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IMAGES OF WOMEN IN NOVELS WRITTEN IN ENGLISH BY SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN

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The thesis discusses over a century of novel writing by South African women writers as they respond to political change from colonialism to apartheid. It follows the sequence of publication. The first five chapters describe the work of Olive Schreiner, Sarah Gertrude Millin, Pauline Smith, Nadine Gordimer and other white writers; the last two chapters are on Bessie Head and other black writers.

The thesis briefly examines problems of writing and publication, and the reasons why some writers choose or are forced to live abroad. Many novels are autobiographical, and many writers interpret the South African situation didactically for their readers in the West and South Africa. Most of the novels are written within the European realist tradition: exceptions like A Question of Power stress the importance of the inner life in bringing about personal and political change. The thesis examines the ways in which the writers use imagery, particularly from nature, to suggest changes in women's lives and even help to create myths.

The novels reflect the divisions in the society: perhaps only Bessie Head and Phyllis Altman cross them successfully. The novels indicate how misuse of power by men can change the lives and characters of women, although white women's lives still rest on black labour. Although white bourgeois women increasingly insist on choosing the direction of their lives, becoming less dependent on personal relationships, the novels illustrate how rarely even educated black women can choose how to live. The break-up of families is a recurring theme, as is the isolation and fear of women. However, hope for the future lies in the creation of male characters with feminist sympathies, such as Waldo and Pholoso. In such ways the writers themselves become part of the process of change in South Africa.

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Introduction

South African literature is closely related to the country's history and politics. Writers often consciously seem to be educating their Western and African readers. The influence that such authors might have can be estimated by the number of novels which the Government has banned, and by the recent republishing of several novels by women in response to a growing interest in South Africa and in feminism[1].

The thesis is about the work of women novelists from Olive Schreiner to Miriam Tlali. The chapters follow a historical sequence: five discuss the work of individual novelists and two look at other novels by black and white women. It falls into two parts: novels by white women and novels by black women. The thesis can only be a half of a whole in that it is limited to novels by women, largely ignoring other

forms of writing and novels by men[2].

Although there is an increasing number of critical books and articles by European, American and African writers, most of whom are men, I only refer to them when I want to stress a point[3]. However, some women writers like Phyllis Altman, seem to have been ignored by critics, perhaps for political reasons.

South Africans have been through many political changes in the last hundred years since the discovery of diamonds in 1867 in Kimberley and that of gold in 1886 on the Witwatersrand. The political system, organised by Dutch and British white colonialists, was based on the need for black labour to produce the wealth from the mines. Previously the economy of both Boers and Africans had been based on land and cattle[4]. The novels mark points in the development of South Africa and interpret them for their readership in Europe, America and South Africa. The relationship of the characters with the land and nature are important in all the novels, although Mrs Millin's "Dark River" novels are already describing the movement of the white bourgeois to the towns, and Miriam Tlali stresses the corruption of nature in the townships by the industrial system. However, love for the land itself is a characteristic of all the novels, reinforced by many images although the writers interpret it differently through their characters.

The early novelists were themselves the children of immigrants and their work was influenced by a belief that Europe was the natural centre of culture. Olive Schreiner, whose father

was German and whose mother was English; Pauline Smith, whose parents were Scottish; and Sarah Gertrude Millin, whose family were Jewish refugees from Lithuania, describe the lives of first generation white settlers in the country, and the ways in which they established their position. However, both Pauline Smith and Olive Schreiner lived for many years in Europe and were critical of aspects of the South African Government in their work. But Mrs Millin, who travelled widely, preferred to live in South Africa, indicating her support for the South African Government. Olive Schreiner and Sarah Gertrude Millin were involved in liberal white politics but Mrs Millin's position changed and she became a supporter of apartheid. Mrs Ethelreda Lewis was also another white liberal woman writer who was for many years a friend and supporter of Clemence Kadalie, the leader of the ICU (Industrial and Commercial Union). Like Mrs Millin, Nadine Gordimer today remains in South Africa. She feels she has a responsibility to the future as a white person who is, nevertheless, critical of apartheid. In articles as well as in her latest novel[5] she makes political comments and assessments of the changing situation. White women writers like Nadine Gordimer indicate the liberal position to their readers. Black writers like Miriam Tlali continue to live in Soweto in order to support her people, while others like Lauretta Ngcobo and Bessie Head have been forced into exile through their political involvement. This must affect the way they view the South African situation and add tension to their writing.

The early white novelists turned towards Europe for their culture, and largely ignored the African culture, although

Olive Schreiner comments on the Bushmen paintings. Like Mrs Millin Nadine Gordimer was also influenced by the idea of writing stories about South Africa in the same way as Katherine Mansfield wrote about New Zealand[6]. In a sense these white influential writers did not lose their sense of belonging to Europe, rather than to South Africa, and their writing could be interpreted as part of the process of establishing colonialism, while the work of black writers today is part of the process of struggle. The novelists were all educated, either at home or at school and, except for Olive Schreiner, they either went or could have gone to University. But they all comment on the influence of reading European writers on their work. They belong to the bourgeois class, which established itself as the ruling class, even when, like Nadine Gordimer, they criticise its materialistic outlook; their freedom to work, even when they are writing partly to make money is based on black labour. Only Pauline Smith and Menan du Plessis examine the relationship between white wealth and black labour in their novels.

The position of women in South Africa is still more divisive: as July's People and The Virgins make it clear[7] the relationship between black and white women is usually limited to that of maid and madam even today. In 1975 Hilda Bernstein wrote that:

> "South African society is built in layers in which class and colour coincide. The position of South African women corresponds to their skin colour: the white man is at the very top; at the very bottom of the pile is the black woman."

Although white women may suffer from "inequalities in employ-

ment, wages and in law,"[8] the majority, as described in the novels, lead comfortable, apparently secure lives. However Nadine Gordimer comments on the guilt which sometimes moves them to particpate in political action. Like Hilda Bernstein, Awa Thiam, an African feminist, believes that black women still suffer from "sexism, racism, class division, three plagues,"[9] as a result of colonial history.

Black women novelists are only now beginning to record the lives of black men and women. Previously white women had attempted to do so with varying success. The position of even educated black women in the society makes it clear that, as far as writing is concerned, they have almost inescapable problems to overcome[10]. There are very few published in comparison with white women, and one wonders how many gifted black women, like the girl in Not Either an Experimental Doll[11] have been destroyed by the system. Bessie Head describes the emotional suffering it creates in A Question of Power[12]. In a symposium on Contemporary Black South African Literature, male writers discussed some of the problems: Peter Nazareth commented that:

> "Only writers like Nadine Gordimer have time to write five hundred page novels."[13]

Ezekeiel Mphlalele, after describing the working lives of South African women decided that:

> "Given such a situation, I think one will have to wait for some time before a women's literature develops."[14]

(However, he did not go on to explain how men could contribute to such a change!)

Even if women can achieve the time and space necessary to

write they then have to find a publisher for their work. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries women often submitted their work under a male pseudonym to have a better chance of publication. Olive Schreiner, for instance, sent her novels to Collins in London as Ralph Irons. Dale Spender observes that even in the world today

> "Women do not contribute more than twenty per cent of the published writers"[15]

although in Europe at least women read novels and buy seventy five per cent of all books sold[16].

It is even more difficult for black writers, particularly women, to publish. There seem to be no novels by black women until the 1970s. In spite of world-wide publishers like Heinemann who have encouraged black writers and South African based publishers like Rowan, there is little work by them to be found in print. Miriam Tlali's publisher, Ravan, insisted that she censor Amandla[17] herself, and so, like Flora Nwapa in Nigeria, she decided to organise the republication herself.

The novels are autobiographical to a large extent although the white women writers are writing about the lives of women who are not usually different from the majority of women. Olive Schreiner, however, describes in Rebekah, for instance, a woman who is trying to achieve independence; Pauline Smith and Yvonne Burgess write about the struggles of poor whites. But generally the women in novels by white women reflect the beliefs of the white middle class. At least two writers, Mary Benson and Hilda Bernstein, chose the novel form to write about events in which they were involved, and Miriam

Tlali and Lauretta Ngcobo also include their personal experiences in their novels. Real people, like Bram Fischer, are either thinly disguised as characters or brought in by name like Oliver Tambo.

The novel form as used by the majority of South African women writers follows the traditional realist European nineteenth century novel. A plot and characters illustrate a theme, and the conflicts arising from relationships are resolved in the last chapter. Olive Schreiner began to develop away from the limitations of this form, like Virginia Woolf, in The Story of An African Farm[18] and also in From Man To Man[19] in which Rebekah's feelings and ideas - her inner life - are balanced against the outer reality. But it is not until about a hundred years later that South African women writers begin to experiment with the novel form again. Sheila Fugard, Menan du Plessis and Bessie Head try to give an impression of their protagonists' changing moods and feelings in response to external events. They make it clear that for political change to occur there has to be a change in the individual's inner consciousness. They describe spiritual and emotional journeys. Menan du Plessis even analyses the process and meaning of writing as her heroine reviews her situation[20].

Although the novels are largely concerned with personal relationships, a few writers, sometimes consciously, are using the novel politically to put forward solutions to South Africa's "problems". Mrs Millin's early novels clearly propose separate development. Hilda Bernstein, Mary Benson and Nadine Gordimer have all written novels supporting the ANC (African National

Congress) and Miriam Tlali's hero belongs to the Unity Movement. The rather one-sided position of such writers seems at times, paradoxically, to weaken the force of the novels - they become too didactic, in their attempts to influence the course of events through fiction. Historical novels are rare because, I imagine, writers are caught up in the immediate situation and do not want to spend time researching the past[21]. Only two writers, Lauretta Ngcobo and Nadine Gordimer, project plots of novels into the future, ending with Independence celebrations and a PAC president and an ANC president respectively - a kind of colonisation of the future, perhaps. Jews are often seen as outsiders - shopkeepers or stereotypes of mysterious, rootless strangers, as in From Man To Man, even if the authors are Jewish.

It would be impossible to assess, withough knowing, if a particular novel was written by a woman or not, with perhaps the exception of From Man To Man because of its feminist content. Apart from Olive Schreiner, who was a strong believer in feminism and socialism, none of the other women writers take up an active position on this issue, preferring to see themselves as writers, rather than women writers. Both Mrs Millin and Nadine Gordimer have explained this in their other writings[22]. All the same the novels often reflect and criticise the position of women throughout this period, directly or indirectly. Writers like Phyllis Altman and Nadine Gordimer, for instance, have male narrators, because, clearly, men are still mainly organising political activity.

Relationships with men are described as still being central to women's experience. In the earlier novels before the

Second World War the plots revolve around marriage, and the novels end with a marriage. It is clear that economic power is in the hands of men, and that they control, therefore, the lives of their daughters and wives. Mrs Millin's stories, particularly, have several portraits of unhappy spinsters who become transformed by marriage, which gives them security and status in the society. Such marriages were helping to create a strong white bourgeois class to keep control of the country. Romantic and sexual love is rejected by Mrs Millin, Pauline Smith and Olive Schreiner as not being satisfactory in itself, although for different reasons. Olive Schreiner's women characters are searching for intellectual, emotional and financial equality with men. Only in <u>From Man To Man</u>, her last, unfinished novel, does this seem to become a possibility. Olive Schreiner describes how women themselves support the system, even when it means rejecting other women who do not fit in. She criticises the double sexual standard for men, which destroys the lives of so many women who had no choice, for financial reasons, their children, and society's expectations, but to continue in unhappy marriages. Characters like Lyndall, who reject the system, end up by becoming outcasts. Yvonne Burgess also criticises a patriarchal system which can leave women with no legal rights in marriage, and in which having children reflects on the man's sexual prowess, but destroys a woman's health. By the end of the Second World War there is a change in women's situation and heroines in Nadine Gordimer's novels, for instance, choose their sexual partners, are educated and are financially independent. Menan du Plessis' heroine lives by herself without servants, earning her living as a teacher.

However in novels by black women, the emphasis is on the security of marriage and the family, which serves as a base in the daily struggle to survive. The mother is sometimes idealised, as the mother, Africa, as in The Cross of Gold[23]. Felleng in Amandla is the perfect girl friend, who will continue the struggle in South Africa when the hero goes into exile. The writers are creating myths here; Nadine Gordimer promotes Winnie Mandela, for instance, in A Sport of Nature.

Over the century women become more politically involved, although, usually, through personal relationships, and organised by men. But both Lauretta Ngcobo and Miriam Tlali use the novel form to suggest the importance of women's contribution in the struggle, and how they should be educated to participate. In her novels Bessie Head explores the relationship between the power of the unjust state and the individual.

There is a fasination in some of the novels with sexual relationships between black and white. This is hardly surprising because of the Immorality Act, which has now been repealed. Sarah Gertrude Millin's position was that only degenerate white men and black women would want to live together. Her coloured and black women characters are, by nature, wanton and stupid compared with the white women. Although characters in novels by Nadine Gordimer and Sheila Fugard describe loving relationships between white women and blacks and Asians, they all end because of racist pressures in the society and cultural differences. Even in her last novel, in which Nadine Gordimer describes a happy marriage between a white South African woman and a black South African freedom fighter,

she stresses Hillela's unusual qualities, the marriage takes place outside South Africa, Whaila already has a wife there, he is murdered and the rainbow-coloured child is sent to school in England. Like Sarah Gertrude Millin other writers are concerned about the future of half-caste children. Sheila Fugard's heroine is glad she had a miscarriage because she can see no future for such a child, and Anna Louw worries about her mixed race daughter. Farida Karodia's heroine tries to have an abortion after she has been raped by a white man[25]. Only Bessie Head describes friendships between black and white men and women based on mutual respect and understanding. Otherwise, it seems, their relationships are distorted by white power, which occasionally erupts into violence, and, in many novels, potential violence underlies the events.

Another theme running through the novels is the isolation of women, even within the family. In the early period the lives of white women would be limited by the expectations of men, and in the later ones the woman may choose to live alone. Sometimes a different attitude to life isolates them from the rest of their society. For black women limited time means they can become cut off even within the family. The novels emphasise, directly or indirectly, the importance of sisters and women friends for support, especially in their worlds, which are often still largely dominated by men, legally, economically and emotionally.

It seems that the feminist beliefs of Olive Schreiner are now accepted by modern writers as the status quo, but it is clear that although such changes have occurred for white women, black women are still suffering, and struggling to

promote change through their writing. All the same the thesis illustrates how the shadowy black women servants in the early novels, upon whose work the wealth of South Africa depends, are at last beginning to come into their own, as writers.

Notes

1. See Amandla, published by Miriam Tlali 1986. First published by Ravan 1981 and banned until 1985.
See Nadine Gordimer: The Essential Gesture, Stephen Clingman, Ed. "A Winters Freedom" 1975. London, Cape, 1988, p. 104.

2. This is due to lack of time! A woman with a full time job and family responsibilities finds she only has a very limited amount of time to spend on a thesis when it comes to the point.

3. I do not agree with Mary Ellman's statement, however clever, that there are
"Two literatures like two public toilets, one for men and one for women."
Mary Ellman: Thinking About Women, London, Virago, 1979, p. 33.

4. Dan Mokonyane: Lessons of Azikhwelwa, London, Nakong Ya Rena, 1979?

5. The Essential Gesture: op. cit.

6. See: Mrs Millin: The Night Is Long, London, Faber and Faber, 1941, p. 118, in which she quotes from her correspondence with Katherine Mansfield, and Nadine Gordimer: The Essential Gesture, op. cit. "A Border and the Invincible Summer" 1963, p. 25 in which she refers to Katherine Mansfield and Pauline Smith as inspiring her work.

7. Nadine Gordimer: July's People, London, Cape, 1981.

Reissued Harlow, Longman, 1986.

Jillian Beckford: The Virgins, First published, London, Gollancz, 1976. Reissued Johannesburg, David Philip, 1986.

8. Hilda Bernstein: For Their Triumphs and Their Tears, London, International Defence and Aid Fund, 1975, p. 8.

9. Awa Thiam: Black Sisters Speak Out 1977. Trans. from French by Dorothy S, Blair. London, Pluto, 1986.

10. See Chapter 7.

11. Sheila Marks, Ed.: Not Either an Experimental Doll, London, The Women's Press, 1987.

12. Bessie Head: A Question of Power, First published, London, Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1974. Reprinted London, Heinemann, 1979.

13. Bernth Lindfors, Ed.: A Symposium - Annual Selected Papers of the African Literature Association, Washington, 3 Continents Press Inc., 1975, p. 37.

14. op. cit., p. 41.

15. Dale Spender: Mothers of the Novel, London, Pandora, 1986, p. 5. See also: Joanna Russ: How To Suppress Women's Writing, London, The Women's Press, 1985.

16. BBC Women's Hour: 30/3/89. A discussion on women's writing.

17. Miriam Tlali: Amandla, op. cit.

18. Olive Schreiner: The Story of An African Farm, published 1883. London, Penguin, 1939.

20. Menan du Plessis: A State of Fear, London, Pandora, 1983.

21. See Daphne Rooke: Mittee, First published London, Gollancz, 1951. Cape, Chameleon Press, 1987.

22. See Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

23. Lauretta Ngcobo: Cross of Gold, London, Longman, 1981.

24. Nadine Gordimer: A Sport of Nature, London, Cape, 1987.

25. Farida Karodia: Daughters of The Twilight, London, Women's Press, 1986.

Chapter 1

Olive Schreiner. 1855 - 1921

Olive Schreiner's first novel, The Story of An African Farm, published in 1883[1], introduces over a century of novel writing by black and white South African women. The novel has never been out of print, and recently, in response to an interest in feminist literature and South Africa, her other work, like that of many forgotten South African women writers, has been republished[2].

Many critics and biographers, like Ruth First, have explained her work in depth, examining its close relationship with her life. Olive Schreiner's published letters analyse her feelings about her work, although her husband, Cronwright-Schreiner, destroyed many pertaining to their personal relationship, when he edited them for publication[3]. Like her longest novel the letters seem to be part of a kind of "self-

therapy".

Olive Schreiner was writing at a period of tremendous political change in South Africa and in the world, such as the colonisation of South Africa, the establishment of the Republic, and the discovery of rich mineral wealth, as well as the Boer War and the First World War. In England she became involved in the socialist and the feminist movements, and in South Africa with her husband and brother she also spoke at public meetings against, for example, the injustices of the Boer War and the inequalities of the new franchise in the Cape, which excluded black women.

A short novel, Peter Halket of Mashonaland[4], was written in response to Rhodes' methods and her longest work of non-fiction, Women and Labour[5], is a strong, influential, idealistic plea for real equality between men and women. Many of her personal experiences are used in her other novels, such as working in the Diamond Fields, in Undine[6].

Olive Schreiner's parents were immigrants; her father was a missionary of German origin, and her mother was English. They had twelve children of whom six died. Her father was a failure at converting the natives and became a trader - his character is like that of the German in The Story of An African Farm[7]. As a child Olive Schreiner lost her belief in God, an experience which she gives to the characters of Undine and Waldo. Another traumatic experience was her belief that she was responsible for the death of a younger child. The family were forced to separate when Olive Schreiner was twelve and she went to live with her brothers,

Theo, a school teacher and Will who were looking for diamonds in Kimberley. Will later became Prime Minister of the Cape. The family's early poverty may have contributed to Olive Schreiner's need all her life to feel financially independent. At the same time she was educating herself to a large extent by reading as widely as possible. The only job for which she was qualified was as a governess and she worked for several English and Afrikaaner families from the age of 16. And, about this time, she began to write, often in very cramped, uncomfortable conditions, the stories which became Undine, The Story of An African Farm, and From Man to Man[8], her longest, unfinished novel.

An unhappy love affair, about which her biographers can only speculate, seems to have affected her deeply, and her constant ill-health, which they consider to have been psychosomatic, including asthma attacks, seems to have begun at this period[9]. But long, uncomfortable journeys, as well as miserable living conditions, like those endured by many black servants today, may have contributed more to her ill-health.

With encouragement from some friends Olive Schreiner sent the manuscript of The Story of An African Farm to an English publisher under the name of Ralph Irons as women still found it difficult to have their work published at this time. She travelled to England to train as a nurse but ill health prevented her from completing the course and for a while she was financially dependent on her brother. When her novel was successful, however, she

revealed herself as the writer and was immediately welcomed into London literary life. She met people like Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter and Eleanor Marx with whom she could discuss her ideas, ending the isolation she had felt in South Africa. She worked on her novel From Man To Man and published a book of short stories, Dreams, in 1891[10]. She travelled in Europe, but frequent breakdowns in health led to her return to South Africa in 1889.

Olive Schreiner married in 1894 when she was 38 - late for a Victorian woman - but she was deeply in love with her husband, a farmer, who, unusually, took her name, indicating his support for her feminist beliefs. He became a businessman, then a politician (thus reflecting a variety of colonial involvement in South Africa).

