell, did not allow the white supremacist culture of domination to completely shape and control her psyche and her familial relationships. Working to create a homeplace that affirmed our beings, our blackness, our love for one another was necessary resistance.

Conclusion

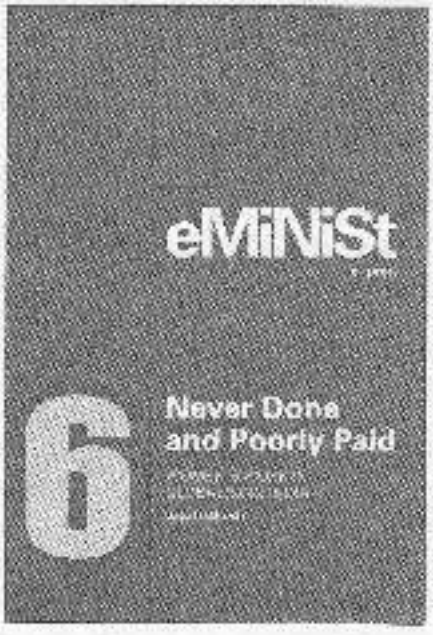
Through women's writing the anthology traces the evolution of women's place in society and her growing empowerment from the fourteenth century to the present day, from the time when a woman was permitted to write only to express piety or when she was literally at death's door as when Elizabeth Joceline wrote her "Legacie To Her Unborne Childe", to a time when Audre Lorde, born in Harlem, a writer, teacher and an activist can introduce herself confidently in these words:

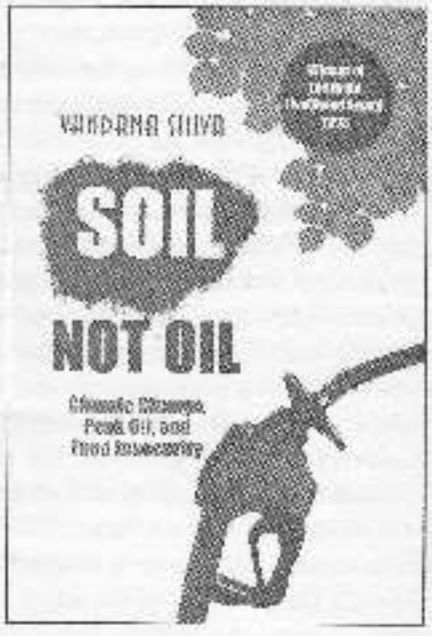
> I was born Black and am a woman... As a Black Lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, mother of two including one boy and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself part of some group in which the majority defines me as deviant, difficult, inferior or just plain wrong.

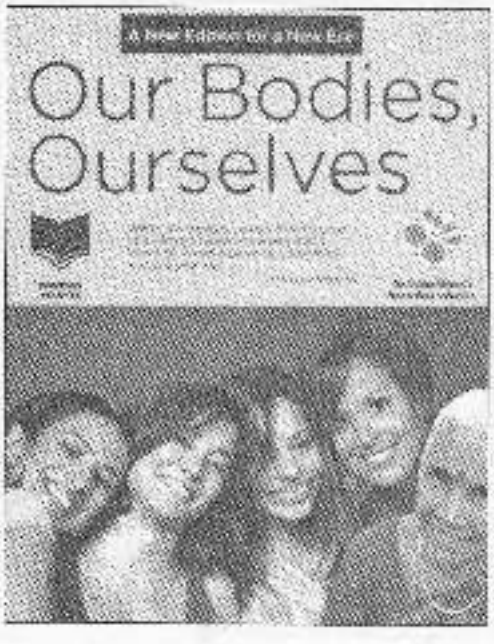
It is left to us to define her as the "majority" does, or be different and celebrate her inspirational life in which she endeavoured to dismantle the barriers of prejudice and respond with anger as she did, to racism, sexism and -homophobia.My response to "Women's Worlds" is that it is a truly inspirational collection of writings that celebrate the lives of women from diverse social, racial and class groups who were motivated in their writings to combat social -injustice and prejudice. From Margaret Lucas Cavendish who cries out "we are kept as caged birds . . .", to Maya Angelou who tells us movingly "I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings", it documents the evolution of women's rights -and their subjectivity, conveying to us an awareness of the incremental steps by which women gained for themselves a wide spectrum of rights. ■

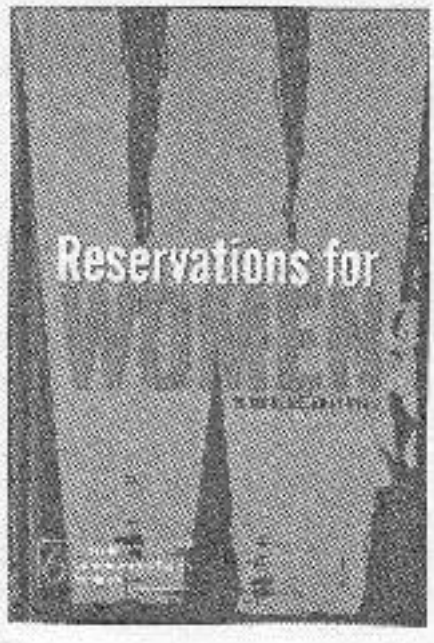
Sarojini Jayawickrema is the author of *Writing that Conquers: Re-reading Knox's A Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon*

New Arrivals from Women Unlimited, India









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BERNADEEN SILVA: CHRISTIAN, PATRIOT, INTERNATIONALIST

Suriya Wickremasinghe

Bernadeen was my senior at Peradeniya University, overlapping with me for one year. I barely knew her then, but retain to this day a vivid mental image of the expressive face of that vivacious and spirited undergraduate. Knowing she was a devout Catholic, and fearing – as one was wont to do in the climate of the time – that she was also likely to be bigoted and right wing, I kept a respectful distance despite her attractive personality. How wrong I was!

The 80th birth anniversary of Bernadeen Silva, who died two years ago, fell on 20 May 2009. This article is from the forthcoming commemorative volume ***Remembering Bernadeen*** published by the Women's Educational and Research Centre, and edited by Selvy Thiruchandran, Suriya Wickremasinghe and Deepika Udagama. Bernadeen Silva was a founder member of the Social Scientists' Association.

In the 1960s and early 1970s I came across Bernadeen again, in pursuit of the various great causes of that era – freedom for the Portuguese colonies in Africa, the liberation movements of South Africa and what was then Southern Rhodesia, opposing the Vietnam war. These were ad hoc encounters when like-minded individuals and groups got together for a particular enterprise. Subsequently we formed the Africa Freedom Committee to coordinate various groups and individuals for action; its address was Bernadeen's flat, No. 60/2 Barnes Place.

Bernadeen was always in the forefront, and often more impassioned and outspoken than the leftist activists with whom I had hitherto been familiar. One never had to inform or enthuse her on such issues, the consciousness and initiative was more likely to be hers. She felt, as did many other Christians, particularly appalled that the government of a Catholic nation was guilty of shameful oppression of the peoples of Angola, Mozambique, and Portuguese Guinea. We took to the streets in comradely fervour. Thus was our personal and enduring friendship cemented on the pavements outside the Colombo Legation of Dictator Salazar's Portugal. The JVP insurrection of April 1971 resulted in these ad hoc encounters turning into a permanent working relationship which continued till Bernadeen's devastating death in 2007. Bernadeen was one of the handful of people who actively planned the formation of the Civil Rights Movement; others at the informal preliminary discussions were Regi Siriwardene, Kumari Jayawardena, Nihal ("Bandy") Perera and his wife Mac, Desmond Fernando and the writer.

Another claim on our attention at this time was the appalling events in Pakistan. The Committee for Human Rights in East Bengal–subsequently renamed Ceylon Committee for Solidarity with Bangla Desh (or later Bangladesh)–was formed, and of course Bernadeen was among its members. Once again we took to the streets, notably outside the Savoy Cinema where a seven-day film festival organized by the Pakistan government was being held. This time around protest was more dicey as emergency regulations were in force banning demonstrations. There is a tale here to be told another time.

Now, however, our anguish at events unfolding across the Bay of Bengal was matched by that we felt for what was happening at home in the aftermath of the April uprising. CRM was officially launched in November 1971 under the chairmanship of Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra, with R.K.W. Goonesekere as deputy chairman and Regi Siriwardena as Secretary. Bernadeen was treasurer and active Working Committee member for the rest of her life. CRM's simple Statement of Aims was the "protection and promotion of the civil liberties of the people of Ceylon at all times", which the statement regarded as "a necessary accompaniment to radical social and economic change and the movement towards an egalitarian society." The text then continued to say that as its immediate task CRM would concern itself with "the restoration of certain rights and liberties that have recently been suspended", in particular citing media freedom.

the rights of persons in custody, revocation of the emergency regulation enabling disposal of dead bodies without inquests, and the restoration of trade union and other rights of employees.