In 1913 Olive Schreiner returned to England by herself for a visit which had to be prolonged because of the war. After the war her husband came to England but she returned alone to South Africa and died in 1921. Her one child died shortly after birth. Her biographers can only speculate about her marriage. They give the impression of a woman of tremendous vitality, and sympathy for other people, in spite of her periods of ill health. Her books were influential, and, although she did not publish as many as, for instance, Sarah Gertrude Millin, and Nadine Gordimer, she was more actively involved in politics. Her letters and her novels suggest the, at times, exhausting involvement of her life and her work; and also a tension created by her desire to live in a way which followed her ideals and the reality of her life; for example, she lived on her own for long

periods in London, and this seems to have led to loneliness and illness. She was aware of this: in one of her many letters to Havelock Ellis she felt her illness was psychosomatic in origin:

> "Oh, it isn't my chest, it isn't my legs, it's I myself, my life. Where shall I go? What shall I do?"[11]

She identified with her characters as she was writing her novels, as in this comment on From Man To Man:

> "Rebekah is me, and Drummond is me, and all is me, only not Veronica and Mrs. Drummond (except a little!) Sometimes I really don't know whether I am I or one of the others."[12]

In this sense her writing was herself but she never concluded her longest novel, and her husband published it, like Undine, which she herself had rejected, after her death.

At the same time Olive Schreiner felt an almost missionary-like responsibility towards other people because of her fame, and her ability: she felt she was someone:

> "To whom all broken or oppressed things, be they prostitutes or South African natives, are dear as though they had sprung from my body."[13]

The link between prostitutes and natives as unfortunate minorities indicates her liberal political position, but it was an unpopular one with most whites, and Olive Schreiner held to her beliefs in an uncompromising way, regardless of what people felt.

She was strongly motivated by her belief that she must help

people in her life and work, particularly women, whom she saw as suffering from the oppression of men:

> "You know all the months when I have been in such suffering, and I have had that yearning to do something for others that I feel when I am in pain, I have always built upon the fact that From Man To Man will help people, for it will help to make men more tender to women, because they will understand them better; it will help to make some women more tender than others; it will comfort some women by showing them that others have felt as they do."[14]

The issues that concerned Olive Schreiner, in spite of changes in, for example, women's education, are still familiar today; many of them are unresolved both in the West and in South Africa, in what is still, in practice, a largely male-dominated world.

However, a preoccupation with feminist issues is only part of Olive Schreiner's search for truth in the relationships between the real and the ideal, man and nature, life and death, the child and the adult. Although Olive Schreiner's work is inevitably part of the European tradition of novel writing, her work is firmly based in the South African setting. But the women she is describing are white and middle class; paradoxically they could be living in Europe or South Africa, except for their isolation, because their lives are largely organised by men. When they try to gain control of their lives conflict arises which creates the organisation of the novels. To express her characters' deepest feelings and thoughts Olive Schreiner uses dreams

and parables reminiscent of the familiar Bible, within the novels, thus creating a variation of the conventional realistic European novel. For instance, Olive Schreiner describes how the opening chapter of From Man To Man was experienced as a dream: it is

> "...a picture in small, a kind of allegory, of the life of the women in the book."[15]

It is concerned with life and death, a child's relationships with her parents and the black servant, and with the land: the woman the child becomes.

The carefully organised structure of The Story of An African Farm follows the apparently inconsequential movement of people's lives, in an immigrant society:

> "nothing can be prophesied. There is a strange coming and going of feet. Men appear, act and re-act upon each other, and pass away. When the curtain falls no one is ready. When the footlights are brightest they are blown out; and what the name of the play is no one knows."[16]

In her letters Olive Schreiner stressed again and again that she wrote from her unconscious - from her instinct.

> "...I am working and am so glad in my work. Every time I look out in the sunshine, the force comes running into me."[17]

She described her style in an image from "Women's Work" - knitting - claiming in a letter to Havelock Ellis that:

> "I never know why I write things in a certain way but I can generally find out if I think afterward. What you mean is what I call "writing ribbed"... I am

> changing a whole chapter of From Man To Man from what I call the "plain" into the "ribbed" style. Sometimes the plain is right, sometimes the ribbed. I think I generally write description in the plain and philosophise in the ribbed."[18]

Ribbed knitting is more complicated to do and requires more concentration - it stretches more easily with the movement of the wearer; plain knitting looks different on each side, but it is simpler to do and quicker to knit. For example, the parables and the examinations of the meaning of life by Waldo and Rebekah are more complex - "ribbed" - than the dialogue and descriptions of real places - "plain".

Olive Schreiner's first novel, Undine, is interesting because it introduces the theme of women's desire for independence in a world dominated by men. Like Lyndall, Undine's attempt to break away from this ends in isolation and death. Only in the third novel, through Rebekah, does Olive Schreiner indicate some hope that women can achieve control over their lives. Undine has two parts; in the first half Undine compromises and marries without love; but in the second half she breaks away from Europe to lead, as far as possible, an independent life in South Africa. Marriage is inevitable, providing women with apparent security, but at its worst they are treated as commodities; daughters are virtually sold off to be wives:

> "Youth and learning and love, they are all convertible into terms of cash, and have their equivalents."[19]

From her childhood Undine queries the position of girls who are treated differently from their brothers, as regards education and their position in the family, in strong terms:

> "I wish I was not a woman. I hate women; they are horrible and disgusting, and I wish I had never been born rather than to be one."[20]

Even romantic love, leading to marriage, means that Undine has to alter her ways to fit in with her lover's expectations; a wintry image symbolises this change:

> "The life that lay before her seemed to look as cheerless and icy as the whole frosty world that lay stretched out before her eye. But, she resolved, I shall be as he wishes me; he shall be proud of me..."[21]

However, Albert still rejects her for a richer woman, in spite of her efforts to change her image to please him. Like Lyndall and Rebekah, Undine's experiences, which she is constantly analysing like them, lead her to make changes in her life. These bring her into opposition with the conventions of her society. Her decision to go to South Africa, leaving her money behind for her step-sons, gives her control over her life; even though poverty and hard work tire her she has recovered her moral integrity. She begins to write, but in the end she is exhausted, her words echoing those of many overworked women:

> "I have not been so tired for many years. I want to sleep for a long, long time. I shall be better then."[22]

Her relationships with men are still unhappy; a poor Englishman whose life she saves and helps to return to England leaves without even saying good-bye. Women, as self-sacrificing carers, are taken for granted by men.

But Undine has a creative imagination in which the natural world brings her consolation in her breakdown in England. In South Africa too, her imagination transforms the

industrial site of the Diamond Diggings into an enchanted moonlit world, with a magic castle at the centre. In a long passage which marks a change in Undine's perception of her life to a tranquil acceptance of her circumstances, Olive Schreiner stresses the power of the imagination to transform life as she does again in The Story of An African Farm when she describes the desert through Waldo's eyes.[23] And, like Waldo, as Undine dies she finds consolation in being part of a movement of the natural world and in her belief that life will be better for women following her example:

> "...the great current will flow on uninjured, unchanged by our loss in its deathless progress."[24]

A related theme - that of the double standard of behaviour for men - is also introduced as a sub-plot in the novel. (This theme is developed in much more depth in From Man To Man.) Albert's mistress, a rich middle class girl whom he seduced, dies in terrible poverty with her child. Undine is her only friend. But like the other women in the novel, Albert's mistress is a minor character; Olive Schreiner concentrates on Undine's relationships with three men: her lover, her husband and the Englishman, who represent, in different ways, how far men organise women's lives.

The weakness of the novel lies in its many uneasy, melodramatic coincidences which are used to illustrate the points about women's lives: Olive Schreiner wrote to Havelock Ellis that

> "...I ought to have burnt it long ago, but the biographical element in it made me soft to it."[25]

But the dialogue, suited to each character's nature, as

well as the long passages of description and self analysis and the sympathy for women's suffering foreshadow her greatest novel.

In The Story of An African Farm Olive Schreiner gives Waldo the same childhood experiences as Undine, as when Undine loses her belief in God. Like Undine, Waldo also lies sleepless listening to the clock ticking and sacrifices a chop to God, in vain[26]. The novel follows the experiences of three children growing up on a small, isolated Boer farm in the Karoo. Like Undine, and, in From Man To Man, Rebekah and Bertie, the children's early feelings and experiences are related to their adult lives. It seems almost as if different aspects of Undine's and Olive Schreiner's characters are taken on by the children. A strong desire for education, and control over her life as well as a sense of justice are part of Lyndall's character: Waldo searches for truth, through his perception of nature, and understanding of God, and Em understands that love involves patient service and self sacrifice, responding to immediate physical needs like providing food. The children's names are significant, taken from Olive Schreiner's family and from her reading: her second name was Emily, Lyndall was her mother's maiden name, and Waldo is Emerson's first name.

Like Undine, Lyndall and Waldo question and discuss all aspects of life, seeking the truth, like the bird in the parable central to the novel[27]. In language reminiscent of the Bible, Olive Schreiner stresses her position on the effect of childhood's observation on the adult's character:

"Not what we are taught, but what we see, makes us,

> and the child gathers the food on which the adult feeds to the end."[28]

Lyndall, unlike Em, whose character is passive, perceives the children's powerlessness and fights for justice with all the strength of her personality, almost defeating the adults, through her moral position.

> "'I will hate everything that has power, and help everything that is weak.'"[29]

At Boarding School, Lyndall discovers that girls' education is intended only to prepare them for marriage. As in Undine marriage is perceived to be central to the survival of bourgeois society: Lyndall feels marriage without love is like prostitution and condemns society's hypocritical attitudes.

> "'With good looks and youth marriage is easy to attain. There are men enough; but a woman who has sold herself, even for a ring and a new name, need hold her skirt aside for no creature in the street. They both earn their bread in the same way. Marriage for love is the beautifullest external symbol of the union of souls; marriage without it is the uncleanest traffic that defiles the world.'"[30]

Lyndall's views are the same as Olive Schreiner's: women themselves connive in their oppression, losing their integrity in the process; but the problems which Lyndall faces when, although pregnant, she refuses to marry her lover because she does not love him enough, lead to her isolation and death. Lyndall's idealism is destroyed by the reality. Her last action is to look again into her mirror to examine her soul and reaffirm her belief in herself:

> "Only, the wonderful yearning light was in the eyes still."[31]

As in <u>Undine</u> the process of death may become part of a change of consciousness for others who follow. The Christian God has nothing to offer. However, Olive Schreiner's belief was that:

> "For the little soul that cries aloud for continued personal existence for itself and its beloved, there is no help. For the soul which knows itself no more as a unit, but as a part of the Universal Unity of which the Beloved also is a part; which feels within itself the throb of the Universal life; for that soul there is no death."[32]

The relationship between Waldo and Lyndall indicates an ideal friendship, without sex, which is possible between men and women who have, in common, as well as their childhood, the search for truth; Lyndall analyses it in her terms:

> "'When I am with you I never know that I am a woman and you are a man; I only know that we are both things that think.'"[33]

Lyndall is, like Undine and Rebekah, a feminist heroine: later women novelists, like Nadine Gordimer writing in a different age, take many of the beliefs for which Lyndall and Undine struggle for granted. Love, for the man who does not share their ideals, leads to tragedy. Lyndall organises Em's marriage; in contrast to Lyndall, Em is only seeking happiness in her personal relationships. The continuity of the farm is ensured through the marriage.

The Boer woman Tant' Sannie who runs the farm and has inherited the problem of raising the three orphaned children, is de-

veloped from an earlier satirical portrait in Undine and was based on the character of an Afrikaner woman for whom Olive Schreiner worked. This portrait made Olive Schreiner unpopular with some Boer readers, and may have reinforced English views of the Boers. Tant' Sannie is fat, superstitious and self-centred. She does not speak English; one of the funniest scenes in the novel centres around her efforts to communicate with the Irish adventurer, Bonaparte, whom she supposes will make a good husband. Unlike Lyndall, she accepts the inevitability of marriage based on property. Her indifference to the individuality of the children and her abuse of her power over them are contrasted with the gentleness of Waldo's father. Both, however, are deceived by Bonaparte. Tant' Sannie wants a husband and the German is naive, in spite of his education.

Hope of a change in attitudes of men to women may lie in the transformation of the character of an Englishman, Greg, who like Bonaparte and the German, came to South Africa to make money. Greg is, at first, a man who believes in male superiority like Albert in Undine; but his love for Lyndall transforms him and he breaks an unwritten rule of his society by dressing up as a woman in order to nurse her when she is dying. Olive Schreiner comments in a gentle, ironic way that:

"He had forgotten that it is man's right to rule."[34]

Through his suffering Greg learns to accept as a necessity the feminine aspects of his nature, symbolised by his change of dress.

The farm itself, isolated and self-sufficient, is apparently

peaceful and stable at the beginning of the novel. Strangers from different European countries pass through and influence the lives of the inhabitants. Waldo's stranger gives him a book which changes his attitude to life. Like Waldo's stranger, such characters often do not have names, but, like Old Otto, the German, are usually known by their country. As the novel progresses, the farm's stability is seen to be an illusion based on physical power and control of the "natives" who do much of the work: it becomes symbolic of the colonial history of the country at this time, as immigrants seek to establish their position. Tant' Sannie controls the farm and the people living there through fear to a large extent. Poverty and the need to survive makes them powerless. Tant' Sannie can turn them away at a whim. However, reference to older civilisations, such as those of Europe, through Otto's stories and books, and of Africa, through Waldo's understanding of the Bushmen's paintings, indicate that in the process of time, the farm - and colonial Africa - may disappear too.

The landscape of the desert, of which Waldo seems, at times to be a part, reflects the changes in the characters' lives from drought to Spring. Waldo's creative instincts, and his awareness of the land, indicate an optimism for the future, in spite of individual tragedy. The writer observes Waldo watching the children at the end of the novel:

> "There will always be something worth living for while there are shimmery afternoons."[35]

Waldo's death - or, perhaps, sleep - because the writer leaves the ending ambiguous, makes a reconciliation and balance to the novel's many tragedies of frustration and

despair.

The novel's complex, rhythmical structure, which follows the patterns of the seasons, moves from reality to dream, from narrative, dialogue and comedy to moralising and parables. The characters' dreams suggest the future, merging with the reality of their lives. So Em dreams of Lyndall's baby long before she knows she is pregnant, suggesting the close non-verbal communication possible between friends. A balance is cleverly achieved, however, between dream and reality, as in this description of Waldo's thoughts:

> "After struggling to see the unseeable, growing drunk with the endeavor to span the infinite, and writhing before the inscrutable mystery, it is a renovating relief to turn to some simple, feelable weighable substance..."[36]

Olive Schreiner also uses the form of a parable in her short political novel, Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland. Peter discusses his life with Jesus and changes from an unthinking male who accepts society's attitudes to war and women to a thoughtful man of principle. The novel is, in effect, a condemnation of the use Rhodes made of uneducated Englishmen who were led to believe they would make their fortunes in South Africa by joining the Chartered Company in the Diamond Fields and then by fighting for Rhodes and extending the Empire. Peter changes so profoundly that he dies for his beliefs. His former unthinking attitude is reflected in his relationships with women. From far away in South Africa he idealises his mother, but, while living with her in Gloucestershire he ignored her wishes. Like most other

white men of his class he kept two black girls in the Diamond Fields. He tells Jesus:

> "'I had two huts to myself, and a couple of nigger girls. It's better fun,' said Peter after a while, 'having those black women than whites. The whites you've got to support, but the niggers support you! And when you've done with them you can just get rid of them. I'm all for nigger girls.'"[37]

The jerky rhythm of Peter's working class speech with its simple vocabulary becomes a terrible condemnation of his racist, sexist attitudes, as, later on, does his description of a rape of a black woman by white soldiers[38]. Olive Schreiner's sympathies are clearly with the anonymous, powerless black women, who are treated as possessions. Peter's Christian upbringing has instilled in him masculine superiority; very unlike the real teachings of Jesus, as Olive Schreiner is pointing out. Writing the novel satirically from the opposite position to the one she is supporting gave Olive Schreiner an opportunity to explore - and condemn - the masculine attitudes to patriotism, war, women, and the Africans, on which the British Empire was based.

Olive Schreiner's longest, unfinished novel, From Man To Man, upon which she was working all her life, returns to the theme of the personal life and contains all her preoccupations with the lives of women in a male-dominated society. As long ago as 1888 she wrote to Havelock Ellis that the subject of this novel was:

> "...prostitution and marriage. It is the story of a prostitute and of a married woman who loves another

man and whose husband is sensual and unfaithful."[39]
The novel develops the idea of how two sisters, brought up in the same household react very differently to their experiences: this theme was first hinted at in Undine, where Undine's life is contrasted with Albert's mistress, and then developed more clearly in the "active" and "passive" natures of Lyndall and Em.

The elder sister, Rebekah, educates herself by reading her father's books - she would like to be a scientist, but falls in love with her cousin, Frank, who is, almost at once, unfaithful to her. Much of the novel is narrated from her viewpoint. Her marriage settlement and her purchase and management of a small farm ensure her financial independence and that of her children. She is then able to negotiate with her husband on an equal basis as to their future relationships when she feels no longer able to continue with the marriage. The painful process of jealousy and despair, which Undine also experienced, are developed in more detail in From Man To Man. Rebekah's physical love for her husband leads her to ignore signs of his unfaithfulness. Finally she rejects him, after a series of dramatic scenes in which she discovers he has made her black servant pregnant. Their relationship settles into a certain peace, and a change in her is marked by an image from her garden symbolising new life.

> "In after years the sight of a firefly brought always back that night to her, with a sense of the coming dawn after the dark."[40]

Like Undine and Waldo, Rebekah constantly finds peace in her relationship with nature, which gives her strength. Her other consolation is her self-education; she has insisted

on her own study in which whe writes a diary of her preoccupations with the meaning of life. She keeps the door locked, eventually giving the key to a man who has become her friend on a basis of mutual respect and interests. This room becomes a symbol of Rebekah's integrity and independence and also her isolation. Unlike Undine and Lyndall the search for control over her life does not lead to her death; she finds the resources within herself which enable her to live as she wishes. She dresses unconventionally, ignoring society's comments, and takes her husband's half-caste child into her house, to bring her up with her children, in spite of the eldest son's protests as he becomes conscious that white society does not approve. All the same, Rebekah treats Sartje rather as a servant, not as equal with her children. It seems clear that Rebekah and Mr Drummond are representatives of the New Woman and the New Man described in Olive Schreiner's Women and Labour as the ideal. Rebekah cares deeply for her sister, but neither can communicate with the other about their unhappiness.

Rebekah's sister, Bertie, like Em, grows up with a loving desire to please everyone, and is easily seduced by her tutor, who runs away back to England immediately. From this point Bertie is described as being destroyed by the men and women in society who believe in the image of marriage, rather than acknowledging the reality, as in Rebekah's unhappy marriage. The double standard for men is described by Bertie's Aunt, who rejects her, when she is found out:

> "'...a woman's character is like gossamer, when you've once dropped it in the mud and pulled it about it can never be put right again.

'With a man it's different; he can live down everything. People say, 'Oh he was young, he's changed'; they never say that of a woman; but the soap isn't invented that can wash a woman's character clean.'"[41]

The images from everyday life experience stress the Aunt's thoughtless acceptance of the unwritten rules of the society in which Bertie is blamed and takes on all the guilt, as a scapegoat might, for her seduction. The Aunt is protecting a society in which such rules clearly only really benefit men. Like Bertie's Aunt, other women in the novel, such as Mrs Drummond, Frank's mistress, viciously condemn Bertie through the use of a network of gossip so that eventually they destroy her. Olive Schreiner stresses in this novel what Lyndall had observed in The Story of An African Farm - the importance of presenting the right image in bourgeois society. Bertie's decline into prostitution in which she is treated only as a possession in London, is cleverly contrasted with Rebekah's control over her life. Only her sister and Mr Drummond, who understand the processes by which Bertie becomes a prostitute, refuse to condemn her. Olive Schreiner emphasises through the development of the novel that only a few women like Rebekah are able to

> "through the intellect draw a kind of life - a poor, broken, half-asphyxiated life, not what might have been...but still life. But Bertie and such as Bertie have only one life possible, the life of the personal relations; if that fails them, all fails."[42]

Olive Schreiner also attempts in perhaps, a rather melodramatic, over-stated manner, to describe women's sexual feelings which lead Rebekah, for example, to marry Frank although she has

previously disliked him for his rough manners and insensitivity to people's feelings. Rebekah becomes aware of a "vague insatiable hunger" or perhaps a voice

> "from that primal depth of nature which...through all the ages has summoned the human woman, in spite of the great Chaldean curse, 'I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception,' along one path."[43]

Olive Schreiner emphasises the role of the mother far more in this novel. Rebekah is described as a loving mother who looks after her children herself, although exhausted by bearing four children quickly, so that her husband finds her less attractive and justifies his affairs. Rebekah takes the main responsibility for the moral education of her children, and, for example, in one very long talk to them, conveys her liberal beliefs on racism.