We soon found ourselves castigated in Parliament as traitors, defenders of the reactionary capitalist class, supporting terrorism and participating covertly on the other side in treason. How commonplace such charges are today! Then, however, we were surprised – surprised, but by no means deterred. Much more daunting was trying to cope with the stream of desperate pleas for information about missing persons, with enquiries as to why someone was still in detention, with the letters that started coming from prisons, and so it went on. And on.

Steeped in the tradition of international solidarity, we now looked for a little of it for our own country's problems. Here again we were to be disappointed. Governments and groups with one sort of orientation or affiliation were hesitant to take a position because they felt here was a democratically elected government, threatened by an uprising of dangerous Marxist insurgents. Those of the "other" orientation saw a "progressive" Government in which there were Marxist parties, what's more Marxists of both the Communist and the Trotskyite variety, so ipso facto the insurgency had to be a right-wing CIA fed neo-imperialist conspiracy! To our relief we stumbled on Amnesty International which was totally disinterested in the political affiliations of either the government or the insurgents and only wanted the **facts** please, and again the **facts**, about persons in detention, trial procedures, allegations of torture and disappearances, and so on and so forth.

CRM's early meetings were held in Bernadeen's flat 60/2 Barnes Place, and later at her home in Don Carolis Road, which remained the official address of CRM and the venue of its AGMs until CRM graduated to separate premises in 1988. Her loyalty and commitment to CRM was unstinting. She never missed a Working Committee meeting, and participated actively in discussions on policy and suggestions for action on the myriad different issues of civil liberties that have bedevilled our country over the past 36 years.

If Bernadeen had any fault it was her over-scrupulousness in never seeking personal help from even good friends and colleagues. I remember discovering that she and her husband had a troublesome legal problem, and taking her almost by force to S. Nadesan QC, whom she already knew well over many years of working together in CRM. He was astounded, gave her the telling off of her life for having even thought that she should not "bother" him, took the whole affair in hand and pursued it with his characteristic skill and tenacity to a right and successful conclusion.

Bernadeen was simple in her lifestyle: she was also full of fun. She didn't wear her religion on her sleeve but expressed it in the integrity and compassion of her character and her actions. She was deeply religious in a way that won the admiration and respect of non-believers such as myself. As another non-believer emailed me on hearing of her death:

> I think I met her a few times and thought she was nice and unassuming and genuine and strong in a gentle way. Some Christians are indeed like that, and it's humbling when you meet people who actually live in practice what they believe, unsanctimoniously and with a sense of humour and not judgmental about others who don't share their beliefs (although sometimes you wonder if you might be a better person if you did).

Bernadeen's passion was balanced by humility, her vehement insistence on standing by principle was untainted by any trace of aggression or self-righteousness. While the main focus of her life was the many-faceted Centre for Society and Religion, where she worked from its inception with Fr Tissa Balasuriya, she gave of herself to secular organizations such as CRM, PAFFREL, the Nadesan Centre, and WERC, in the same way as to religiously-affiliated ones. She was also deeply involved in work to help former mental patients to realise not simply their capability, but also their *right*, to reintegrate into society, and drove regularly each week to Wattala to a "Halfway House" for such persons. The pursuit of social justice was the cause dearest to her heart, and the diversity of the many articles she contributed to the journal of that name is remarkable. Her training as a librarian and documentalist were of special value to the many organizations with which she worked. But she was never so happy as when in the field, driving long distances to monitor elections with tireless vigour and unfailing good humour. She was a good person through and through, the like of which we sorely need but I fear we may not see again.

Associated with the organization at its inception were Chairman: E.R. Sarachchandra (Professor of Sinhala, University of Ceylon); Deputy Chairman: R.K.W.Goonesekere, (Principal , Ceylon Law College); Secretary: Reggie Siriwardene (Writer); Ven. Puhulwella Wimalawansa Thero (lecturer, Vidyodaya University); Ven Puthegama Gnanarama Thero; Ven. Matara Chandarama Thero; Ven. Ratgama Sumanananda Thero; Rt. Rev Leo

Nanayakkara, OSB, (Bishop of Kandy); Rt. Rev Lakshman Wickremesinghe (Bishop of Kurunegala); Rev. Father Tissa Balasuriya OMI (former Rector, Aquinas University College); Fr. Daniel Fernando; L. Ariyawansa (teacher, trade unionist); Tissa Abeysekera (writer); Cora Abraham (Art teacher); Mervyn Casie Chetty J.P.U.M. (proctor); L.J. Mark Cooray (Reader, Ceylon Law College); Dr C.C. de Silva (Professor Emeritus); D.B. Ellepola (former Director of Rural Development); Desmond Fernando (Advocate); Dr. Carlo Fonseka (Faculty of Medicine); H.A.I. Goonetileke (University Librarian, Peradeniya); A.J. Gunawardena (University Lecturer); Indika Gunawardena (trade unionist); Richard Gabriel (Artist); Leslie Gunawardena (University lecturer); D.C.R. Gunawardena (former Ambassador); H.M. Jayatissa Herath (Advocate); Prof. Ashley Halpe (Dean, Arts Faculty, Peradeniya); Prof. Laksiri Jayasuriya (University Lecturer); Kumari Jayawardena (University lecturer), George Keyt (artists); Harischandra Mendis (advocate); S. Nadesan QC ; Prof. T. Nadaraja (Dean, Law Faculty, Colombo University); Prof. Gananath Obeysekera (lecturer); Lester James Peris (film maker); J.A.K. Perera (trade unionist); P. Nihal Perera (Chartered Accountant); Gerald Peris (University lecturer); N.D.M. Samarakoon QC; Laki Senanayake (artist); Nimal Senanayake (Advocate); Bernadeen Silva (librarian); J.W. Subasinghe (Advocate); Vinnie Virharana (University lecturer); Suriya Wickremasinghe (Advocate); W.M.K. Wijemuge (University lecturer). ■

BOOK REVIEW

ANTHROPOLOGY OF DEMOCRACY

Premakumara De Silva

Jonathan Spencer (2007). *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 203 pp.

Anthropology offers an ideal point of departure for a radical rethinking of democratization theories. Its ethnographic method has the potential to enter and understand worlds (such as popular politics) which are often left unexplored or under-explored by the more formal methodologies of other social science disciplines. However, despite this potential, until recently the anthropology of democracy has been a marginal topic of study. Indeed, anthropology has not only failed to generate ethnographic studies of 'democracy,' but it has also failed to provide a critique of the Orientalism that is entailed in much of the theorizing about democracy. Universalistic and modernist misconceptions about democratization processes and the assumed homogeneity and static nature of culture are still commonplace in comparative politics and political science.

Following the decolonization period, anthropologists produced ethnographic accounts of how democracy was working (or failing to work) in the new independent countries (see Geertz 1963). In this context, democracy was considered a universal political form, and an indicator of modernity and progress. In recent years government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations have promoted democracy as the panacea for developing countries (see Paley 2002). These organizations often focus on promoting free and fair elections and good governance. In today's political discourse 'democracy' is widely considered the only legitimate political regime. Mainstream political studies which try to make sense of democratization processes have therefore often been trapped in this modernist narrative.

Only in the last decade have anthropologists begun to turn their attention to formal political institutions and to macro-political areas of inquiry. Many of the current ethnographic insights on the working of democracy in different settings have emerged as part of discussions about 'the state', 'post communism regimes' post-colonialism, and civil society. However, few have been the studies which directly address democracy as an object of ethnographic enquiry. Illustrations about how democracy has come to be understood and practiced in local contexts can be found in the work of Gutmann in Mexico, Paley's study of Chilean democracy, and Schirmer's work on Guatemalan politics and the military.

From the 1950s to the early 1980s anthropologists, did not pay much attention to democratic politics in Sri Lanka. During this period they produced a large body of literature on kinships, land tenure, village and urban Buddhism, caste and rural change. With some noteworthy exceptions (e.g., Margret Robinson 1975), studies on the politics of democracy have generally failed to exploring local politics ethnographically.

In the last decade anthropologists, intrigued by the phenomenon of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and by the ethnic issue, went back to the study of politics in Sri Lanka. Importantly this new literature on the anthropology of democracy draws attention to the daily lives and political struggles of people living in non-elite sectors of society.