The novel also marks a movement of the white middle class settlers to the towns from the country as the South African government establishes control. An interest in culture is developing - Rebekah and her husband go to concerts and the theatre. Frank goes on hunting trips into the country killing animals for sport, rather than for food. As in her previous novels Olive Schreiner closely observes developments in society. However, Rebekah, through her farm, and her garden, remains in touch with the natural rhythms of nature in strong contrast with Bertie, who is kept in an oppressive, corrupt London, first as a rich Jew's mistress, and then as a prostitute. Bertie becomes a victim of the same society in which Rebekah finds ways of surviving.

Although From Man To Man is incomplete and the philosophical reflections as well as some descriptive passages are overlong, the novel is a fascinating exploration of women's personal suffering; unlike her previous novels in which the heroines' opposition to society's unwritten rules ended in their deaths Olive Schreiner is suggesting that the women who survive are those who have an inner strength of the intellect. She also indicates that there are feminist men like Mr Drummond who are, unlike Albert in Undine and Frank, sensitive to the needs of individual women. But the novel is also a lament for the wasted lives of uneducated, financially dependent women who have suffered in a patriarchal society and who, unlike Undine and Rebekah, have had no intellectual outlet for their feelings: except those allowed for them by men, like sewing and knitting. Bertie's silent pain in her situation is only alleviated by sewing an elaborate Christening robe for her former fiance's baby. The symbolic acceptance of her changed life is rejected by the mother who had schemed against Bertie's innocent trust to achieve the marriage. Olive Schreiner examines such personal experiences and draws from them universal conclusions to which, she believed, many women could relate.

> "The poet, when his heart is weighted, writes a sonnet, and the painter paints a picture...but the woman who is only a woman, what has she but her needle? In that torn bit of brown leather brace worked through and through with yellow silk, in that bit of white rag with invisible stitching, lying among the fallen leaves and rubbish that the wind has blown into the gutter or the street corner lies all the passion of some woman's soul finding expression. Has the pen or the pencil dipped so deep

in the blood of the human race as the needle?"[44]

Such images from women's everyday experience reflect the sympathetic understanding Olive Schreiner felt for their limited lives. Her novels suggest how women can by thoughtfully analysing their ideas and personal relationships in a search for truth become independent within society by being unafraid of it. As Lyndall says as she rejects a conventional marriage:

> "'I am not afraid of the world. I will fight the world.'"[45]

How far does this belief apply to Olive Schreiner's attitude to the black and coloured women who exist in the fringes of her novels? Without their more or less invisible labour the white characters would not lead such lives. Olive Schreiner's writing reflects the liberal attitudes of the period; she does not make the connection. Sartje becomes a symbol of Rebekah's moral values which lead her to behave in an unconventional way - but Sartje is still brought up to call Rebekah "mistress".

Notes

1. The Story of An African Farm, London, Penguin, reissued 1939. First published London, Chapman and Hall, 1833.

2. See the Introduction for more detailed comments on publishing.

3. For example:
Vera Buchanan Gould: Not Without Honour. The Life and Writings of Olive Schreiner, London, Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1954.
Marion Friedman: Olive Schreiner: A Study in Latent Meanings, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand Press, 1954.
D.L. Hobman: Olive Schreiner. Her Friends and Times, London, Watts, 1955.
Ruth First and Ann Scott: Olive Schreiner: A Biography, London, Andre Deutsch, 1980.
Johannes Meintjes: Olive Schreiner, Portrait of a South African Woman, Johannesburg, Hugh Keartland, 1965. (Re-written from Afrikaans, 1946.)
S.C. Cronwright-Schreiner, Ed.: The Letters of Olive Schreiner, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1924.

4. Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland, republished Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1974. First published London, Unwin, 1897.

5. Women and Labour, republished London, Virago, 1978. published London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1911.

6. Undine, London, Ernest Bevan Ltd., 1929. Introd. S.C. Cronwright-Schreiner.

7. Olive Schreiner's husband pointed this out in his Introduction to The Story of An African Farm (op. cit.), as well as other autobiographical elements. Pp. 15, 16, 17.

8. From Man To Man, or Perhaps Only..., Republished London, Virago, 1980. 1st published London, Unwin, 1926.

9. Marion Friedmann believes the asthma was a symptom of neurotic behaviour (op. cit., p. 21); Elaine Showalter: (A Literature of Their Own. British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing, London, Virago, 1978, p. 198) feels that Olive Schreiner had a "perverse will to fail" and like Ruth First and Ann Scott (op. cit., p. 19) thinks she was unable to reconcile the paradoxes in her life between the way she lived and the way she wanted to live. D.L. Hobman suggests the asthma recurred when her independence seemed to be threatened, during her marriage, for example. (Chapter 9).

10. Dreams, First published London, Unwin, 1890. Republished London, Wildwood House, 1982.

11. Letters, (op. cit.): To Havelock Ellis, 4 Robertson Terrace. 27th Jan. 1885.

12. Letters (op. cit.): To Havelock Ellis, Alassio, 24th Jan. 1888.

13. Letters (op. cit.): To W. Stead. Cape Town 1890.

14. Letters (op. cit.): To Havelock Ellis, Bole Hill, 19th July 1884.

15. Letters (op. cit.): To Mrs Frances Smith, De Aar, Oct. 1908.

16. The Story of An African Farm. op. cit. Preface. p. 7.

17. Letters (op. cit.): To Havelock Ellis, Cape Town. 1st Dec. 1889.

18. Letters (op. cit.): To Havelock Ellis, Buxton. 7th Aug. 1884.

19. Undine. (op. cit.) p. 127.

20. ibid. p. 43.
(These words are echoed by Rebekah in From Man To Man. She imagines being a man in a longer, more thoughtful passage:

> "She felt the great freedom open to her, no places shut off from her, her long chain broken, all work possible for her, no law to say this and this is for a woman, you are woman...Oh how beautiful to be a man and be able to take care of and defend all the creatures weaker and smaller than you are."
> op. cit. p. 226.

Marion Friedmann thought Olive Schreiner might be a lesbian but there seems no evidence for this. op. cit. p. 53.

It seems that until she met her husband she was unfortunate in the men she chose to love, but they may have been upset by her independent mind.

21. Undine p. 107.

22. ibid. p. 239.

23. See particularly the ending of The Story of An African Farm. Undine op. cit. p. 204.

24. Undine op. cit. p. 253.

25. Letters, op. cit. To Havelock Ellis, St. Leonards. 20th Nov. 1884.

26. compare Undine (op. cit.) Chapter 1 and The Story of An African Farm (op. cit.) for the experiences of the children; also the first chapter of From Man To Man (op. cit.)

27. The Story of An African Farm: op. cit. p. 142. Waldo's stranger tells him the story of the hunter after truth: it is told again in the parable "The Hunter" in Dreams, op. cit. p. 25.

28. ibid. p. 48.

29. ibid. p. 79.

30. ibid. p. 173.

31. ibid. p. 262. The image of a woman seeking truth by looking in her mirror at moments of crisis is used by other women writers, such as Pauline Smith in The Beadle.

32. ibid. p. 269.

33. ibid. p. 190.

34. ibid. p. 255.
This compares with his earlier comment that

> "I don't believe in a man who can't make a woman obey him." p. 189.

35. ibid. p. 276.

36. ibid. p. 91.

37. Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland. op. cit. p. 42.

38. Olive Schreiner was only recording in fictional form what happened in real life. For example, see Hon. Sidney Peel: Trooper 8008lY, London, Arnold, 1901, 3rd imp.

39. Letters. op. cit. To Havelock Ellis. St. Leonards on Sea. 29th Oct. 1888.

40. From Man To Man p. 411.

41. ibid. p. 326.

42. ibid. p. 121.

43. ibid. p. 86.

44. ibid. p. 322.

45. The Story of An African Farm. op. cit. p. 33.

Chapter 2

Sarah Gertrude Millin. 1888 - 1967

The Early "River" Novels

Sarah Gertrude Millin is known today for one novel, God's Step Children, which was first published in 1924 and recently reprinted[1]. The theme is miscegenation and it is based on the writer's experience as a child growing up near Kimberley. Olive Schreiner had touched on the subject in From Man To Man but Mrs Millin was the first woman writer to examine relationships between the white settlers and the natives as the main concern of a novel[2].

While she was alive Mrs Millin dominated the South African literary scene (after Olive Schreiner's death), producing sixteen novels and other works such as short stories, biographies of Smuts and Rhodes, accounts of South African life,

two autobiographies and her war diaries[3]. She was rather critical of Mrs Schreiner for not publishing more[4]. Like Olive Schreiner, whom she knew personally, she was the child of immigrants. Although her parents were Jewish refugees from Lithuania her first language was English because her father, a trader, was committed to English culture. Mrs Millin also learnt Yiddish and taught herself German. Like Olive Schreiner she read widely in European literature, history and philosopy. She was sent to Boarding School when she was very young and she was unhappy there away from her large family of brothers and sisters. Although she could have gone to University she chose instead to train as a music teacher, but, after living at home for a short period she married Philip Millin who was training to be a barrister. To help sort out their financial problems she began to write newspaper articles. But eventually they both became very successful. Philip Millin ended his career as a Supreme Court Judge and his wife's work was well known in Europe and the States.

Unlike that of Olive Schreiner, Sarah Gertrude Millin's marriage seems to have been very happy. There were no children but her autobiographies do not record her feelings about this. Many of her novels involve descriptions of motherhood. She also felt responsible for the death of a younger child when she was small - an experience similar to that of Olive Schreiner's. Her husband died in 1952, leaving his wife increasingly depressed and isolated. All her life she suffered from insomnia, and, during one sad period a fear of cancer, an illness given to a character in one of her novels, Mrs Bissaker[5]. Like Olive Schreiner she chose her early

subject matter from her childhood and adolescence, concentrating usually on the experiences of women. She had always wanted to be a writer as well. But unlike Olive Schreiner and other white writers of the period, such as William Plomer and Roy Campbell, who felt restricted by white South African attitudes to culture and went to Europe to enlarge their experience, Mrs Millin chose to remain there. All South African writers seem to love the land and Mrs Millin expressed this powerful feeling in her autobiography The Night is Long, when describing where she lived as a child. For example:

> "in some way, I don't understand, I belong to this sucked-dry, used-up, thrown-aside scrap of the earth's surface where I should hate to live again..."[6]

She travelled widely in Europe and the States and met and corresponded with many writers including Pauline Smith. She supported the status quo in a way which Olive Schreiner was unable to do. Her friendship with Smuts, who also greatly admired Olive Schreiner, led to her writing his autobiography. She also wrote about the attitudes of her Government towards black Africans, as for instance in a short history of South Africa published in the Second World War. She supported Rhodes who, she felt, had been right under international law

> "to take a savage land"

and that, although she was aware that the natives' rights were limited:

> "One dare not ask the five million Europeans in Africa to be mixed up - live as one - with them, nor has one the right to ask them to abandon what they have created."[7]

One of several interesting paradoxes which one can find in Mrs Millin's life and work is that, although so conscious of her Jewish race and the sufferings of the Jewish people

in the war that she became a strong supporter of the new state of Israel and turned against Smuts to become a supporter of the Nationalist Government in 1948 because he would not promote Jews to the Bench, she did not relate the sufferings of Jews to those of the coloureds and blacks, in the way that other descendants of Jewish immigrants did in South Africa. Indeed, she spoke in Trafalgar Square after Sharpeville in defence of apartheid and worked hard to help Welensky in Rhodesia. Mrs Millin died in 1967 leaving her last work - a review of world history - unfinished.

In her autobiographies Mrs Millin describes for posterity her feelings about her work: in almost the same way as Olive Schreiner wrote about her thought processes in letters to her friends Mrs Millin analyses her writing. The difference is that Olive Schreiner was not writing for publication. Even in her autobiographies Mrs Millin is hoping to illuminate for the reader the way in which a writer works. She began writing in "the empty days" before she was married[8]. She had a strong feeling of cultural isolation. She tried to follow Arnold Bennett's advice in his book, How to Become An Author but unlike Pauline Smith his advice did not suit her. She wrote:

> "I knew my drawbacks. I was under-educated. I had no experience of the great world. I had never met a writing person...My only stock-in-trade as a writer was that odd world which was peculiarly mine, the River Diggings."[9]

Her isolation became a challenge to her and she aimed at creating a story with a theme, next deciding on a place and characters, following the structure of the realist European novel. She liked to write 1,000 words a day.

"My novels are not fashionably long. Partly through a desire for exact and unqualified statement, and particularly when I am much concerned, I put things as shortly and sharply as I may."[10]

Her first novel, The Dark River[11], introduces the theme of miscegenation and her strong views on it. She sets the scene at the beginning of the novel, describing the layers of the new society still in the process of being created by the white rush to get rich. In the Diamond Diggings the whites consisted of

"mixed small fry" who have "drifted down" or been "forced down..."

Then there are also the

"children of stray and very poor Dutch settlers; the natural half-caste off-spring of the older diggers; here and there the family of a better-class farmer."

and,

"too, there were a few shop and hotel keepers, possibly Jewish..."

Finally, well-separated from the rest, are the natives and half-castes, up the hill and farthest away from the water[12]. The ironic tone of her narrative, typical of her style, suggests, perhaps, a certain moral superiority.

In this first novel there is an attempt to place the terrible living conditions of the blacks and coloureds within a political context, through the author's strong voice:

"A paternal Government, with no impertinent interference, gave them, if nothing else, at least full liberty to be sick and die in any way they chose."[13]

And in the introduction to God's Step Children her apparently sympathetic position towards the half-caste children is defined in long, alliterative, repetitive rhetoric:

> "Mixed breeds of South Africa: the off-spring of the careless and casual; unwanted in their birth; unwanted in their lives; unwanted, scorned by black and white alike."[14]

Her belief is that the children are the product of degenerate whites and blacks. Their fate was decided by their birth.

> "One was born, one was cold, one was hungry, one got ill, one died. That was the kaffir destiny."[15]

Her simple, direct, rather journalistic style makes an immediate impact. Her position belonged to the "mainstream" white thinking of the period, supported both by her personal experience and her reading[16]. All the same, as a writer, similarly to Olive Schreiner, she believed that:

> "I am all the people I write about, black, brown or white, old or young, male or female, good or evil."[17]

This amazingly arrogant claim, given her limited perspective of the lives of blacks and coloureds, is one by which she should, ultimately, be judged. It raises the question for the first time but not the last, as to whether white writers can ever write as blacks in a meaningful way.

The Dark River illustrates Mrs Millin's views on race in South Africa in a dramatic and organised way. The novel follows the contrasting lives of three sisters and their marriages to very different men. Although events outside the women's personal lives such as the First World War affect them indirectly the novel concentrates on the movement of the middle classes from the countryside - farms and the

Diamond Diggings - where they make their money - to the Towns, and their personal relationships. Like her other novels it is a family saga. Conflict arises between the sisters, their lovers and husbands and their father, for instance. Like all Mrs Millin's novels it consists of a series of short episodes, connected by theme, and narrated in the third person by different characters to create interest and suspense. The novel opens with a description of the Diamond Diggings. Unlike Olive Schreiner, Mrs Millin writes from a man's viewpoint at the beginning of the novel - an immigrant from England, like Undine, but a man who has a limited education and perspective. As usual Mrs Millin introduces a new character in a few sentences, describing his personality and appearance in a clear, simple style. From this starting point she indicates her character's thoughts, feelings and actions; but, unlike Olive Schreiner's characters, they do not develop in response to events, but react to them. John Oliver lacks Undine's creative imagination which transformed the diggings into a symbol of hope. Mrs Millin concentrates on the soul-destroying aspects of the Diamond Fields, foreshadowing the story's personal tragedies. In an image from her reading she describes John Oliver's reactions as he crosses the river to get to the Lost Hope Diggings in 1902.

> "It was summer-time and the river ran heavy and dark and swift, and John Oliver told himself that the oarsman looked like the Boatman on the Styx, coming to take him across to doom. The apt comparison pleased him while it depressed him."[18]

In this way Mrs Millin creates some sympathy for the apparent hero of the novel and suspense as to his future.

John Oliver's relationships with the natives illustrate Mrs Millin's thesis, however, that only degenerate white men and black women become sexually involved. Loneliness and lack of money may lead to such relationships but, as in Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland, white men also despise the blacks who are mere possessions.

> "'What a life! Nothing to do but drink. Not a white woman about. These filthy blacks. These Annies... there was a black one with a woolly head. It died. Thank God!'"[19]

Like Olive Schreiner Mrs Millin has a good ear for recording the rhythms of different kinds of dialogue. However, the coloured and black women are themselves described as having a sexual awareness at an early age, as well as a desire for money and a lazy life, living off a white man, which indicates Mrs Millin's view that they are not entirely victims. John Oliver meets his "Annie" at a wedding.

> "She was slim and lithe and graceful; and carried her head, as do all natives, regally. She was probably about seventeen years of age and had a small impudent face, set on a long neck, and a general demeanor of sly wantonness."[20]

Her good looks do not last, and after several children Annie becomes a fat, lazy alcoholic.

John Oliver's other contact with blacks is as their master, organising his "boys'" work on the river diggings. Mrs Millin's ironic tone implies a criticism of such arrangements at times but in her later novels, particularly God's Step Children, she does not relate the work of the blacks so closely to the wealth of her white characters. Her attitude is

ambiguous: she seems to hate the effects of the unfair search for diamonds. However, the novel concentrates on the moral aspects of miscegenation. Through his relationship with Annie, John Oliver becomes an anti-hero. Much of the suspense in the central part of the novel depends on how and when his white wife, Hester, will find out. Hester does not leave her husband because of his financial failures or his drunken abuse, but because she discovers his liaison with Annie. Her revulsion is so strong that she returns, humiliated, to her father's house, to bring up her child alone. John Oliver returns to Europe to enlist in the war.

Mrs Millin's novels concentrate their plots around the importance of marriage. They may end in marriage like The Dark River or with the resolution of marital problems, like Mary Glenn. The implication is that this is helping to create a stable white bourgeois society, based on black labour. Her view seems pessimistic and cynical but her novels are interesting because of the insights they give into South African life at this period. In Mary Glenn, for instance, Emma, a schoolteacher, hopes to improve her status through marriage to a wealthy farmer, but she is not certain that she loves him in a romantic way.

> "She knew life. It was a tournament where people were divided into groups. One strove against the competitor in one's own group for admission into the next group, and there again the struggle began."[21]

In this society of white immigrants, consolidating their power over the blacks in South Africa in this period at the beginning of the century, into the twenties, the majority

of white bourgeois women are freed from the responsibility of earning a living and can concentrate on analysing their personal relationships. But they, unlike Olive Schreiner's heroines, accept the status quo, and are dependent like Em and Bertie on these personal relationships which are controlled in effect by men. Marriage is inevitable as Miriam realises in Adam's Rest.

> "The time came for a woman to marry and she married. Neither for love nor for any practical advantage but simply because it was her destiny to marry."[22]

Until she married she lived at home, occupying herself with "woman's work" - sewing, organising the house and so on:

> "It was well to speak of independence for a woman. What could one do with the independence? Could one eat it, wear it, speak to it, love it? It was, after all but a euphony for loneliness. Who that is happy, is independent - independent of ties? At the most, was not that kind of independence but the saddest of dependences? Dependence on oneself alone?"[23]

Alma's sad, heart felt cry of loneliness illustrates not only Mrs Millin's power to express women's unhappiness sensitively and clearly, but also the fundamental dilemma for women, which Olive Schreiner examined in her novels and her non-fiction arriving at the opposite viewpoint, however[24]. Such acceptance of women's dependence on men perpetuate their power over us.

Mrs Millin creates some powerful sympathetic images of women's loneliness, particularly that of spinsters, forced to work as school teachers in South Africa because they have no money,

no family and no qualifications for other work. For example, in The Dark River Miss Wilson's

> "freshly-darned stockings lying in little balls on the bed,"[25]

arouse pity in her future husband who is visiting her room as a poignant symbol of her lack of money, and her isolation. Miss Wilson's simple, honest expressions of her situation are very moving but reflect the attitude of the period (and even of today) in which a woman's appearance can mean everything. She knows:

> "'I'm thirty-two, and I'm plain. I can't do the sort of things pretty women can do without making a fool of myself. And at the same time I have the same nature and I can't help doing them. No one will ever marry me...'"[26]

Miss Wilson's self pitying lack of belief in herself is transformed through marriage, and she becomes, like other such women in Mrs Millin's novels, a happy, contented mother.

However Mrs Millin is not a romantic novelist in the sense that marriage always brings happiness to her characters. Women are aware that in return for financial security they have to give good value. Emma, lacking confidence in her appearance, compared with that of Mary Glenn, tries hard to find suitable dresses which would indicate her husband's status as a Doctor and landowner.

> "In the end she would buy one out of sheer weariness, and no sooner would it be delivered, than she would feel that she would rather lose money on it than have to keep it, that this dress, of all dresses, was precisely the wrong dress - yet even that would not help her, for it only

meant the renewed agony of having to select a substitute."[27]

Such characters' introspection arouses sympathy for their situation, because the reader follows Emma's thought processes. Unlike Olive Schreiner, however, Mrs Millin does not examine the reason for Emma's position except in terms of personal relationships. Hester, in The Dark River, remains with John Oliver even after he beats her up because marriage is a life long commitment and so, as his wife

"whither he went she must follow."[28]

An unhappy marriage can even lead to an early death, as in God's Step Children. Mrs Linsell dies young:

"His wife's association with him was one long unease to her."[29]

In An Artist In The Family a middle-aged wife and mother, Mrs Bissaker, who is not even given a first name, to emphasise the importance the character places on her two roles in life, suddenly realises her isolation as she watches a sunset from a train.

"No one could feel, as he himself, the individual's pain of flesh and spirit. Wherever one stood on one's own world there was the centre of the circle of life. And when darkness came, the rays from other worlds could send a friendly glow, but they could not change night into day."[30]

This image, unusual in Mrs Millin's early novels because of its length, is reminiscent of Undine's realisation of the beauty that can be found in an individual landscape, because both women reveal that they have a creative imagination at a time of stress. But, unlike Undine, or Theo, Mrs Bissaker's son, Mrs Bissaker does not use her imagination

to write or paint. (Her problems in the novel are resolved in terms of personal relationships in a very weak, unconvincing ending.)

The emphasis in the novels is on women's dependence on men as a natural process, supported by the Church, which does not, however, have a very important part in the novels. Women are wives, mothers and daughters, while men work as farmers, businessmen, artists and in the diamond diggings or mines. Except for poor women, who have to earn their living, usually as teachers, women are financially dependent on men and are not expected to work outside the house. Hester, in Mrs Millin's first novel, is the only exception to this - when her marriage ends she trains as a nurse because her unhappy experiences lead her to want her independence, but her sister, Alma, makes it clear that Hester is an exception. Within the limitations of their lives, however, women can often be energetic and supportive of their husband's position. In The Dark River Mrs Millin ironically describes how a woman conceals her intelligence and organising ability from her husband, making him believe he is in control. Everyone believes she is:

> "below her husband's level. His cultivated English and wide vocabulary, in juxtaposition to her heavy Dutch accent and very simple choice of language, were probably at the root of the general impression."[31]

Women react to men's domination in the novels. Their insecurity makes it difficult for them to form close relationships with other women, even with their sisters, unlike Rebekah and Baby-Bertie in From Man To Man. Jealousy nearly destroys the relationship between Ruth and Alma in The Dark River

when Ruth believes George regrets their marriage. In a familiar image from nature Mrs Millin stresses Ruth's feelings, which lead her to change her style of dress so as to appear more attractive to George than her sister.

> "...there was a seed sown that matured under the dark earth and began to thrust its sprouts above ground."[32]

Mrs Millin does not idealise the role of the mother either. The birth of the child glorifies the image of the mother, as Mrs Millin claims in another ironic comment:

> "The most ordinary woman in the world makes no scruples in her claim to having produced a wonder of the universe as a personal extension."[33]

Hester leaves her child to her sister to bring up, and in <u>God's Step Children</u>, another spinster looks after her unwanted half-brother.

Mrs Millin describes children as individuals with their own personalities, and observes how although they may at first make an unhappy marriage meaningful, this can bring intense suffering to their mothers who, usually, have the main responsibility for their up-bringing. In <u>Adam's Rest</u> when Janet's beautiful son, Felix, falls in love with a coloured girl his mother suddenly realises:

> "Felix did not need her. She mattered so little in his scheme of existence that she might as well be dead."[34]

Mrs Bissaker's jealousy of her son's English wife leads to her insomnia and depression, when she realises that he is no longer dependent on her. Although sons are expected to leave home and to set up their own households, unmarried daughters have to take on the role of their dead mothers, until, in their turn, they are replaced by step-mothers. Both in <u>The Dark River</u> and in <u>God's Step Children</u> Mrs Millin

describes this unhappy situation for women of this period which leads to depression and low self esteem. On the other hand to a man the birth of a son signifies male virility and the continuance of the dynasty, as in God's Step Children.

There is little consolation for women in natural beauty for these women, as in the novels by Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith. Mary Glenn, who is often left alone while her husband is working on the farm feels that her depression at the loss of her son is intensified by the landscape:

> "And if there was nothing in one's self with which to fill the world, this wide emptiness was unbearably desolate. But if one was greatly happy or unhappy it was good. For then the waves of our being might spread unto space and never encounter an obstacle to hinder them."[35]

Like Mrs Bisset Mary Glenn's sense of the natural world emphasises her isolation.

An image from An Artist in the Family adds another dimension to the story of family conflicts: to Theo the desert becomes a symbol of the violent black threat surrounding white civilisation.

> "Theo painted the savage landscape and felt, as he did so, that here was a world, old and secret, and brooding and waiting, passionate and inexplicable, the begetter of dark men and of fates beyond human calculation."[36]

The repetitive, rhythmic piling on of emotive words stresses the fear of the Africans upon which white racism feeds. In contrast the newly created town of Johannesburg with its cosmopolitan excitement provides a place of escape from res-

ponsibilities, as the bourgeois whites move into the cities:

> "The great idea in Johannesburg seemed to be that one must not think. It was wiser not to think. If one thought too deeply one might realise the war...one... made of the war a new pastime in life, and went one's way complacently and cheerfully."[37]

With such satirical comments Mrs Millin distances herself from her characters, creating a standard by which they can be judged.

Although her earliest novels emphasise white women's relationships within marriage Mrs Millin became concerned in Adam's Rest and in God's Step Children to describe the lives of coloured people sympathetically, as individuals, rather than as stereotypes. Adam's Rest describes life in a small town, and the connections between a white and coloured family over eighteen years beginning and ending with wars. The events are seen from a white woman's viewpoint; Miriam Lincoln's early life seems to be based largely on Mrs Millin's experiences, playing at a concert for example at her boarding school, and worrying about her appearance. The character of the painter, Emery Maythem, seems to be based on her brother who died in the First World War. Miriam has a feeling of superiority, however, which she feels places her, socially, above the coloured Croft family, who in their turn despise their "almost black cousins". Their position is to become as white as possible. However white and coloured are dependent on each other: Mrs Croft is a good nurse and that places her on the edge of the society but Miriam herself did not feel able to mix socially with the Crofts whom she found repulsive because of their colour, although the children

went to the same school.

"It was a feeling as old as civilisation"[38]

In a number of discussions on race in the course of the novel other viewpoints are put forward, as when the English artist Emery suggests that black blood is irrelevant in South Africa.

"'...what difference does a drop of black actually make? The Crofts here, for instance, don't seem to me any worse than white people of their class. In fact, I honestly think they are better than your poor whites.' 'Can't you see that it's a degenerate taint?' Miriam protested. 'Like lunacy or crime--'"[39]

But Miriam at last acknowledges the individuality of the Crofts. For instance, Susie Maxwell, with whom Miriam went to school, although coloured, leads a respectable life, showing gratitude for any interest shown in her. Their different social status is marked by Miriam calling Susie Maxwell "Susie", while she calls Miriam "Mrs Hugo". Mrs Millin's brilliant observation of social nuances is well illustrated by her description of Susie's smile.

"Susie Maxwell was smiling her polite and reticent smile. Just so much might she smile at a really white woman. It had to be an exact thing, that smile. A little less would signify ungratefulness of the condescension that had evoked it, a little more, pushfulness."[40]

Paradoxically Mrs Millin's sympathies are clearly with the coloured woman in this passage and at the end of the novel Miriam is (finally) able to accept a coloured woman as her equal when she meets Frances, Susie's daughter, now a young widow. Miriam has been profoundly upset by her nephew's death and in her mind Felix and Frances' husband have become confused. Instinctively she reacts to Frances' grief.

"She did not realise it herself, but it was the first time she had asked a Croft to walk with her."[41]

In this novel Mrs Millin becomes the first white woman novelist to portray coloured women as individuals. But this liberal position is undermined by her realisation of the mass of Kaffirs who live outside the town, to whom missionaries and kind white women offer help. (There is no connection in this novel as in The Dark River between the position of the blacks and the whites' responsibility for it.)[42] Mrs Millin is reinforcing a view of the Kaffirs as godless and wild, in comparison to the advancement of the whites. The coloured are superior, but still in a class below whites. In God's Step Children, however, Mrs Millin crosses another barrier between the races and creates a portrait of coloureds from their viewpoint. The novel tells the story of four generations of a coloured family, beginning with the marriage of a lonely, neurotic missionary to a black woman. As in Adam's Rest the coloured children of this liaison aim to become accepted as white. More explicitly in this novel, whose title indicates Mrs Millin's position on race, black blood is the image used to indicate the terrible limitation on what can be achieved by coloureds. Barry Linsell's "secret darkness in his blood"[43] limits his intellectual capabilities compared to those of white men, for instance. His return to work as a missionary with his Kaffir relations after his white English wife returns home, marks a carefully logical conclusion to this well-organised novel. Far more than in Adam's Rest the message is driven home that coloureds cannot succeed in becoming white, although paradoxically, that is what they most want. Barry's mother, Elmira, dies in terrible poverty. Mrs Millin, however, describes her tragic life

sympathetically. It is clear that power is well-established in the hands of the whites. Mr Linsell offers to pay for Elmira's education at a white boarding school. However as a coloured child, who looks white, she is a failure academically.

> "It was if her brain, running a race against the brains of white children, was very quick at starting but soon tired and lagged behind, so that the time came when it fell altogether out of the running."[44]

Elmira attracts a white lover as she is physically mature at 16, but his family discover she is coloured and she

> "had lost her white status and her white hopes."[45]

Mr Linsell threatens Elmira's parents with loss of their livelihood on his estate if they do not agree to his marrying her. Again and again Mrs Millin emphasises the low status of coloureds in this society, while apparently sympathising with the individual's position. Elmira's youth and her phsyical beauty are her only assets in the marriage, which gives her status and wealth. She hates her old husband, and Mrs Millin indicates this, for example, in a powerful image of physical revulsion which is not limited by colour:

> "She hated the light, shiny, old skin on the back of his hands."[46]

Mr Linsell's marriage across the colour bar, legal in the Cape at this period, arouses comment on the honeymoon among whites, but he ignores this, until Elmira fails as a housewife and he begins to insult her racially. Although she runs off with another white man leaving her child with its father, her dying words to her son Barry indicate that her lover was only interested in her money, and it seems that, like Baby-Bertie, she eventually became a prostitute. Her

conclusion is that:

> "'It is better for people like us not to be born.'"[47]

re-inforcing Mrs Millin's message that relationships between black and white are unnatural and that coloureds are:

> "nothing but an untidiness on God's earth...an affront against Nature."[48]

God's Step Children brought Mrs Millin fame and financial success. It was particularly popular in the United States, which has its own "colour problem". According to Snyman, it was translated into ten languages. Paradoxically Mrs Millin would not allow it to be translated into German because she was aware of Nazi persecution of the Jews, but Snyman comments:

> "Ironically, it was used in Germany as a racial novel in the campaign against the Jews."[49]

The implication of the novel's position on race, in spite of its attempt to portray individual coloureds as suffering from oppression is that the races should live separately, and that whites are superior[50], although maybe in England a different arrangement was possible.

Mrs Millin went on to write many more novels about different aspects of South African life, but her work has not survived the test of time. It was all out of print until recently when the South African publisher David Philips republished God's Step Children with a Preface by Tony Voss suggesting that it should be read as a historical document, part of the development of apartheid.

Although she was in control of her own life, financially

independent and with a happy marriage, paradoxically her women characters with their dependence on men indicate that Mrs Millin did not support feminism. Unlike Olive Schreiner, who was attempting to change women's consciousness of their position, Mrs Millin's novels support the status quo of the period[51], and she never tried to resolve the contradictions apparent in her life and work with regards to either racism or the position of women. She saw life as a struggle to survive, in which people were naturally divided by class and race. John Oliver in The Dark River sums up her position:

> "..conventionality is the accepted heritage of tradition, because it is the accumulated wisdom of the ages."[52]

Notes

1. God's Step Children, London, Constable, 1924. New edition, 1951. Republished Craighall, Ad. Donker, 1986.

2. Men writers like Rider Haggard discussed this in earlier novels.

3. See for information about the life and work of Mrs Millin:
J.P.L. Snyman: The Works of Sarah Gertrude Millin, Johannesburg, Central News Agency, Lt., 1955.
Martin Rubin: Sarah Gertrude Millin: A South African Life, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1977.
Her autobiographies:
The Night Is Long, London, Faber and Faber, 1941.
The Measure of My Days, London, Faber, 1955.

4. Mrs Millin commented tartly that:

   > "I cannot conceive why she should have spent forty years of her life on a novel - never finished - and I don't wonder - that had as its theme the wickedness of men towards women." The Night Is Long, op. cit., p. 97.

5. An Artist In The Family, London, Constable, 1928.

6. The Night Is Long, op. cit., p. 18.

7. Britain in Pictures: South Africa, London, Collins, 1941, pp. 33-34.

8. The Night Is Long, op. cit., p. 90. This comment indicates her views on marriage were very conventional!

9. ibid., p. 92.

10. ibid., p. 95.

11. The Dark River, First published 1920. London, Constable Miscellany, 1928.

12. ibid., pp. 15-16.

13. ibid., p. 17. For an analysis of the lives of black and coloured women in this period see Maids and Madams, op. cit.

14. God's Step Children, p. xii.

15. The Dark River, p. 189.

16. See J.M. Coetzee: White Writing, Chapter 6, "Blood, Taint, Flaw, Degeneration." New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 1988. J.M. Coetzee analyses Mrs Millin's attitudes to race, placing them in the mainstream of white thinking of this period.

17. The Night Is Long, p. 119.

18. The Dark River, p. 3.

19. ibid., p. 15.

Annie was the name given by whites to all coloured or black women. When Mrs Millin wrote about individual coloured women she gave them English names - another way of control over their lives.

20. ibid. p. 37.

21. Mary Glenn, London, Constable, 1925, p. 32.

22. Adam's Rest, London, Constable, 1928. 1st published 1922.

23. The Dark River. p. 38.

24. For an example of the present day discussion see: Sue Hubbard, "The High Price of Freedom" - Guardian Women, 18/1/89 and Jane Miller: Women Writing About Men,. London, Virago, 1986, for an analysis of nineteenth century attitudes to marriage in literature.

25. The Dark River. p. 39.

26. ibid. p. 40.

27. Mary Glenn. p. 37.

28. The Dark River. p. 175.

29. God's Step Children. p. 101.

30. An Artist In The Family. p.178.

31. The Dark River. p. 21.

32. ibid. p. 267.

33. ibid. p. 135.

34. Adam's Rest. p. 215.

35. Mary Glenn. p. 158.

36. An Artist In The Family. p. 61.
The sense of the black threat is also felt by Nadine Gordimer in The Conservationist, op. cit. in images of the township on the outskirts of the farm.

37. The Dark River. p. 259.

38. Adam's Rest. p. 159.

39. ibid. p.

40. ibid. p. 110.

41. ibid. p. 251.

42. ibid. p. 250.

43. God's Step Children. p. 239.
J.M. Coetzee gives many examples of the many images of tainted blood that occur in the novel: for instance - Elmira - "There flowed in her the blood of submissive

slaves and acquiescent Eastern wives." (p. 151) and Barry has "that flaw in his blood." (p. 286). In this way Mrs Millin, apparently sympathetic to her coloured characters' problems, is creating racist stereotypes.

44. ibid. p. 152.

45. ibid. p. 163.

46. ibid. p. 177.

47. ibid. p. 31.
(This lament is echoed by women characters much later. Anna in Nadine Gordimer's A World of Strangers is afraid that her coloured child can never be happy and Sheila Fugard's heroine in A Revolutionary Woman is glad that she never had a child with her Indian lover. (see chapters 4 and 5))

48. ibid. p. 313.

49. Snyman: The Works of Sarah Gertrude Millin, op. cit. p. 54.

50. Ezekiel Mphahlele comments that this novel was so successful because it presented the coloureds and blacks in terms of the white man's problems.

> "There's the tragedy of mixed blood, and we're in it too, brother man, they must have thought. A chattering guilt complex set in: not over the

white man's rotten treatment of the Negro, but over his 'sinfulness' that produced the Negro." The African Image, London, Faber and Faber, 1962, p. 116.

51. Roy Campbell's epigram on South African women novelists of the period is apposite here:

"Far from the vulgar haunts of men
Each sits in her 'successful room',
Housekeeping with her fountain pen
And writing novels with her broom."

Adamastor 1930.

Collected Poems, London, The Bodley Head, 1st published 1941. Reprinted 1955.

52. The Dark River, p. 15.

Chapter 3

Pauline Smith. 1882 - 1959

Pauline Smith's novel The Beadle[1] was published in 1926 long after the kind of South African life before the first world war which she was describing must have almost disappeared. Pauline Smith herself observes in The Beadle that the changes are already beginning as the old Afrikaner style of dress is now only worm by the older women[2] who dress in black calico with black sunbonnets, while the younger girls are beginning to wear coloured prints. In Adam's Rest Mrs Millin describes how the building of better roads and the motor car affected people's lives in a small town[3]. But in the Aangenaam Valley, which is isolated from the nearest large towns, the old ways of the Afrikaners dominate, untouched by the approach of industrialisation; and Pauline Smith examines how an Englishman, an outsider, like those in The Story of An African Farm, and The Dark River, disturbs the lives of some of the people

of Harmonie.

It is interesting to speculate why Pauline Smith, whose parents were immigrants to South Africa from Scotland, and whose first language was English, chose to write about the Boers. South Africans, however, including Olive Schreiner and Mrs Millin as well as later women writers seem to feel a need to explain aspects of their country to their English readers in Europe and America.

Pauline Smith was born in Oudtschoorn in the Little Karoo where her father was a doctor[4]. She was sent to a Scottish Boarding School with her sister when she was quite young; her father died unexpectedly and her mother took Pauline and her sister round Europe, living in hotels, until they finally settled in Dorset. Pauline Smith always wanted to be a writer, and, like Olive Schreiner and Sarah Gertrude Millin, she read widely. But it was not until she met Arnold Bennett in a Swiss hotel that she received any real encouragement to write. In her tribute to him she explains that she often felt "diffident and despondent" about her work[5] and that in spite of his support she always found writing "a slow and painful process"[6]. This, perhaps, is the major reason as to why she only published so few books - two collections of short stories, The Little Karoo and Plaatje's Children, The Beadle and a radio play[7]. Like Olive Schreiner she died with one novel incomplete.

Pauline Smith met Mrs Millin and used her letters to her as well as her diary to analyse her attitude to her life and her work; in the same way as Olive Schreiner and Mrs

Millin she gives us useful insights into the process of a kind of self-therapy which, perhaps, these at times rather isolated creative women used to help themselves to understand the relationship between their writing and their lives.

Like Em, in The Story of An African Farm, Pauline Smith was aware that like many women she had been brought up to put others first:

> "I know in my heart that it is not really unselfishness but a sort of weakness that makes me put myself always in the other person's place, and think of my own affairs as of no account - of my work as of no account compared with that of others - you know Sarah I have never been able to think of myself as a writer - whatever I have written seems to me somehow the accidental outcome of emotion - or of A.B.'s belief in me and insistence that I should justify that belief."[8]

Pauline Smith's short stories, published in The Little Karoo, describe the isolated lives of poor Afrikaners before the war in a sympathetic and powerfully lucid style. The women, particularly, suffer from the harsh life in the struggle to establish possession of the land because, like the middle class women in Olive Schreiner's and Mrs Millin's novels, but without education or money, they are possessions of their fathers and husbands. The emotional and physical violence Olive Schreiner described in The Story of An African Farm, which is not limited by fear of the law at this period, is more explicit in her stories as a reaction to frustration and stress. Religion dominates the characters' lives, sometimes in an oppressive, and sometimes in a joyful way, and

ownership of the land is seen as crucial to survival by the male heads of families. So the material and spiritual aspects of the Boers' lives often come into conflict as a background to the stories, but when they are reconciled as in the first story, The Pain, the characters' lives are harmonious and at peace with nature. As in Olive Schreiner's and Mrs Millin's work, Pauline Smith's feeling for the South African land is an essential part of her stories[9].