It is in this context that we need to understand Jonathan Spencer's seminal work *Anthropology, Politics, and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia* (2007). Jonathan Spencer is professor of the anthropology of South Asia at the University of Edinburgh. Prior to this book, his published books include *A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble: Politics and Change in Rural Sri Lanka* (1990); *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (1990); *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (co-edited with Alan Barnard, 1996); and *The Conditions of Listening: Essays on Religion, History and Politics in South Asia* (co-edited with C. J. Fuller, 1996).

In *Anthropology, Politics, and the State*, Spencer argues that the modern institutions of government in post-colonial countries have been understudied due to their presumed 'transparency' and foreign origin (2007). Accordingly, since

'democracy' originates in the West, its interpretation in post-colonial states has been considered essentially similar to those in the West and hence anthropologically irrelevant and intellectually unchallenging (2007:13). However, through his ethnographical (1990, 2007) study of rural electoral politics in Sri Lanka, he shows how democracy has different meanings for different sections of society.

Building on the findings of this research, this book offers a new way of analyzing the relationship between culture and politics, with special attention to democracy, nationalism, the state and political violence in Sri Lanka and India, in particular, and South Asia in general. This book concerns the way in which the politicization of culture has destabilized anthropologists' assumptions about cultural difference, and the language they use to talk about it. But it also concerns the way politics operates in different cultural and historical contexts, and proposes anthropologists to distance themselves from the reductionist models of the political, which dominate much academic writing.

For Spencer, there are two aspects in the definition of the political: 'expressive and performative as to the instrumental; and the 'dynamic force of the political. This book quite convincely address both aspects of 'political' in the cultural contexts of South Asia which have been run through elegantly crafted eight chapters namely: The Strange Death of Political Anthropology; Locating the Political; Culture, Nation, and Misery; Performing Democracy; States and Persons; The State and Violence; Pluralism in Theory, Pluralism in Practice, and Politics and Counter-politics.

Though these eight chapters are equally important in understanding 'other people's politics,' the performative aspect of democracy which Spencer explains in chapter four is, in my view, quite fascinating. What kind of object do anthropologists take 'democracy' to be? They can systematically examine the gap between the promise of popular decision-making and the stark reality of disempowerment and exclusion. A second line of inquiry would be on the technology of democracy – the rituals, procedures, and material culture of the ballot. A third is to assess the cultural implications of democratic procedures and ideas as they are received in different contexts. According to Spencer modern democracies hinge on the idea of representation , of one person standing for a much larger group of people, making the decisions 'they' might expect to make had they been consulted. And the mysterious link between representative and represented is established and renewed in ritual form; through elections. He proposes that the idea of elections is best understood as ritual actions rather than instrumental (2007:78). So, Spencer argues that elections, like other so-called political rituals, are not epiphenomenal to the world of real politics. Rather , they are crucial sites for the production and reproduction of the political. This is an exciting book for political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists, but students and scholars from other disciplines would also be impressed by the conviction in Spencer's arguments and the diversity of ethnography and case studies. ■

Dr. Premakumara De Silva is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo.

IN MEMORIAM

SYDNEY WANASINGHE

T. Perera

Sydney Wanasinghe, the veteran LSSP activist died following a heart attack on 28 April 2007 at his home at Wellawatte, Colombo. He was 75 years old. He is survived by his wife Vijitha, daughter Nimalka and two grandchildren.

He had been in failing health for some time, which affected his physical movements but left untouched his marvellous memory. He was a boon for struggling writers researching the left movement.

Sydney was born at Raddoluwa, Seeduwa on 16 February 1932, the son of Louis Wanasinghe, a school principal and Jane Wanasinghe. Sydney was educated at St. Mary's College, Negombo, St. Joseph's College, Colombo and S.Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia. He joined the LSSP while still a university student in the early 1950s.

He was the live-wire of a group of samasamajists who distributed the party newspapers on the Peradeniya campus. Those were the pre-and post-Hartal days when the LSSP dominated campus politics. Sydney and his comrades would collect bundles of the LSSP weeklies at the Peradeniya railway station and engage in street sales in Kandy.

After his graduation Sydney served as a teacher at Carey College, Colombo, and rose to be headmaster. In 1959 he married Vijitha, a teacher at St. Michaels, Polwatte, who later gave up teaching. In the 1960s Sydney was back at Peradeniya to obtain a teachers' diploma in education. He was also active in the teachers' trade union.

In 1955 he was nominated by the party to contest the Wellawatte North ward of the CMC. He succeeded his friend and party comrade Osmund Jayaratne as the LSSP representative for this ward. In the municipal by-election that ensued Sydney won the seat which he held till 1965.