In The Beadle Pauline Smith develops the themes of her short stories. Pauline Smith had wanted to return to South Africa because she felt that the illnesses which continually afflicted her chest, like quinsy, disappeared when she was staying there. But her family had come to depend on her services as the unmarried daughter, perhaps another reason why she published so little - she was so busy looking after them - and she could only manage several long holidays in South Africa. While there she recorded in her diary the Afrikaners' way of life as well as individual stories which she used directly in her novels. Her observations made her critical of the Boers' class and racial attitudes:

> "I cannot imagine the Dutch fighting to raise the standards of their own poor whites. I can imagine them fighting to re-introduce slavery. They have never forgiven the English the freeing of their slaves. The Jew stands for them not on an Equality like the English, and so to be feared and hated, but is somewhat vaguely between the lowest of poor Christian whites and those coloured races who might still be slaves,,,"[10]

The intensely claustrophobic life of the Afrikaner in the

Aangeraam Valley is sympathetically described, with their confident, tolerant attitudes towards the Englishman and the Jewish shopkeepers, who will always be outsiders, but whose ways of life are cleverly contrasted with the Boers, bringing a sense of other cultures and times into this cleverly organised novel. Just as Olive Schreiner in The Story of An African Farm and Mrs Millin in Adam's Rest used one small place as a metaphor for the South African experience at a particular time so Pauline Smith makes Harmonie a symbol of the strengths and weaknesses of the Boers' colonisation of South Africa. She is also conscious, as I have said, that it is a way of life which is already changing in response to the outside world, and so worth recording. Pauline Smith describes many details of the people's everyday lives like the clothes they wear, as they accept, uncomplainingly, their position in the class structure already formed (just as in the same way the English settlers were already settled into position so to speak, although less happily as described by Mrs Millin). A wealthy landowner and his wife dominate the area, and provide work for the poor whites. Van der Merwe has provided the Church where the farmers and their families gather together from the outlying areas four times a year. The church ceremony of the Sacrament is central to their lives. Unlike Emma in Mary Glenn for instance, the poor whites accept their class position because

> "In the gathering round the church rich and poor mingled together without distinction of class. Here, in the sight of God, all were equal."[11]

The Englishman cannot understand the Boers who trekked because they know they are

> "a people chosen of God for the redeeming of this portion

of the earth.... The freeing of the slaves by the English was for him, and remains for many of his descendants, an incomprehensible act of injustice towards himself, and of indifference to the warnings of the prophets."[12]

In this passage Pauline Smith intervenes as the author to explain to her English-speaking readers the character of the Afrikaner; (in the same way as a later woman writer, Sheila Fugard, in A Revolutionary Woman makes the intolerance of the Boers crucial to the unfolding of her story.)

The Beadle is narrated from several viewpoints in the third person, but the central character is Andrina du Toit, with the uncomfortable figure of The Beadle always shadowing her. The novel consists of four parts - each ending in a major event and personal discovery of truth; within each part are a series of short episodes. The changing viewpoint, together with the author's frequent comments, give a many-sided view of Andrina and of the life in the valley. The Beadle's story begins and ends the novel, illustrating not only his personal tragedy, but the Boers' moral attitudes. In spite of his appearance of respectability, the Beadle's life is broken by an inner conflict - it is only when he confesses his sin in the Church and leaves the valley that he finds an inner peace. The harmony of the district which the Englishman at first finds so restful is discovered to be, as the novel develops, full of moral and personal conflicts, related to the Church's attitudes, and to poverty. The plot depends on an act of violence - the rape of a young girl - which took place long before the novel begins. It is only when this is expiated that the novel reaches its conclusion. The apparently idyllic pastoral life is revealed by the writer

to be one of hardship and suffering, alleviated by love for the land itself, by personal relationships and belief in God. (This is the image of idyllic life which The Conservationist is searching for when he buys his farm in Nadine Gordimer's novel. Nearly fifty years earlier Pauline Smith, Olive Schreiner, and to a certain extent, Mrs Millin, were already pointing out that it is an illusion.) This conflict between illusion and reality creates much of the dramatic tension in the novel.

God is made in the image of the individual believer. Van der Merwe's God, for instance, is Jehovah, representing justice and his wife's is compassionate and forgiving. Andrina's idea of Jesus becomes connected with her love for Henry so that they become indistinguishable. In her innocence the joy of God which the Pastor assured her would become hers once she received the Sacrament for the first time becomes connected with her sexual joy.

> "All that new sweet joy which she had been assured would be hers when she joined the Church, and, as an acknowledged child of God, partook of the Sacrament, was now indeed hers, and though it reached her through the Englishman and not through the Redeemer of the world, she had no doubt that it came from her Heavenly Father."[13]

In this gentle passage whose simple vocabulary and directness of thought convey Andrina's character, Pauline Smith is also commenting on the paradox that the Church's teachings have led to the opposite effect from that which the Pastor intended - by making love with the Englishman, and becoming pregnant Andrina has broken the strict moral code. This hypocritical position, which Pauline Smith criticises implicitly through

the reactions of the other characters, is illustrated by Andrina's being turned out of the farm where whe was working as a maid. (In a similar scene in From Man To Man Bertie's aunt turns out her middle class niece.) One of her Aunts, Johanna, also rejects Andrina, while the other continues to love her. Andrina finds a home for herself and her child with a stranger outside the valley.

Unlike Lyndall in The Story of An African Farm, Andrina is not a feminist heroine in the sense that she relates her position to wider issues. She is more like Em. She has been brought up to look after other people and in one of many images from the sky, the sun or heaven, which Pauline Smith uses to underline the importance of religion in the characters' lives and Andrina's connection of Harry and Jesus Andrina feels:

> "Was not her dear Arry as high above her as were the heavens above the earth?"[14]

Andrina even packs the Englishman's suitcase as he is leaving the valley, having become bored with her innocent love for him.

Andrina's only education has been from reading the Bible. Her Aunts have never given her any information about sex and her relationship with Harry is described as being completely natural on her side while his sophisticated arguments, justifying his seduction of Andrina, implicitly condemn the double standard for men, and emphasise his sophistication compared with the Afrikaner men. However, Andrina is not seen as a victim who suffers terribly for love but as a gentle woman whose upbringing and character have given her an inner

strength which means that she survives and grows stronger. Her life is compared unknown to her by the other characters - her Aunts and the Beadle - with her mother's, whose frustration with her poverty and the narrow moral attitudes of her family led her to run away to go to the nearest town. Klaartje's consequent rape by the Beadle, and unhappy marriage led to her early death. So Andrina's life is placed in a wider context. Another woman character of Andrina's age also illuminates Andrina's position by showing her in comparison with an educated bilingual middle class Boer girl, Emerentia, who reminds Harry of his English fiancée, Lettie, and leads to his leaving the Valley. Emerentia is going to marry Van der Merwe's son and the marriage is organised by the farmer's wife who chose a suitable bride. In a characteristic image from nature Pauline Smith compares Emerentia with a bird:

> "She was, in fact, like a bird, darting from branch to branch, from tree to tree, in absolute and gay assurance."[15]

(This bird is free: earlier in the novel Pauline Smith compares Andrina's running away from her lover's first kiss to a bird trying to escape to freedom, running

> "through the night like some strange, white-hooded bird towards the church."[16])

Other women characters in the novel, seen in relation to Andrina, suggest, like her, the great emotional strength of the women who are supporting men in creating this new society. Mrs Van der Merwe becomes a symbol of the Boer woman, the matriarchical figure, (and her husband is the patriarch,) in strong contrast to Olive Schreiner's satirical portrait. Like the farmhouse in <u>The Story of An African</u>

Farm, Rebekah's room in From Man To Man, and, for example, Hester's shack in The Dark River which indicate the quality of the characters' lives, Mrs Van der Merwe's house illustrates the comfortable life of this well-established Boer family, for which Andrina works as an adopted daughter and maid. Several detailed descriptions of the room indicate the past and present of the Afrikaner women and the importance of their "housework", as well as their attitude to others. The descriptions are reminiscent of Dutch paintings by Vermeer, for instance of the interiors of wealthy burghers' homes, glimpsed through an open door. I will quote only one sentence from the first description in Chapter Three to show how Pauline Smith's detailed account in simple, rhythmic prose, has the clarity of such oil paintings, and is an admiring and loving record of a way of life which the Afrikaners now idealise, paradoxically written by an English woman.

> "The shovel, the chairs against the whitewashed walls, the meal-chest, the kneading trough, the bucket-rack with its row of brass-bound wooden buckets, were all, like the ceiling of the room and its doors and window-frames, made of yellow-wood grown rich in colour with age and beautiful with the constant use of years."[17]

However, Pauline Smith is also conscious of the usually anonymous black servants, once slaves, upon whose labour the wealth was built, although the hospitality of Mrs Van der Merwe is open to Dutch, English and blacks alike.

In comparison Andrina and her Aunts live in a "brown mud house,"[18] and while Andrina works for the Van der Merwes her Aunts and the Beadle, who lives with them, struggle to survive by growing their own food and working on land owned

by Van der Merwe. The poverty of their lives as well as their different characters is illustrated through the novel by the presents the sisters give Andrina to celebrate her Sacrament. Jacoba, the younger sister, who had once been engaged to marry the Beadle, gives Andrina a mirror, with a frame of pink and white shells. None of the women has seen herself in a mirror before. While Lyndall looks in her glass at moments of crisis to examine changes in her life, Andrina, who is described as beautiful, only sees herself in relation to her lover, and wonders, rhetorically:

> "Was it those eyes, those lips, that the Englishman had kissed? Was she indeed beautiful enough, as she saw herself now, for the Englishman to love? She could not believe it."[19]

The Beadle breaks the mirror, having seen himself for the first time since before he raped Klaartje, and this moment leads to the beginning of his attempts to gain forgiveness for his crime. He sees the worst possible image:

> "the face of a man abandoned by his God."[20]

Johanna, the dominant sister, whose bitterness and jealousy motivate all her actions, chooses to make a point to the Beadle by buying pale grey material with black dots, pink roses and forget-me-nots with which to make Andrina's Sacrament dress, instead of the traditional black one. This dress becomes symbolic of the changes in Andrina's life as well as of her Aunt's unspoken love for her. For example, at the end of the novel, the Beadle, who has been searching for her, recognises the dress drying on a bush,

> "like a sign from the Lord"[21]

and is able to make his peace with her.

Such recurring images give a lyrical quality to the novel as well as emphasising the development of the characters. As in other novels of this period marriage is described as being central to the stability of the society. Although Pauline Smith illustrates how Andrina can bring up her child without a husband and survive the terrible jealousy and suffering she feels when the Englishman deserts her, she contrasts this with the attitudes of other conventional characters who accept the status quo of marriage as a business arrangement. For instance, in a sub-plot the Beadle tries to arrange a marriage for Andrina with a young Boer by offering a dowry of two oxen. The Boer wants

> "a wife with a proper sense of his own importance, a plump body and goods to add to his."[22]

Through this gentle satirical comment Pauline Smith is criticising conventional attitudes to marriage, particularly the dowry system. The Beadle cannot enforce the marriage as he is apparently no relation of Andrina. The Boer chooses his wife from two girls - one can offer him three sheep and the other a sewing machine. Andrina refuses to let herself be used as a possession. The post-mistress, who is a physically handicapped, middle-aged spinster and one of the few people who can write in the village and a minor character connects up many of the other people in the novel by attempting to organise their relationships. Although unmarried herself she is not the unhappy spinster to be found in Mrs Millin's novels.

The Englishman, whom only Andrina calls by his name, remains an outsider, unable to learn Afrikaans, and, after an initial period of delight, becoming bored with the Valley. He, as

well as Emerentia, introduces the idea of another world with different values in which, for instance, culture as well as material possessions are important, in contrast to the Afrikaners. But as well as the Englishman other outsiders come to the Valley. As in The Dark River and From Man To Man Jewish refugees from Europe, usually involved in selling, are described as settling in South Africa. In The Beadle Pauline Smith emphasises the Jewish shopkeeper as a disturbing presence from the outside world, in comparison with the less complex lives of the women at Harmonie. She was

> "a tragic and mysterious being who, to the end of her days, remained a stranger among Aangenaam people."[23]

This sense of other worlds, of the mystery of life, which Olive Schreiner and even occasionally Mrs Millin also are aware of in their description of the South African peoples and landscape, make this novel more than a record of a vanished way of life. Like Waldo and Undine, the women in Pauline Smith's novels relate their lives to nature: for instance when Andrina leaves the Valley Pauline Smith uses images from Jacoba's experience of life to convey her suffering. The parting

> "had been calamity as droughts and floods, locusts and rinderpests are calamities, and as such she had accepted and borne it."[24]

Such images extend the character's personal experience to the universal, relating their inner suffering to the outer reality, so that their lives become bearable and less claustrophobic.

After all her suffering Andrina also finds like Undine and

Waldo that her personal life is part of a universal process - a fatalistic position, but a consoling one. Away from the valley with its landscape partly created by man, she finds peace in the Great Karoo, relating it to her understanding of God.

> "Calm and indifferent as the peace of God the Great Karoo absorbed both man and the labour of man as things of naught."[25]

The characters' relationship with the land and the natural rhythm of the seasons gives them a perspective on their lives which enables them to survive poverty and personal disasters. The images of nature Pauline Smith uses to describe her characters underline their connection with the land in this pre-industrial society.

Pauline Smith's novel is written in the European tradition of realistic novels, and is perhaps closest to Thomas Hardy in its description of rural life, with its fatalistic acceptance of events. (Andrina as a poor, uneducated heroine who is seduced, and suffers, is rather like Tess in some respects.) Pauline Smith's ability to convey the differences and similarities between the three white races in her novel, through her comments, creation of character, and their dialogue[26] makes <u>The Beadle</u> another novel like <u>The Story of An African Farm</u>. It describes a particular period so clearly that reading it is like watching a brilliant world through a time telescope. Unlike Mrs Millin's novels, the lyrical quality of the writing and the insights into the characters' conflicts between the inner and outer reality of their experience make it more than a document of historical and sociological interest.

Pauline Smith's sympathy for the undeducated, finanacially dependent women in the novel suggests that she is implicitly criticising a patriarchal system which uses the Bible to support it, as well as, through the Englishman, the double standard for men. Pauline Smith does not explore the position of the blacks in the novel; their relationship with the whites is that of servant and mistress, although she seems to have been aware of the relationship of black labour and white wealth in the description of the Van der Merwe's farm.

Like God's Step Children the novel has been republished: in 1979 by A.A. Balkema of Cape Town and in 1980 by Jonathan Cape.

Notes

1. The Beadle, London, Thos Nelson and Sons, 1938.

2. op. cit., p. 69.

3. Adam's Rest, op. cit., p. 250. Janet looks back over eighteen years to about 1902 comparing the changes in the lives of whites with those of the kaffirs.

   "They did not travel by motor-car, nor follow the latest fashion in clothes" like the whites.

4. Information on Pauline Smith's life is from:
   Dorothy Driver, Ed.: Pauline Smith, South African Literature Series No. 3. General Ed. Stephen Gray. Johannesburg, McGraw Hill Book Co., 1983.
   Leonie Twentyman Jones, The Pauline Smith Collection, University of Cape Town Libraries, 1982.

5. A.B....A Minor Marginal Note. Cape, 1937, pp. 12-13.

6. ibid., p. 64.

7. The Little Karoo, published 1925. Reissued Cape Town, The New Travellers Library, 1950.
   Last Voyage, 1929.
   Plaatkops Children, London, Cape, 1935.

8. Letter to Sarah Gertrude Millin. Wellington 27th August

1935, quoted in Pauline Smith op. cit. pp. 124-125. (Sarah Gertrude Millin complained that Pauline Smith's handwriting was so bad that she sometimes left her letters unopened - see Rubin op. cit.)

9. The Little Karoo op. cit. p. 7.

10. Quoted in Pauline Smith op. cit. p. 62, "Pauline Smith. Some Sources for The Little Karoo." South African Journal 1913 - 14 University of Cape Town Special Collection.

Babette Tante, whose grandparents owned the house in which Pauline Smith stayed remembered her making notes.

> "So much of the actual life here was described in Miss Smith's books...She was a descriptive writer and not an imaginative one. Always she could write only about people and places she had actually known..."
>
> Memoir in Pauline Smith op. cit. p. 40.

11. The Beadle op. cit. p. 70.

12. ibid. p. 33.

13. ibid. p. 133.

14. ibid. p. 180.

A similar image, for example compares Harry with the sun (son?)

> "Like the sun itself was the love she had in her heart for the Englishman! Though no one else in

all the world should love him, still, like the sun, would her love light all his world."
ibid. p. 80.

15. ibid. p. 169.
And of course today sexist men colloquially call women 'birds'!

16. ibid. p. 66.
And later Andrina runs "swift as a bird" into her Aunt's arms. ibid. p. 66.
Images from natural surroundings are used at moments of tension in all the novels I am discussing, raising the question, which I cannot attempt to answer, as to whether women tend to use certain kinds of imagery. (See Conclusion.)

17. ibid. p. 15.
Earlier in the same passage a description of a three-legged cooking pot recalls Bessie Head's story of their history describing how such pots link the colonial and native races. see LIP From Southern African Women, Edited Susan Brown, Isabel Hofmeyr, Susan Rosenberg. Johannesburg, Ravan, 1983. "The Old Iron cooking Pot of Europe" P.5.

18. ibid. p. 73.

19. ibid. p. 111.
The same mirror appears in a short story of marital breakdown in The Little Karoo, when it is used by a husband-hunting woman to seduce a bijwoner. "The Sinner" p. 68.

20. ibid. p. 117.

21. ibid. p. 247.

22. ibid. p. 71.

23. ibid. p. 11.

24. ibid. p. 196.

25. ibid. p. 222.

26. See J.M. Coetzee White Writing op. cit. for an analysis of Pauline Smith's use of dialogue.

Chapter 4

Nadine Gordimer. 1923 -

For many years now Nadine Gordimer, novelist, short story writer, critic and essayist has dominated the contemporary South African literary scene, and through the demands of the media and literary conferences her ideas on related subjects such as the politics of South Africa are shared with the West[1]. Her latest published novel, A Sport of Nature[2] is a response to changes in South African politics, and foretells a future in which there will be a black government. Like Mrs Millin, Nadine Gordimer has discussed over many years in her novels different attitudes to the racist capitalist state and she feels her own position has also changed in response, to changes in the political system.

Although she was born in this century her education and background are similar to those of Olive Schreiner and Mrs Millin in the sense that she grew up in a mining town near Johannesburg which she describes as being in "a cultural backwater."[3] Like them she has given many clues to her life and work, but Nadine Gordimer's come from interviews and essays. She has not yet published an autobiography because she is afraid of hurting people. Her early novels in particular seem to be autobiographical like Olive Schreiner's and Mrs Millin's.

Nadine Gordimer's family are Jewish, although like Mrs Millin she does not often write directly of the problems of the Jews, identifying more closely with the white English speaking bourgeois[4]. She also largely educated herself as a writer through her wide reading of European authors, and, influenced like Mrs Millin and Pauline Smith by studying Katherine Mansfield's stories, she realised she could write about life in South Africa.

> "this gold mining town in which I lived, the people around me there, the little dramas in the street - that there were things one could write about, and which, perhaps, somebody might even be interested in reading about."[5]

Nadine Gordimer's writing was at first influenced by what she calls: "the British liberal tradition" from which she feels she broke away, unlike Olive Schreiner and Mrs Millin,

> "because it was inappropriate to the life that I was living and to what was around me. I had to find a way to express what I had to say because it was coming out of my own life and that society in which I lived. So

I had to break with that English liberal tradition and range further."[6]

Nadine Gordimer travels widely round the world to literary conferences, for example, but she is committed to living in South Africa although during the period in which she has been writing other white writers as well as black have gone into voluntary exile or been forced to leave. She is very concerned with this dilemma for whites in all her novels, but feels optimistic about the future, in a multiracial South Africa, which helps her to justify her position. In A Sport of Nature, through her implied suport for the ANC she joins a group of politically committed writers like Mary Benson, Hilda Bernstein, Lauretta Ngcobo and Miriam Tlali, who use their novels to educate the reader and so, like them, in her fiction as well as her essays and interviews, Nadine Gordimer has become more directly part of the process of political change in South Africa.

Nadine Gordimer's world is unlike the white working class of Yvonne Burgess but, like the majority of white writers,[7] her writing is involved with the concerns of the white bourgeois. Their problems in their relationships with Africans dominate her novels. She observes their changing relationships with each other, and with the black world of intellectuals and servants, and the influence of the apartheid system on their lives. As the novels progress she attempts to describe more contact between black and white, but the emphasis still is on white problems - the buried body of the dead black man will always return to the surface[8]. She also became concerned with the differences between Afrikaners and English.

Nadine Gordimer's earliest novel, The Lying Days[9] 1953 describes a girl growing up and is clearly autobiographical. In her second novel, A World of Strangers[10] however, she distances herself from her own experience and, through the character of Toby Hood, an Englishman, who is visiting South Africa for the first time, she is able to give an impression of the differences she perceives between the white and black worlds. Writing as a man enables Nadine Gordimer to give her protagonist experiences such as staying overnight in a black township, which it is unlikely that a white bourgeois woman would have been able to do so easily. The fear which Helen feels in The Lying Days[11] when she visits a township for the first time is changed as Toby begins to relate to Africans like Steven and Sam as individuals in their own homes.

Nadine Gordimer uses Toby to cross the gulfs between the three worlds through personal relationships rather than political principles which he rejects. He is conscious of himself as an Englishman as having a long cultural history which the English and Afrikaans speaking whites, however rich they may be, lack. Nadine Gordimer satirises the desire of the wealthy wife of an industrialist to buy in culture like a dingy Courbet. Through Toby she observes the obsession with appearances and youth, particularly of the women. Cecil, Toby's mistress, feels old at thirty, as did Alma in Mrs Millin's The Dark River. In characteristically detailed description like a painter Toby observes Cecil at a party when he first meets her:

> "With her face in repose, I noticed that, although she was too young to have lines, I could see the pull, beneath

the skin, of the muscle that always exerted the same tension when she smiled..."[12]

However, Toby feels at home in this world because in England he belongs to the same social class who are always

"making something out of nothing very much."[13]

Set pieces like the parties Toby goes to in the novel indicate a powerful quality in Nadine Gordimer's writing from which it gains its unique strength - the intensity of its sensuous detail. In this way the conclusions which Toby makes about life in South Africa have validity. He realises that at this time the different worlds in which he moves freely are alien to each other. Cecil rejects him when she discovers he has black friends. Toby also observes that within the separate worlds there are different hierarchical layers. Cecil, for example, is comparatively poor - living with a child and a maid in a small flat - on alimony. She can only achieve security through marriage to a rich alcoholic. In a long passage, central to Toby's position as the connection between the two worlds, he concludes that

"possibly life in the townships seemed more 'real' simply because there were fewer distractions, far fewer vicarious means for spending passion, or boredom."[14]

Nadine Gordimer does not attempt to analyse further the relationship between the townships and the white middle classes here.

In this novel the "double standard" is described from the male viewpoint. Toby's relationship with Cecil and Steven is based on his desire to experience life to the full - a quality of uncommitted restlessness he finds in each of them. He analyses Steven. He is

> "something new...not a white man, but not quite a black man, either: a kind of flash-flash-in-the-pan produced by the surface of the two societies in friction."[15]

This clever comment also indicates Toby's liberal attitude. The tragedies of black lives do not affect him personally until Steven is killed in a car accident. The novel ends ambiguously with Toby leaving South Africa, promising to return soon. But his black friend, Sam, is uncertain. Toby, however, having come to Africa with an open mind now feels committed to his relationships with the black world rather than the white. In the white bourgeois world he has become:

> "Like an enemy: the word took away my freedom, tore up the safe conduct of the open mind."[16]

Steven's relationships with women are less committed. The "romantic" love, which Helen felt in The Lying Days is seen as irrelevant in a materialistic society. Women are a commodity, easily available. Toby enjoys being in the position of having two mistresses at the same time. The moral values of the early novelists are irrelevant by this period and the characters no longer relate their experiences to God. The emphasis is on enjoyment and self-fulfillment. A weakness of the narrative is that Toby stresses his maleness rather often in comments like

> "I suppose there's no use trying to explain oneself, so far as one's feelings about women are concerned."[17]

(In later novels, such as A Guest of Honour[18] where the narrator is male Nadine Gordimer indicates the masculinity more subtly.) Steven's only disagreement with Toby is that Toby will not sleep with black women - he does not find them attractive enough. Anna Louw, Toby's second mistress, is

a woman like Helen with a liberal conscience who has become a social worker, moving, like Toby, between the two South African worlds. Toby, in an image from a chess contest, indicates her serious attitude to race compared with Cecil's unthinking racism:

> "She would be one of those for whom every utterance was a move to a black square or a white square."[19]

Both women are divorced and live by themselves as single parents. Anna's husband was an Indian; the marriage broke up because she could not withstand racist social pressures. In a further novel, <u>Occasion for Loving</u>,[20] Nadine Gordimer explores in more detail the problems of love across the colour bar. The two women come to represent two opposing attitudes of white middle class women in South Africa. These types of women, who appear in different forms in further novels by Nadine Gordimer are constantly assessed through Toby's cynical eyes. In description of their homes, for instance, Toby finds reflections of their characters[21]. It becomes clear as the novel develops that Cecil's desire for money and material possessions has corrupted any innocence or moral attitudes to life that she may have had. She will become one of the possessions of a wealthy man. However Anna, like <u>Burger's Daughter</u>[22] goes to prison for her active support of the black struggle, keeping her moral integrity and her independence.

Black women have little importance in the novel and appear as very minor characters, such as Cecil's maid, who is virtually bringing up the white woman's child, whom Cecil has rejected and also protecting Cecil. The close relationship

between Steven Sitole and Toby Hood is the central relationship of the novel. The emphasis is on the importance of personal relationships in the South African situation, and the choices that have to be made from a liberal position. The novel ignores the actual political actions of the Africans at this period such as the Bus Boycott of 1957 and the development of the African Nationalist Congress and the PAC. The emphasis is on the white problem, and the white conscience. Neither does this early novel suggest except perhaps indirectly that women's role should be changing. Apart, perhaps from Anna in her work, relationships are still being organised by men.

In further novels Nadine Gordimer discusses issues raised in World of Strangers and experiments with narrating from different viewpoints. Occasion for Loving (1960) describes the processes by which a white liberal woman, Jessie Stilwell, becomes committed to active work in the struggle. The novel also examines the inevitable failure of an adulterous love affair between a white woman and a black artist, observed by Jessie from within her own secure marriage. (Although Jessie is undergoing a personal crisis in her thirties her name indicates that she will survive.) A new element in Nadine Gordimer's work is the role of the wife and mother in the family in South African society at this period. In the sense that Jessie is searching for a meaning in her life she becomes a feminist heroine but she is not seeking "equality" with her husband - she is looking for an answer to her sense of doubt about her role in relation to the South African situation. In this novel Nadine Gordimer is again interpreting life in South Africa for the outside world.

The Late Bourgeois World (1966)[23] is a clever, taut, sensitive, carefully organised novel which describes in the first person one day in Elizabeth Van Den Sandt's life. News of her former husband's suicide in the morning makes her examine her past and present, while at the same time, continuing, apart from an unplanned visit to her son's school, with her plans for the day.

Her former husband's involvement in black radical politics, his subsequent imprisonment and betrayal of his friends, which led to their divorce, dominate the story - in a sense he is the main character. As Elizabeth recalls him her image of him changes. She begins to understand that his politics were based on his revulsion against his background and his terrible feelings of guilt at being white and rich. In a shocking, violent image from women's bodies - shocking because it reverses and exposes the white woman's obsession with appearance - Elizabeth realises that fear and guilt motivated Max:

> "Oh we bathed and depilated white ladies in whose wombs the sanctity of the white race is entombed! What concoction of musk and boiled petals can disguise the dirt done in the name of that sanctity? Max took that dirt upon himself, tarred and feathered himself with it, and she (Max 's mother) complains of her martyred respectability."[24]

(This is a far stronger reaction, from the inside, than Toby's.) Elizabeth is searching for the truth, reexamining choices made in the past and the urgent rhetorical questioning reflects this. Since her husband's death Elizabeth has chosen to live alone while her son is at school, financially independent

as she has a job. Her relationship with her lover is one of mutual support rather than romance: she is aware that she is not fully committed to it. As she considers it, objectively the hesitation revealed in the disjointed structure of the sentences indicates a calmer, more reflective mood than in the previous passage:

> "A sexual connection. But there is more to it than that. A love affair? Less than that. I'm not suggesting it's a new form of relationship, of course, but rather that it's made up of the bits of old ones that don't work. It's decent enough; harms nobody, not even ourselves."[25]

The colloquial language suggests that Elizabeth is talking to herself (or the reader), working out her problems as she discusses them, far less in control of herself than Toby, although the detached observation of her feelings is like his.

These two passages indicate how Nadine Gordimer was moving away in this novel from the controlled organisation of her early realist novels to a more flexible use of language, and form.

The novel, however, like all Nadine Gordimer's fiction, is placed firmly in its setting of space and time. At the end of the novel Elizabeth relates them in a surprising juxtaposition which puts her husband's death metaphorically in the perspective of the possibilities for mankind:

> "When Max drowned today, a man walked about in space."[26]

She decides that she will, after all, help a black nationalist

with money. As with earlier novels The Late Bourgeois World ends with a character's commitment to change in South Africa. But this novel seems full of anger. Throughout the day Elizabeth relates everything to her husband's death and his position on apartheid. For instance, she visits her grandmother in hospital - an aged version of the rich bourgeois women in A World of Strangers. She relates the old woman's quality of life to the violence that produced it. It

> ..."was apparently what our fathers and grandfathers had fought two wars abroad and killed black men in 'native' wars of conquest here at home, to secure for us."[27]

Elizabeth's detached cynicism, which suggests anger and frustration is also apparent in her relationship with Luke, an African who knew her husband. He is a black intellectual, like Steven or Gideon, another type who recurs in Nadine Gordimer's novels. The delicate description of their dinner together with Elizabeth's awareness of what Luke is thinking of her as a white woman, and her changes of mood, bring together the different experiences of the novel and lead to Elizabeth's decision.

Elizabeth's control over every aspect of her life, even the possibility of an affair with Luke is carefully weighed up, and suggests that she is a heroine who would serve as a feminist role model. At the end of the novel she is committed to a course which will make her, like her husband, an outsider and which could end in her imprisonment and death; the decision is based on a reaction to her personal relationships, but also on a sense of justice, and implies a new development in Nadine Gordimer's understanding of politics.

In a lecture she gave to students in South Africa in 1968 she explained how she came to write this novel:

> "My short novel, The Late Bourgeois World was an attempt to look into the specific character of the social climate that produced the wave of young saboteurs in 1963 - 64... What emerged from the book was the guilt of white society towards its own sons, who are, by its own definition, its features: those sons who, if they won't act as white men for white men, are not allowed to act at all."[28]

The novel is symbolic of many of the attitudes of the white South African middle classes at this time. Elizabeth's husband is motivated by guilt and destroyed by their fear but Elizabeth takes up his role indicating that ultimately apartheid will itself be destroyed.

In the 1970s Nadine Gordimer published three more novels which discuss in different ways the relationships between the white and black races in Africa. A Guest of Honour (1970) although probably based on the experience of the ending of colonialism in Malawi or Kenya, nevertheless could serve as a metaphor for the future of South Africa. Through its characters the novel examines attitudes to Africa, and describes the different expectations of the Europeans who settle in the new State, as well as the political differences of the new African Government. It is Nadine Gordimer's most overtly political novel.

The Conservationist (1974) returns to South Africa. The novel is about a wealthy man's purchase of a farm for tax

purposes and is about the importance of the land to South Africans. Published two years before the Soweto uprising in 1976 and written from a male viewpoint, the novel indicates the fragile hold which the whites have on the land. Just as The Story of An African Farm, published in 1883, has become a metaphor for the colonisation of South Africa, so does The Conservationist's farm become a metaphor of the white control of the land in South Africa at this time, and, like A Guest of Honour ends when the hero imagines his own violent murder.

In Burger's Daughter, Nadine Gordimer returns to the theme of The Late Bourgeois World, and describes how Rosa, the daughter of a committed white South African Communist Party member herself becomes involved in the struggle. (It is possible that Burger is based on Bram Fischer - Mary Benson had already used Bram Fischer's character in her novel. This suggests how people like Bram Fischer, in spite of the efforts of the South African Government become symbolic of aspects of the struggle; and, also, how close fiction and reality are in fact.) Like the earlier novels Rosa's choices of action are described in relation to the apartheid system, and the conclusion is, again, a commitment to the future, which is seen to be more important than any personal problems a white person may have.

"Everything is done in the name of future generations."[29]

Nadine Gordimer's last two novels are about the future of South Africa. In July's People (1981)[30] she reverses the roles of mistress and servant. The situation in the novel slowly becomes apparent through the developing awareness of Maureen Smales. Although the narrative changes from

Maureen to her husband and other characters in the novel it is Maureen's viewpoint which dominates. Maureen and her family represent well-meaning liberals who have delayed leaving South Africa, not because of a commitment to a multi-racial future, but because they do not want to leave material possessions behind. In the uprising of the blacks in Johannesburg they, in effect, lose everything except their yellow bakkie and a hunting gun. July, their servant, saves them because he sees them as his responsibility, and the bakkie and gun become their symbols of independence. They cannot admit their need for July's help, and, in his turn, he continues to act out the role of servant while it becomes increasingly clear to Maureen that they are in July's power.

This short, complex novel works on two levels, as it projects the present (1980) situation of the whites into the future: the personal relationship of the family and their servants, and their relationship with the political situation in South Africa. It is about the way both blacks and whites in South Africa have created images of themselves and each other to support an economic system which is ultimately destructive of all layers of society. It is also about the abuse of power and lack of trust. In the novel the images are gradually stripped away and the real power is revealed as belonging to July, in a series of scenes between Maureen and her former servant. The use of language is stressed as being crucial in the making of images. Maureen always translates what she wants to tell July into the simplest of English. July now mocks her back in those terms:

" --I'm the boy for your house, isn't it?"[31]

"Boy" is the derogatory term used for South African males,

whatever their ages, by whites. July is middle-aged and an important man in his village. "Home" is now July's spare hut. Maureen also observes that

> "People in the relation they had been in are used to having to interpret what is never said, between them."[32]

The power has changed from her to July and when she taunts him with her knowledge of his town woman, for the first time in her life she feels threatened by the physical strength which lies behind the power. She feels humiliated at the same time as she is observing her own reactions:

> "...She had never been afraid of a man. Now came fear, on top of everything else, the fleas, the menstruating in rags - and it comes from this one, from <u>him</u>."[33]

The sudden change from the past to the present tense emphasises Maureen's sudden awareness of her position - the use of language follows her thought processes making her problems immediate. July's words, as they are printed on the page, stress her realisation that July is not a servant but an individual like herself.

> "Fifteen years
>
> your boy
>
> you satisfy."[34]

The final confrontation between July and Maureen is when she goes to find out where her husband's gun is. He tells her the truth in his own language but she at last understands him:

> "although she knew no word. Understood everything; what he had had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him."[35]

She understands at last what it means to be black in South

Africa, and that the gun has had to be taken so that the liberation struggle can continue. The violence in the situation is justifiable as an opposition to white violence.

Maureen's childhood is like that of Helen, or Jessie. Her relationship as a child with black servants is also revealed, as she looks into her past, as one of domination as symbolised in her memory of an old photograph. But she also dominates her husband and children, and makes decisions which she considers to be best for them, as for example when to talk to July, or drowning the kittens. Bam, her husband, feels that Maureen has always prevented him from following his instincts with the strength of her will.

The novel ends dramatically with Maureen's having learnt to accept their situation, and their dependence on each other in July's village. An unknown helicopter comes in to land near the village and Maureen, forgetting her family, having at last let go of her tight hold on them and herself, runs towards it:

> "trusting herself with all the suppressed trust of a life time..."[36]

As in other novels by Nadine Gordimer the conclusions reached by the main character become applicable to the situation in South Africa. July's People becomes an allegory of the relationship of power and lack of trust between black and white, and foretells, more explicitly than in previous novels, the violence which many whites are afraid is inevitable. A weakness of the novel perhaps lies in its portrayal of black people as stereotypes. Maybe this is deliberate but in comparison with the characterisation of Maureen and

Bam the blacks lack individuality. July's mother and wife are described as being simple mothers who, even when they are talking with July in their own language, speak in very simple words, and simple sentence structures:

> "white people bring trouble."[37]

and, in Biblical terms, perhaps, their thoughts are also simple:

> "The sun rises, the moon sets; the money must come, the man must go."[38]

(Bessie Head's stories of village life give a rather different picture of even uneducated Africans.)

Hillela, the heroine of A Sport of Nature (1987) is quite different from Maureen and other white women in Nadine Gordimer's novels. The time span of the novel covers her life history - indeed the novel is written like a biography - from her early memories of her father to her appearance as wife of the O.A.U.'s president at South Africa's celebration of its new black government[39]. This long novel encapsulates many aspects of the struggle for freedom in South Africa both in and outside the country which are linked by Hillela's experiences. Passages in italics mark periods of change and of realisation in her life. Although Hillela becomes a powerful, charismatic figure, Nadine Gordimer emphasises that,

> "She was a white child with choices; that was the irony of it. Young blacks had no choice..."[40]

As a child Hillela is brought up by two aunts whose families represent the two basic attitudes to life of the wealthy middle class which Nadine Gordimer has always illustrated in her novels. Olga is fascinated by material possessions,

and Pauline is a liberal who wants to help the Africans. Hillela rejects both these ways of life, and in her turn is rejected by her Aunts. Unlike Maureen, Hilella trusts her instincts to help her to survive - to "make out" and to "move on". She learns from her experiences to adapt to any kind of life, whether sleeping rough on a beach or in a Diplomat's home. Her progress through Africa marks the changes from colony to independence in states like Ghana.

Hillela also breaks sexual tabus in an instinctive way by sleeping with her cousin Sasha. She learns from each of her lovers until she falls in love with a charismatic representative of the ANC. Unlike the traumas of the relationship described in Occasion For Loving Hillela and her husband are happy together. Hillela, unlike Anna Louw, longs for a large African family[41], marking another change in attitudes to race. Hillela and Whaila name their daughter Nomzamo, after Mrs Mandela's African name indicating future hopes.

A terrible act of violence, when Whaila is shot dead, by South African Government agents, ends the first part of the novel. In the second part Hillela becomes a leading political activist working in Russia, the States and Africa, to promote the cause of freedom - the first portrait of a woman leader in South African literature written by women. Hillela's experiences teach her the importance of political belief:

> "Without a cause is without a home,...I've learnt that. Without a cause is without a reason to be."[42]

Sexually also Hillela is liberated. One of her lovers, a rich American, comments:

"At times it was clear that for her only sexual love - and oddly enough this included her feeling for the little girl - was to be trusted."[43]

Each lover, except Sasha and her husband, brings her either some material security or advances her cause - black freedom in South Africa. She also gives herself generously. To her second husband, for example, who becomes President of his country after a coup:

"Her small, generous, urging, inventive body was the des.erts of success."[44]

The moral dilemmas of previous heroines in Nadine Gordimer's novels are unknown to her; they are represented by comparativ-ely minor characters like Sasha and his mother. Hillela dominates the novel and so a number of ambiguities are created which Nadine Gordimer does not resolve. Hillela is not a totally feminist character; she uses people like her lovers even though she is portrayed as independent. Her daughter, Nomzamo, has an English education and becomes a model, taking on the position of a symbol of Africa, but rather different from that of David Nkosi for example:

"An international model does not hamper her image with national politics...she is a symbol of Africa, anyway; one preferable to those children in the advertisements of aid organizations begging money to keep them from starving."[45]

But a fashion model is not, perhaps, an ideal symbol in the sense that she represents a materialistic viewpoint - closer to that of the wealthy bourgeois women which Nadine Gordimer has criticised so carefully in her earlier novels. Perhaps such ambiguities reflect the dilemmas of white South African liberals. Hillela's second husband, the General, organises

his country as a one party state, and this raises another question: would this be what Nadine Gordimer is suggesting as the ideal solution for any African country? The novel emphasises the work of the ANC, ignoring other liberation movements; they believe in democracy based on one man, one vote. By stressing the work of the ANC in her descriptions of their lives in exile, and their role as a future government of South Africa, and by introducing real people into the novel, like Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela, Nadine Gordimer is using fiction in this novel for the first time to help to create a myth.