In the heady varsity days Sydney had teamed up with Vijaya Vidyasagara and Saravana Baghawan (Baggy), editors of the *Samasamajist*. In the years to come they were drawn more closely together. Baggy began publishing Marxist classics in pamphlet form under the star press imprint. Eventually Sydney took over where Baggy left off and blossomed as a peerless publisher of left books.

He published a series of writings of Rosa Luxemburg: *On the Spartacus Programme, Social Reform or Revolution, What is Economics, The Mass Strike* and the *Junius Pamphlet (three editions)*; and Trotsky's works: *My Flight from Siberia, Marxism and Science, The Problems of Life, The Struggle for State Power* and *Whither Russia*.

He also initiated the popular *Young Socialist* series, the publication of which coincided with the emergence of the leftwing tendency in the LSSP on the eve of the party split in 1964. At that time he opened a sales outlet – Suriya Bookshop. He also collaborated with Baggy in writing a biography of Leon Trotsky, which he translated and published in Sinhala in 1990. He also published a couple of books by Che Guevara in Sinhala.

In the aftermath of the electoral defeat of the SLFP in the mid 1960s, its coalition allies, the LSSP and the CP unleashed a campaign of chauvinism. It was left to Sydney to document in the 70's the wave of dreadful diatribes that appeared in the LSSP and CP press.

Sydney was one of the signatories to the resolution moved by fourteen central council members at the party conference in June 1964 which opposed the resolution of the leadership to enter a coalition government led by the SLFP. Their resolution was defeated by an overwhelming margin and they quit the LSSP to form the LSSP-R. Sydney later rejoined the party.

Under the SLFP-led coalition government (1970-75), in which the LSSP held three ministries, Sydney served as a project manager in the National Savings Bank, and the State Distilleries Corporation.

In the 1990s he formed a publishing partnership with Wesley Muttiah. (Sydney was a couple of years younger than his collaborator Wesley). They embarked on publishing documentary collections: *Britain, World War Two* and the *Samasamajists* (1996), and *The Bracegirdle Affair* (1998 reprinted in 2006), *The Hartal of 1953* (2002), *The Case for Socialism* (2004), *Socialist Women of Sri Lanka* (2006), *Two Languages, One Nation, One Nation, Two Languages* (2006), a collection of speeches by Colvin R. de Silva; *State Language Question*, speeches in parliament by N.M. Perera and Edmund Samarakkody, in a Sinhala translation by Sydney (1955 and 2006), and a re-publication in 2006 of *Hundred Days in Ceylon under Martial Law* by Armand de Souza, on the 1915 communal riots.

Some of the books were prompted by anniversaries of working class struggles spearheaded by the LSSP, and birth centenaries of the left luminaries. Thanks to the initiative they have ensured that the material they gleaned from the party archives is not forgotten. Sydney was preparing a memoir of his friend Baggy when the final day came.

Three months later Wesley Muttiah, after a brief illness, passed away in London on 4 August. ■

Young Socialist Publications
Books edited by Wesley Muthiah and Sydney Wanasinghe

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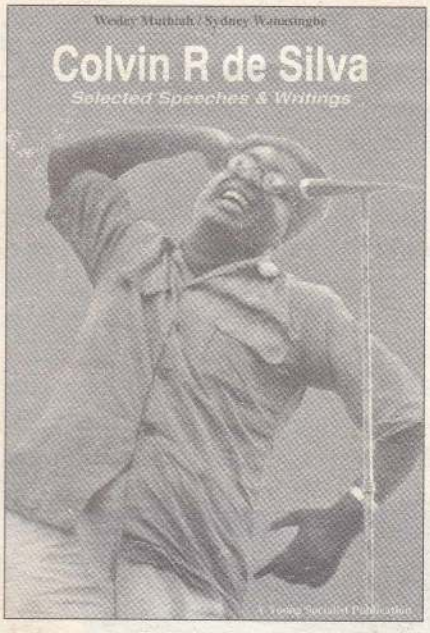