As a white woman married to an African, Hillela represents the possibility of unity between the races: she is as dedicated as black Africans to

> "...Looking for ways to free Whaila "[46]

her murdered husband, who symbolises the black struggle. The novel is long and the subtleties of Nadine Gordimer's use of language, as in The Late Bourgeois World and July's People are exchanged for a more explicit, repetitive style, which sometimes becomes tedious. The relationship between Hillela and the General, for example, in this description of the reverse of romantic love, seems to be overstressed in long sentences, qualified by phrases, and clumsy double negatives:

> "The General did not tell her he could not live without her. It was in his face, and hers - they recognised it in each other without ever having it stated: each could live as long as individual life lasted, independent of anyone, in the momentum of moving on..."[47]

This description of Hillela's relationship with the General attempts to emphasise the paramount importance of the struggle for freedom, which cannot exist without the freedom of the individuals within their personal relationships. In this way political relationships between black and white are connected with their sexual ones. There are many discussions in the novel about South African politics and about black and white people: unity becomes symbolised not only by Hillela's child but by the handclasp of a black man and a white woman - a symbol which, like that of the Imani cats, presents given to Hillela by her Aunt, recurs throughout the novel, arising naturally from the characters' experiences. (This handshake is also the symbol of unity used by the anti-apartheid movement.)

Nadine Gordimer's skill as a novelist is apparent in the way she has responded to changes in white consciousness in South Africa over forty years. However, except perhaps for her latest novel, in which she attempts to reconcile differences and make her peace with the future as she sees it, the blacks are still described as a white problem. Neither does she, unlike Olive Schreiner, consciously take an active position on feminism. One of her lovers tells Hillela, who is not well enough educated to understand the aphorism, that

> "'The proper study of woman is man.'"[48]

The lives of Nadine Gordimer's women characters reflect social changes, in the same way as Mrs Millin's. Religion is no longer relevant either; Nadine Gordimer is promoting, in her last novel, a belief in freedom following the ANC creed.

Stephen Clingman, in his fulsome introduction to The Essential

Gesture believes that:

> "To many she has, through her fiction, become the interpreter of South Africa..."[49]

However it seems that he must mean the white interpeter of white experience for a largely white readership.

Notes

1. For example, The Observer 18/2/90.
   See also The Essential Gesture. Edited and introduced by Stephen Clingman, London, Jonathan Cape, 1988.

2. A Sport of Nature, London, Cape, 1987.

3. "A Conversation with Nadine Gordimer." First published in Salmagundi, a Quarterly of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Skidmor College, NY 12866 Vol. 62, Winter 1984. Quoted in the Introduction to July's People, ed. Alison Leake, Harlow, Longman, 1985, p. xx.

4. "I was looking for what people meant but didn't say, not only about sex, but also about politics and their relationship with the black people among whom we lived as people live in a forest among trees." The Essential Gesture, op. cit. p. 26.

5. op. cit. p. xxi.

6. op. cit. p. xxii.

7. See Hilda Bernstein's article in Southern African Review of Books, February/March 1989, Vol 2, No 5, Issue 7, p. 22.

8. The Conservationist: London, Cape 1974. London, Penguin edition, 1978.

9. The Lying Days. First published 1953. Reissued London,

Jonathan Cape, 1978.

10. *A World of Strangers*, London, Gollancz, 1958. Reissued London, Penguin, 1962, p. 63.

11. *The Lying Days*, op. cit. p.

12. *A World of Strangers*, op. cit. p. 63.

13. ibid. p. 54.

14. ibid. p. 158.

15. ibid. p. 134.

16. ibid. p. 263

17. ibid. p. 184.

18. *A Guest of Honour*, London, Cape, 1970. Reissued London, Penguin, 1973.

19. *A World of Strangers*, op. cit. p. 73.

20. *Occasion For Loving*, London, Gollancz, 1963.

21. *A World of Strangers*, op. cit.
Cecil's living room "seemed to be a room of many attempts, all of which had petered out into each other" (p. 140) while Anna's bathroom reflects "the severe order of Anna's mind." (p. 183.)

22. *Burger's Daughter*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1979.

23. *The Late Bourgeois World*, London, Cape, 1966. Reissued London, Penguin, 1982.

24. op. cit. p. 25.

25. ibid. p. 37.

26. ibid. p. 91.

27. ibid. p. 61.

28. 'South Africa: towards a desk-drawer literature.' *The Classic*, Johannesburg Vol. 2 No. 4, 1968. pp. 66-74. (Extract quoted from pp. 70 - 71.)
Quoted in Michael Wade, *Nadine Gordimer*, London, Evans Bros, 1978, p. 109.

29. *Burger's Daughter*, op. cit. p. 328.

30. *July's People*, London, Longmans, 1986. First published London, Cape, 1981.

31. op. cit. p. 63.

32. ibid. p. 61.

33. ibid. p. 87.

34. ibid. p. 88.

35. ibid. p. 135.

36. ibid. p. 149.

37. ibid. p. 72.

38. ibid. p. 74.
The language used in the above quotations reminds me of the way Red Indians speak in old cowboy movies. It also reflects the way second language learners begin to use English.

39. For example, authorial comments like: "This is not a period well-documented in anyone's memory, even, it seems, Hillela's own," (p. 119) indicate that this novel is supposed to give the impression of being a biography.

40. A Sport of Nature, p. 71.

41. ibid. p. 234.

42. ibid. p. 189.

43. ibid. p. 290.

44. ibid. p. 330.

45. ibid. p. 227.

46. ibid. p. 289.

47. ibid. p. 307.

48. ibid. p. 204.

49. <u>The Essential Gesture</u>, op. cit. p. 1.
This echoes the title of her critical essays:
<u>The Black Interpreters</u>, Johannesburg, SPRO-CAS/RAVAN, 1973.

Chapter 5

Other Novels by White South African Women Writers

The fallacious impression given by some critics[1] is that South African literature by women has been dominated for over a hundred years by four white writers: Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Sarah Gertrude Millin and Nadine Gordimer.

Recently, however, South African publishers like Ad. Donker and David Philips, and English feminist publishers like Virago and the Women's Press have published or re-issued some novels by comparatively unknown writers, perhaps in response to both an interest in feminism and in the politics and history of South Africa.

In her satirical novel, Jacks in Corner (1987), Sheila Roberts

observes through her middle-aged heroine that if she were black it would be much easier for her to publish her writings whatever the subject: she believes that in the future all white writing will be irrelevant - the implication is that the South African government will be black. White writing

> "would fall into oblivion in the revolutionised future, unless she were black or had black grandchildren."[2]

This cynical comment, which indicates a belief that literature can only be judged by a writer's colour, as well as a realisation that white rule will inevitably end, nevertheless stresses the divide between black and white experience which several white women writers have attempted to cross. All the same Sheila Roberts' attitude marks an amazing change from the complacency of women like Mrs Millin and Ethelreda Lewis (who promised white rule) in the 1920s and '30s. Sheila Roberts' comment also raises doubts about the value of literature in a revolutionary situation, which cannot be resolved in the sense that literature is inevitable and its influence incalculable. Another modern writer, Menán du Plessis, in her first novel A State of Fear (1983) also queries through her protagonist, Anna, the kind of novel that can be written now. She believes

> "realist novels only help to preserve the status quo."

But her friend argues that:

> "committed literature ought to be about the misery of life in a re-settlement camp or a squatter's shanty."[3]

Anna, however, believes that a different kind of fiction is needed at a time of change. The novel seems to be "only pen and ink"[4]. A change of consciousness would take the writer and reader, in their shared experience towards self-understanding, and therefore participation in the future.

"the lone heroes doggedly refuse to share the dreams of the dominant class: and yet can't accept the consequences of commitment to some steady dream of a different future. Seems their only recourse is to Romanticism? Protestations about the value of self-realization."[5]

Her brilliant novel follows this course, almost to the point of repetitive self-indulgence at times in its attempt to examine every aspect of life in a short period of unrest in the Cape in the early 1980s.

A hundred years before Olive Schreiner also developed towards this position - changing the organisation of the conventional nineteenth century realist novel - towards novels in which plot is subordinate to the characters' personal voyages of discovery, as the relationship between their inner and outer lives is explored, and a change in their understanding of their lives and their society brings the novels to a close. Other modern writers like Sheila Fugard, and to a certain extent Nadine Gordimer have also attempted this kind of novel (for which Virginia Woolf's writing may have been used as a starting point).

Such novels focus on the experiences of women, and may be autobiographical. To achieve the position of self-exploration women need time, a room of their own, and freedom from some of the responsibilities of day to day life[6]. For example, Christina in Sheila Fugard's A Revolutionary Woman[7], and Anna Roussow in A State of Fear, have freed themselves at crucial points in their lives to consider their personal experiences in relation to the South African situation: education and financial independence have made this possible. They are

also living alone by choice: they are free of the pressures described in pre-war novels, in which a woman was usually seen as a failure if unmarried. As well as changes in the consciousness of whites towards blacks, there has been an important change in expectations for women - as long as they are white and middle class. There seems to be an awareness in these modern novels, returning to Olive Schreiner's position, that change, with which all these writers are concerned, begins within the consciousness of the individual. Solitude, chosen or imposed, seems to be necessary to this. (Loneliness, such as that felt by Mrs Millin's uneducated aging women, is different, reflecting empty lives dependent on men's and without inner resources.)

Another aspect of South African writing, reflected in these novels too, is that all the novelists I am discussing want to educate their readers about life in South Africa; some do it more subtly than others. For instance, Mrs Millin's God's Step Children[8] in effect promotes separate development and both Wild Deer[9] by Ethelreda Lewis and Mittee[10] by Daphne Rooke, share her position, although the emphasis is different. Historical novels, like Exiles by Rose Zwi[11], which tells the story of a Jewish family, and Mittee, which discusses the settlement of the land by the Boers, attempt to place modern South Africa in context. Mary Benson[12] and Hilda Bernstein[13] use their political experiences in fiction to record and support the policies of the ANC while Phyllis Altman[14], writing in the early fifties concludes that a strong working class movement of both black and white could destroy the Nationalist regime. Sheila Fugard and Menán du Plessis believe in a classless society: Menán du Plessis moves the argument forward by

suggesting that the black children will lead a revolution.

The tensions created by the extent of their characters' awareness of the problems of apartheid and the choices which subsequently have to be made, become central to the development of many of these novels which can be read therefore as historical and sociological documents as well as literature. (Sometimes like Wild Deer this seems to be their major contribution to the history of the South African novel!)

Women's role is still usually described, with the exception of A Revolutionary Woman and A State of Fear as being supportive of men: direct participation in politics often begins through a relationship with a man. Men organise and direct most of the political activity. So far as I am aware, apart from Nadine Gordimer, no woman writer has attempted to describe the life of a white woman who takes a leading role in the struggle because of her principles[15], although a minor character, Paula Waszynski in At The Still Point may be based on Ruth First.
The majority of the white women characters in the novels only meet blacks as servants. In several books the turning point in their attitudes to apartheid is when the relationship with a black man becomes personal - usually when a woman sleeps with him. This becomes a political action in the sense that they are breaking the law[16] which has only recently been repealed. It may also, as in The Virgins[17] (1976) be a confused act of defiance against racist bourgeois parents by an adolescent who is also longing to have her first experience of sex.

Other women writers approach the racial question like Mrs

Millin - by attempting to narrate part or all of the novel from a black viewpoint.

There is no ambiguity in the feelings of the characters in Wild Deer by Ethelreda Lewis. Everyone knows his or her place in the scheme of things, except for the hero, who has to find out. He is a black American singer, possibly based on the characters of Clemence Kadalie and Paul Robeson. De la Harpe is visiting South Africa to discover for himself how blacks are treated. Ethelreda Lewis was herself involved politically through her friendship with Clemence Kadalie, the charismatic leader of the I.C.U. and white liberals like Mabel Palmer and the Millins [18].

The novel falls into two parts. The first describes how the heroine, a wealthy philanthropist, who visits the townships and organises clinics for the blacks, as well as writing articles about them - a character that must be based on Mrs Lewis's personal experience - falls in love with De la Harpe. Unlike Mrs Millin's women characters she is not anxious to be married but enjoys her independence, although her mother puts pressure on her to conform. Mrs Lewis distinguishes between educated American blacks and black South Africans in this part of the story, and De la Harpe has some racist experiences, of which she is clearly critical. But her position on race becomes clear as the novel develops. De la Harpe rejects his wealthy friend Ruth on the grounds that the two races should not mix sexually, although they can meet as equals in friendship. Ruth accepts his position, which he explains in a series of rhetorical questions.

"'Have we no subject in common, we black humans and

white, except the subject of sex? Does nothing draw us together but mutual repulsion or an unnatural desire? A kind of desire which no animal sinks to'"[19]

This rather stilted, pompous questioning of a woman in the circumstances gives the impression that De la Harpe is an unpleasant, self-satisfied prig rather than the intelligent, educated black American he is made out to be. This is a weakness in the novel; Ruth is a far more sympathetic character, but Mrs Lewis, writing one of the earliest novels about romantic love across the colour bar, is, perhaps over anxious to emphasise her beliefs[20].

The second part of the novel discusses the practice of separate development, which, like Mrs Millin, Mrs Lewis believes is the solution to racial problems. De la Harpe commits himself to the future of South Africa by going to live in a rural area with an educated African Chief, who, politically, supports the Government view. The chief gives De la Harpe a young black virgin as well as a house and food. The act of love with her at the end of the novel symbolises De la Harpe's identification with this way of life, and the ending of his personal search for peace in a racist world. The development of the story is as important as the characters in this novel because it illustrates De la Harpe's journeys - spiritual and physical.

Mrs Lewis's belief in women's independence - Ruth is far more independent than any of Mrs Millin's characters, except perhaps Hester in <u>The Dark River</u> - is limited to the white race. Black women are clearly made out to be possessions. Although much of the novel is narrated from De la Harpe's

point of view and indicates some sympathy for his position with regard to white racism, the overall impression given by the novel is that Africans are primitive, noble savages who have been destroyed by white desire for gold - an attempt to place the position of the blacks in the context of white capitalism, which Mrs Millin avoided after her first novel. Images of animals, like the title, underline the message that Africans belong, like exotic species of rare animals, in the rural areas, as in this passage:

> "that was the crime that made the gold-mines unique, this breaking of primitives on the wheel of the machine. As if bright zebras, great horizons reflected in their wild eyes, should suddenly be set to do the work of blind pit ponies."[21]

The return to the wild, to the pastoral scene, as an ideal way of life, runs through much Western literature, and, in terms of South Africa at least, it is a fallacious concept - in this novel, for example, it is used to promote the apartheid policy of separate development. The development of the capitalist system in South Africa based on the wealth produced in the mines by black labour enables writers like Ethelreda Lewis to write, from a secure position, about the problems of the blacks and to suggest solutions. The writers of the 1980s seem to have lost this feeling of security. (Paradoxically a black writer, Lauretta Ngcobo, attacks the South African capitalist system and the gold mines, from the black viewpoint by calling her novel Cross of Gold.)

Mittee (1951) by Daphne Rooke takes a historical perspective on the lives of the Afrikaners leading up to the events of

the Boer war, but arrives at the same viewpoint - that apartheid is the only solution. Daphne Rooke also describes the Boer pastoral way of life but from a different attitude to that of Pauline Smith. The story is narrated in the first person by a coloured servant, Selina, in a style reminiscent of Biblical language to indicate the way Selina would speak. It describes her complex relationship moving between love and hatred with her mistress Mittee, which illustrates the interdependence of maid and mistress in the developing colonial society. Although earlier novels include violence, seduction, rape, unhappy marriages and so on, Daphne Rooke's long family saga also involves hints at masturbation, incest between brother and sister, and mother and son; violent rape in war as well as abortion; seduction and rape across the colour bar; and murders as well as deaths in war, in a much more explicit way, breaking down the convention that descriptions of sex should not be so direct. The novel would make a good television drama today, or soap opera, and is also the kind of writing, like Forever Amber, which mothers did not like their daughters to read in the fifties and sixties (as explained in The Virgins). It portrays a very different world from that of The Beadle, although the Afrikaner men, with their religious strength of purpose, are similar.

The opening of the novel, which describes the two women with Fannie, Selina's husband, in the Boer War, shooting their own game, and running the farm, suggests an anti-racist and feminist perspective, but this is soon undermined by the rest of the novel, in which various relationships with men are the main concern of the women characters. The war is seen only as affecting their lives and the political issues

are not examined. Both women are survivors in a time of conflict. However, Daphne Rooke's portrayal of a coloured girl is much more sympathetic than that of Mrs Millin. Selina is conscious of her individuality, although this is expressed in terms of her own enjoyment of her physical beauty in terms reminiscent of the Biblical Song of Songs, which she would have read, as she is literate.

> "In all the world there was only one Selina - of all the millions who came after her, there would never be another being exactly like she who sat crocheting beside the spring. Her breasts were like gold satin, the nipples like the heart of a dark rose..."[22]

It becomes clear, through the complicated plot of the novel, that both women as well as other white women in the novel are searching for happiness in their relationships with the ideal man. They have little control over their lives. Sexual attraction can even destroy their sense of morals: for instance, although Paul, Mittee's husband, is seduced by Selina, and later rapes her, and then she discovers he has murdered her father, she cannot resist him, nor he her.

> "He could not keep away. I think it was because I knew all the evil in him. But I was as lonely as a ghost."[23]

This sad, simple image gives some depth to the character's feelings and, I think, such images throughout the novel, make it more than a popular "romance".

In spite of love affairs marriage is still central to the women's experience, and, as in earlier novels, appearance is important in finding a husband. Women are still possessions. Mittee's family are involved in setting up her marriage to

Paul. Her beauty and her clothes indicate Paul's position in the colony. Paul, as Selina's master, chooses a husband for her whom she hates. Although Selina is portrayed as sexually active, unlike Mrs Millin Daphne Rooke does not comdemn her character for this - indeed white girls in the novel also have 'sex before marriage'. In this respect the women are portrayed as being equal. But Paul's relationship with Selina has to be kept hidden, and he is clearly using her. Selina, as the narrator, is always conscious of her inferior position in the structure of the new society, in which the white bourgeois Afrikaners are solidifying their position through marriages and the acquisition of more land. As well as Selina other coloured characters are described as having their lives controlled by whites. The inevitable conclusion is expressed at the end of the novel by Fannie, Selina's coloured husband:

> "It's always best not to trust a white person for much, no matter who they are."[24]

They set up a home far away from the white settlers.

Throughout the novel the recurring image of a skeleton is a reminder of the almost unchecked violence upon which the colonialists base their control of South Africa. Nadine Gordimer uses the same image of a dead body in The Conservationist. As in A Revolutionary Woman, the Afrikaners are described as the bringers of death through such images. Mittee is a historical novel, which nevertheless, relates the past to the present, perpetuating stereotypes of women as sexual possessions of men. For the first time in a novel, as far as I know, a coloured girl describes the white bourgeois world. The land is important as representing food and wealth,

but also as an essential part of Mittee's life in providing consolation in her struggle to survive[25].

In Law of the Vultures (1952), another but quite different novel of this period, Phyllis Altman also narrates the story from a black viewpoint, in the third person. The novel describes the lives of a group of black men in the late forties, after the Second World War and the effects of apartheid which politicise them in different ways. Their personal suffering is related to the wider issues through the characters' developing understanding of the system, and their changing response to it. Thaele's disillusion leads to his setting up a "black consciousness" group, and his subsequent violent death. For many years he had worked in a job as clerk, well below the standard of his education. The whites' racist attitudes are explained effectively through dialogue which Thaele is meant to hear.

> "'What do they want education for? Leave them alone - they're perfectly happy.'
> 'They're so immoral...'"[26]

(In the same way Muriel suffers at work in Muriel At Metropolitan, a novel by a black woman.) The first part of the novel follows Thaele's story, which later becomes involved with that of David Nkosi. Thaele's problems with work, housing, education, prison and his family are all analysed and seen to be the result of the apartheid system, which was now institutionalised by the Nationalist Government that came into power in 1948. Thaele, now living in the Township, justifiably idealises his childhood in the rural area as

> "a small lost world of unutterable peace."[27]

but Phyllis Altman makes it clear that there is no returning

to this world, and, through Nkosi's experiences that it has already changed, because of the Government's need for black labour in the mines.

Relationships with whites are those of master and servant: David Nkosi's friendship with a white soldier in the war cannot survive under apartheid because the white man values his image in the white society more than the promises he made to David. Through such episodes Phyllis Altman illustrates the enjoyment of power of the whites and its destructive effects on the personal relationships of the blacks. The novel ends tragically and inevitably in violence and death. However, the message of the novel which comes naturally from the experience of the characters, emphasises the possibility of change in the period long before Sharpeville.

David Nkosi, who, like Alan Paton's hero comes from the rural areas to the town in order to survive becomes a symbol of all that is noble in African manhood (just as Pholoso does in Amandla[28]).

> "His face was young and smooth, a face innocent of guile... the face of Africa..."[29]

He rejects Thaele's movement, whose ideals have become corrupted by the Africans' desparate need for money, and joins a Trade Union. The organiser, Dhlamini, in discussions and in a speech to the factory workers, believes in the power of the united working class both black and white to change the system.