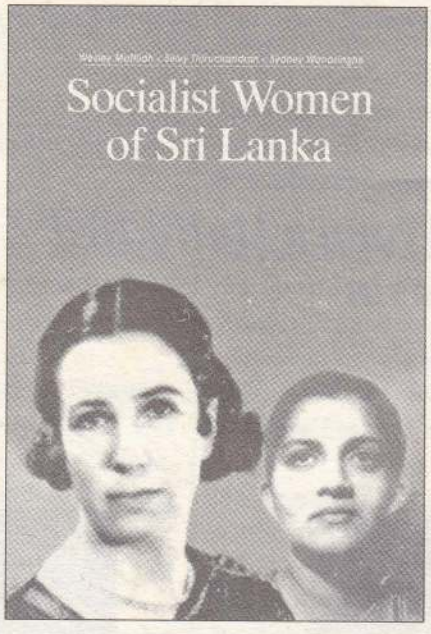

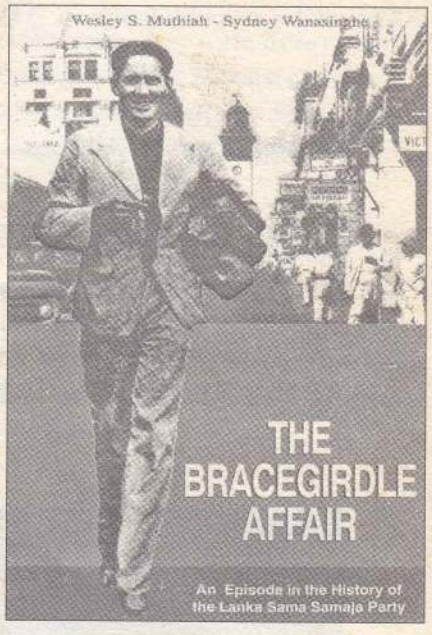

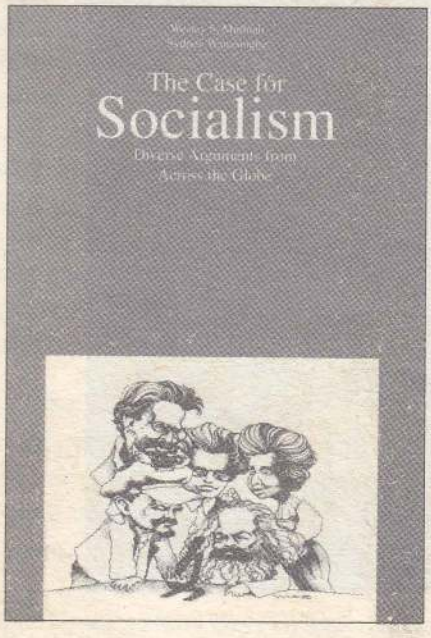

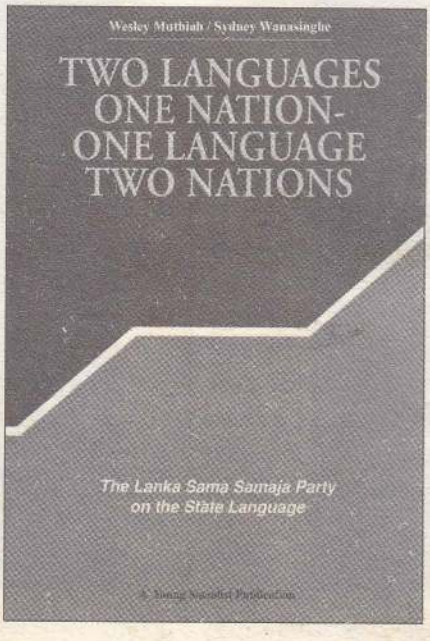

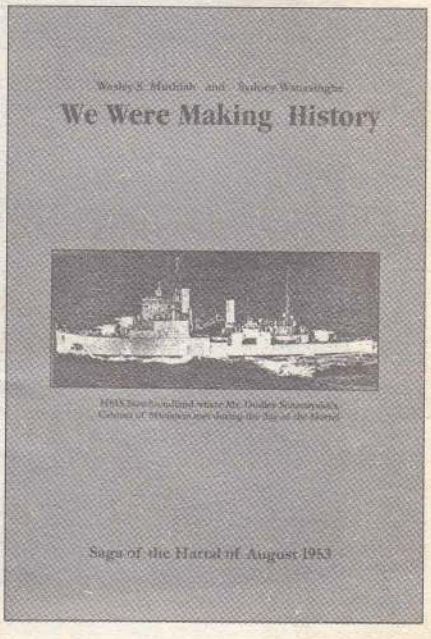

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