> "'Our sufferings are great, but our hearts are strong. We know that it is good to laugh, to dance, to be with our women, to talk with our friends...We are all

brothers.'"[30]

Women's position in this list, and more importantly the narration of the novel from the viewpoint of black men, suggest that women are not seen as equal partners in the novel. Phyllis Altman does not take up a feminist position here. The role of black women is to support men, in the struggle and in the homeland, to share the work with men on the land. The tragedy of their lives under apartheid is described in minor episodes as when Thaele rejects his wife so that he can begin his political work unencumbered. She leaves the city and her marriage

"tear blinded and heart-broken."[31]

The novel involves many sad partings of this kind between husband and wife, parent and child. Nkosi's sister, pregnant at 15 is deserted by her lover and Mary's baby dies when her rich white employer refuses to let her maid have any time off. All these events illustrate different aspects of the corruption of the system. A white woman clerk in Thaele's office falsely accuses him of theft, and sets the story in motion, contrasting the power of white women with the helplessness of black men.

Phyllis Altman's novel has only recently been republished. It takes similar themes to those discussed by Alan Paton, whose books have never been out of print. Law of the Vultures is a complex, powerful novel written from a position of sympathy and understanding for the Africans like Amandla and Cross of Gold, two political novels by black women writers. I agree with J.M. Coetzee's analysis of Paton's writing. Paton's liberal attitude is patronising towards

his black characters. His work encourages a comfortable feeling of liberal guilt, and so is acceptable, whereas Phyllis Altman describes the Africans as individuals of equal if not better intelligence than whites, and also with more moral courage, whose lives are being ruined by apartheid.

Two political novels written about the struggle against apartheid in the 1960s mark a new realism in the novel; fictional characters sometimes based on real people experience real events, in which their authors were involved. Both Mary Benson and Hilda Bernstein have also written autobiographies[33] about their lives in South Africa. The central white women characters have also undergone a change, reflecting changes in society. They have, superficially, become the New Women of which Olive Schreiner was writing. They are well educated, financially independent working women who are no longer interested in marriage as an end in itself but who choose their lovers. The double standard has at last disappeared in the novels, although women still endure jealousy.

The heroine of At The Still Point by Mary Benson returns to South Africa as a journalist, after a long stay abroad. This device enables Mary Benson to describe the changes that are occurring in the attitudes of the white middle classes towards apartheid. During a series of social encounters in the first part of the novel Anne observes a range of white feelings in her friends and relations which reflect the mood of the sixties. Some whites are afraid and are thinking of leaving the country; some liberals are trying to help the blacks through the law and in the Townships; others are politically involved and have been in prison. The middle

class liberal guilt is perhaps summed up by Ben as he and Anne watch Africans being sentenced in Court under the Pass Laws.

> "And we a part of it, sitting here, witnessing, pitying, feeling brave for having come. Patronize. Emasculate. Never have I felt so white, so middle class, so "privileged", so guilty."[34]

Although the dialogue may be rather forced to make a point the novel accurately reflects the attitudes of the period, also described by Nadine Gordimer in her early novels. Mary Benson compares these white bourgeois characters unfavourably with political activists such as Beatrice Quba, whom Anne meets in the Cape, and of whom she gives brief, but effective descriptions. Another white woman, who may be a portrait of Ruth First, whom Anne visits, is in prison under the new 90 Days Law.

> "Unconventional, lonely, she had a sardonic sense of humour, or was she sarcastic and arrogant...?"[35]

Anne lives in an atmosphere of fear once she begins her own involvement through her romance with a lawyer who defends black people and who is also working underground for the ANC. This white, middle class political hero is based on Bram Fischer. Nadine Gordimer also uses him as a basis for a character in a more complex novel. Unfortunately Mary Benson, who has only written one novel and is better known for her political works, experiments with style to create an impression of Anne's immediate feelings, by writing at times in the present tense and constructing disjointed sentences without verbs. Anne's feminist position too, is rather contradicted by descriptions of her romantic feelings for Matthew:

"Irresistably I was open to him. The woman, flawed, vain, shameful, myself, whom Matthew loved."[36]

This ambivalent attitude is also reflected in Anne's observations when she visits the rural area of the Cape for the first time.

"I felt pride at the luxuriance they'd (her ancestors) wrought out of the unknown wilderness, often with little but their bare hands and resolution."[37]

In spite of her descriptions of her liberal friends it seems that Anne may, after all, share their beliefs that they have a right to the land. The blacks are seen as a problem which can be resolved by the whites, on whom they are dependent.

Hilda Bernstein's only novel so far, Death Is Part of The Process, is more complex, and more subtle, in its condemnation of apartheid. It is narrated in the third person from the viewpoints of several black and white characters, who become involved in the ANC guerilla movement of the sixties. Unity is also achieved by describing the passage of time as a small Indian boy observes events at the beginning of the novel and at the end as a young man becomes involved himself. In writing the novel Hilda Bernstein herself is participating in the process of change in the same way as the characters she is describing. The black male activists are described as individuals who react in different ways, like the white characters, to the apartheid system. The novel concentrates on the male experience because, as was made clear in Phyllis Altman's novel about the early 1950s, men are usually leaders of the struggle, and women's role is to support them. As a kind of sub-plot which is part of the complex organisation of the novel reflecting the difficulties of communication

in a secret struggle, Hilda Bernstein compares the lives of two white women. Through Pilar, the daughter of wealthy bourgeois parents, Hilda Bernstein satirises the lives of the rich, and also of liberal thinking activists. She uses the image of Pilar's clothes to indicate this. Although Pilar has her own flat and a job she cannot break away from her parents and has lunch with them every Sunday. She looks into her mirror and observes her fashionable appearance. Hilda Bernstein comments:

> "...but the cultivation of carelessness was itself becoming a fashion, and her cosmetics, although restricted and discreet, were none the less expensive."[38]

Pilar's involvement in political activity does not arise from principle but from her personal relationship with an African she meets through her work, and her liberal reaction against her parents' attitudes. But when she is arrested her father, against her will, arranges for her release from prison. Consequently, as she knows,

> "wherever she went, she would be marked white and a woman."[39]

The other woman, Marge, who is married with young children, develops her political consciousness as a result of her husband's arrest. She changes from a housewife who had accepted her husband's view of herself as a listener, not a participant, into a well-organised capable woman, who is at last in control of her life. Like Anne in The Virgins this change is symbolised by her sexual relationship with an Indian whom she is sheltering from the police.

Black women take little active part in the novel compared with the whites. Marie briefly appears in the story when

she warns others about Sipho who is also working for the police. Sipho, like Stephen in A World of Strangers is almost a black stereotype of a sexy black man - created by a white woman, as unprincipled in his love life as he is politically[40]. He is in strong contrast to the other characters in the novel, who whatever their personal problems or race are united in their belief that violence is necessary in response to the violence of the State, after Sharpeville, and that individual acts of terrorism by the underground wing of the ANC are justifiable. The novel gives an impression of the tension and fear of this period, and the dedication of the people who became involved in the struggle. Like Mary Benson's novel, Death is Part of the Process, however, indirectly promotes the work of the ANC as the only liberation movement. Women are part of the struggle, which is more important than any individual.

A historical novel published in the 1970s, A Life To Live, by Yvonne Burgess returns to the discussion of the lives of poor whites which Pauline Smith first described in The Little Karoo. Yvonne Burgess's interesting but depressing novel describes in a flat, simple, direct style the movement to the town in search of work of poor Afrikaners dispossessed of their land. The main part of the book begins when the heroine, Nel, arrives in the city, although the first part introduces the background of two generations of unhappy women that produced her. Their attitude has been formed by their experiences of men in a patriarchal society in which the double standard existed and in which contraception was unavailable. Yvonne Burgess underlines the women's personal tragedies by drawing conclusions from the lives she is describing in

an ironic, epigrammatic way. Nel's mother was exhausted by childbearing for example.

> "Fertility was the disease Naomi suffered and babies were its symptoms."[41]

The women themselves cooperate in this system by accepting it. Naomi's mother warned her that

> "men had only one thought in mind, and that was to make of their wives mattresses."[42]

Although Naomi inherited a farm her husband took control of it on their marriage, and wasted her inheritance. In spite of this Naomi does not want Nel to be educated. Her message is that

> "Learning could only make a woman unwilling to bear her lot in life which was to marry and rear children, and for that, as everyone knew, no education was necessary."[43]

Nel never escapes from the poverty trap, and her marriage to another poor white like herself who becomes an alcoholic and beats her up, in the result of social pressure, and brings her no relief from her sad life. But she manages to send money to her mother to help educate her younger sister, Margriet. In the third part of the novel Margriet's successful life - well-educated, healthy and attractive - she has married an Afrikaner landowner - is compared with Nel's apparent failure. But Yvonne Burgess shows that Margriet's life is made up of images which impress other people, while Nel has kept her moral integrity. Their relationship is symbolised by the silk dress Margriet wants her sister to wear at a party while Nel prefers to wear the secondhand one given to her with kindness by her Jewish employer. So

Nel rejects white bourgeois values.

Yvonne Burgess, like Olive Schreiner, is clearly writing critically of a male-dominated society in which men have legal control of women's property and in which marriage and children are seen as inevitable for women. She also criticises bourgeois material values. Political events have little direct effect on the lives of such poor people who are struggling day by day to keep alive. Black people, in one short episode, are described as being in a worse position than the whites. Implicit in the novel is a deeper criticism of a government which can allow such contrasts of poverty and riches as are found in the lives of the two sisters. Nel is the closest to the image of a woman as a victim in the novels but Yvonne Burgess makes it clear that she is a victim of an indifferent society, not of her own wrong choices.

In The Virgins (1976) Jillian Becker also criticises the white middle classes, through the eyes of her heroine, Annie Firmin. This clever, sensitive novel about adolescence describes how Annie grows up increasingly aware of her privileged way of life compared with that of poorer whites and with the family's black servants. But Annie reacts in a personal way; the reader is left to draw the conclusions about the South African political system. Annie is also curious about sex and the novel ends when she tries to lose her virginity to a coloured boy who is staying, with the other servants, in the house for one night, so defiantly breaking two basic moral tabus of her class at one time. Jillian Becker closely observes the bourgeois way of life and the novel's delicate

descriptions of people and places written in the kind of language Annie would use are honest and sometimes shocking in the sense that they express moments of sudden insight involving a change in Annie's consciousness. For instance, Annie observes that the washerwoman has no shoes, and that her feet

"could have been made of wood. Cracks ran up from the soles, as they did up the split poles of the yard fence."[45]

This image, in which Annie is suddenly aware of Hannah's poverty marks a change in her attitude towards black servants. But Annie's attitude is ambiguous, reflecting that of other liberals described in these novels. Although Hannah's dismissal at a moment's notice - she is being replaced by a washing machine - upsets Annie and she intends to pass on to Hannah the £20 her father gave her after a row with him about apartheid, she cannot resist buying a pair of lizard skin shoes instead. Unlike Nel, she cannot resist the luxuries of apartheid although increasingly aware that they are based on black labour. Annie has also been brought up to feel that men know best. Her father

> "knew her carry-on had not only been childish but silly in a specially female way she thought, smoothing out the notes across her knee."[46]

It is left unclear at the end of the novel as to whether Annie will follow through her acts of rebellion or become like her mother. From Olive Schreiner in From Man To Man, Mrs Millin, and Mrs Lewis in the early part of the century to Mary Benson, Hilda Bernstein, Yvonne Burgess and Nadine Gordimer, women writers have enjoyed describing middle-aged white bourgeois women as being obsessed by appearances and material possessions. Daughters rebel against such women,

who are interested in the idea of perpetuating marriage in, for instance, Wild Deer, and Death is Part of The Process. In The Virgins Jillian Becker creates a satirical portrait of Mrs Firmin through her daughter's eyes which is both funny and tragic. For example,

> "Mrs Firmin did not come downstairs until eleven, but she was very busy between her seven o'clock tea and her descent. In addition to breakfast there also came to her room - generally on different days - the Masseuse (twice a week), the Beautician (twice)..."[47]

Annie longs for her mother's love and attention and the novel's sadness comes from Annie's growing sense of loneliness, which is only relieved by finding a close girl friend with the same background. Fear is the key to women like Mrs Firmin, who is even jealous of Annie's youth. Women like Mrs Firmin may be concentrating on creating masks to hide from themselves the realities of their situation; to disguise the effects it is having on their faces; to indicate how wealthy they are and also like white women in Europe and the States, to try to stop the aging process from showing so that their husbands remain faithful.

In the 1980s two novels about women's journeys of self-discovery indicate a movement away from novels of realism to experiments with form, reflecting changes in emphasis from the importance of the outside world to the inner consciousness. (In the same way nearly a hundred years earlier Olive Schreiner moved from the conventional European novel to the use of dreams and allegories to express her characters' search for spiritual truth.)

Sheila Fugard's short novel A Revolutionary Woman (1984) is dense with images from Greek, Hindu and Christian mythology as her heroine who narrates the story in the first person tries to make sense of her experiences in the 1920s, relating them to those of all women.

> "All women are Lakshmi (the child bride). They are Kasturbai too. (Gandhi's wife.) They represent youth, and age. The full cycle of a woman's life. The menstrual flow being one with the ocean. Then, the walk across the sand, with a vision of a temple in the sky."[48]

When her young coloured student Ebrahim attempts to rape her she concludes:

> "I've become a thing, something to be sued, abused and then abandoned. The rape of all women throughout our history."[49]

Sheila Fugard believes that women's sexual experiences are crucial to understanding South African life. Love across the colour bar breaks down the barrier between Asian and white. The Boers feel that the African and coloured males threaten their masculinity. Christina, however, does not regret her miscarriage - like Anna in A World of Strangers she feels the world is not ready for children of mixed races. The town of New Kimberley and the Karoo become symbolic of the South African future, riven by racist wars. Christina prophesies that

> "A foul pit opens here, and the stench of it is terrible. It's the contagion of a plague."[50]

The Boers are transformed by racial hatred into messengers of death from the Underworld[51]. But at the end of the novel she realises in an image of rain falling on the desert that a classless society can be achieved if people follow the

ways of Gandhi. Sadly the novel's experimentation with language and symbols is not effective, but confusing. The individual Boers and the coloured boy, Ebrahim, are not convincing in their actions, and the plot does not sustain the allegory. However, Christina is a feminist heroine who emphasises the universality of female experiences.

Menán du Plessis' first novel, A State of Fear, is far more convincing. This apparently formless novel is narrated in a series of typed letters by a school teacher, perhaps to the reader, perhaps to her dead brother, or perhaps to her exiled father, or both. The novel is a long personal search for understanding both of Anna's situation, her relationships with her family, friends and her students, and with the South African State. Anna is the most highly educated of the heroines in these novels; she knows both English and Afrikaans cultures and history; she has studied philosophy and politics. Her references to her father's poetry, written in Afrikaans, add a further dimension to the novel. Few actual events take place in the period of the novel, which is set in Cape Town in the early 1980s at a time of student unrest. One of the coloured students Anna is hiding in her flat may have been killed in police custody. But Anna recalls a series of past events, such as her parents' divorce, her earlier involvement in student politics and her brother's suicide, relating them to the present experience, and attempting to reach their truth. Sometimes the inner and outer realities become merged. The "state of fear" is both political - the apartheid system - and personal - her sense of oppression.

> "Perhaps it's all a fiction. I feel tempted to believe that none of this is real, that the outside world, our

invisible Revolution, the children - that none of these exist at all, but rise up out of my own sleeplessness, blazing chaotically at night behind my own eyelids: nothing more than fantasies of light pressing against my own eyelids."[52]

The novel is written in a lyrical style which reflects Anna's search for truth - long sentences, reflecting the rhythms of speech as if Anna is talking with herself, although it is in effect, a dialogue with the reader, which develops into images taken from her experiences that illuminate her discoveries. Her voluntary isolation becomes symbolised by the one small tree that grows in her garden, for example, which, she believes, will survive to see changes in the political system. Her understanding of colonialism is reached after she remembers seeing the wreck of an old ship stuck in the sand - an allegory of the trade upon which the Empire was built. Her restless mind continually journeys into all aspects of South African life, recreating for the reader, in effect, the state of fear. By the end of the novel Anna reaches the conclusion that she cannot leave South Africa like her father, or commit suicide like her brother or shut herself away like her mother. She must accept the past and return to the veld to

"face our historical condition."[53]

An image of rain falling signifies change is coming (as it does in other novels by women writers like Olive Schreiner, Sheila Fugard and Bessie Head.)

"It'll rain soon again, I think. There's a brilliant clarity in the air - as though the whole world were on the threshold of exquisite brightness, of sadness."[54]

Passages of introspection are related to outer reality through such images. Anna is always aware of the weather and changes in the light. Anna's feminist position is seen, not only in her way of life but in her attitude to her mother, of whom Anna is critical because of her lack of independence.

> "You can't ask someone to stop being a stranger to you when she has learnt to be alien to herself even."[55]

Menan du Plessis' first novel with its subtle changes of emphasis from the personal to the universal is an honest, successful analysis by a feminist white writer of the apartheid system in this period. Anna's uncertainties and personal tragedies are a long way from the rather complacent liberal white attitudes of middle class heroines like Hester, Anne in Mary Benson's novel and even Hillela. (I think Anne is closest to Lyndall in her search for truth.) In a world in which television and newspaper daily inform the West about the South African situation Menan du Plessis' novel indicates how changes in the forms of literature can provide a deeper, more imaginative and sensitive analysis, in response to changes in consciousness of the struggle.[56]

Notes

1. Any information I have about some of these writers is from the covers and introductions to their books or from autobiographies, e.g. Daphne Rooke, Phyllis Altman, and Mary Benson were journalists which is, perhaps, reflected in their style.

2. Sheila Roberts: Jacks in Corner, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1987. Also see Sheila Roberts: He's My Brother, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1987.

3. Menan Du Plessis: A State of Fear, Johannesburg, David Philip, 1983.

4. ibid., p. 161.

5. ibid., p. 148.

6. Olive Schreiner: From Man To Man, London, Virago, 1982.

7. Sheila Fugard: A Revolutionary Woman, London, Virago, 1984.

8. See Chapter 2 on Mrs Millin.

9. Ethelreda Lewis: Wild Deer, London, Faber and Faber, under the pseudonym R. Honekin Baptist. Reissued Johannesburg, David Philip, 1984.

10. Daphne Rooke: Mittee, London, Gollancz, 1951. Reissued Cape, Chameleon Press, 1987.

11. Rose Zwi: Exiles, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1984. Also see Shirley Van Zyl: Sowing The Wind, Johannesburg, horne and de Villiers, 1986. This is a beautifully produced novel about a love story with the background of the Boer War, ardently supportive of the Afrikaners.

12. Mary Benson: At the Still Point, Boston, Gambit, 1969. Reissued London, Virago, 1988.

13. Hilda Bernstein: Death Is Part of the Process, London, Sinclair Browne, 1983. Reissued London, Grafton, 1986.

14. Phyllis Altman: Law of the Vultures, London, Jonathan Cape, 1952. Reissued Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1987.

15. See, for instance, autobiographies by Ruth First, Emma Mashinini. (Nadine Gordimer's last novel, A Sport of Nature, see Chapter 4, is an exception to this general point.)

16. "Love Across the Colour Bar" as Jillian Becker calls it in a chapter heading in The Virgins (op. cit.) has been the issue in many novels by men and women, black and white, including one recently by Lewis Nkosi, but the repeal of this law has, perhaps, taken away some of the tension around this theme.

17. Jillian Becker: The Virgins, London, Gollancz, 1976. Reissued Johannesburg, David Philip, 1986.

18. See Sheila Marks: Not Either an Experimental Doll, (op. cit.)

19. Wild Deer, op. cit., p. 178.

20. William Plomer: Turbott Wolfe, London, The Hogarth Press, 1925. Reissued Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983. This novel indicates an apparently opposite view to that put forward by Mrs Lewis. The heroine is a feminist who falls in love with a black intellectual and is happy to marry him.

21. Wild Deer, op. cit., p. 109. Compare this imagery with that in Roy Campbell's poems. Op. cit.

22. Mittee, op. cit., p. 172.

23. ibid., p. 117.

24. ibid., p. 172.

25. ibid., p. 11. "For always this is the precious time for me when the horizon shines like water...Then...God bent towards me."

26. Law of the Vultures, op. cit., p. 7

27. ibid., p. 10.

28. See the chapter on Other Novels by Black Women Writers.

29. Law of the Vultures, op. cit., p. 24.

30. ibid., p. 153.

31. ibid., p. 105.

32. J.M. Coetzee: White Writing, op. cit. See Chapter 5, "Simple People. Smith, Paton, Mikro".

33. Mary Benson: A Far Cry, London, Viking, 1989.

Hilda Bernstein: The World That Was Ours. The Story of the Rivonia Trial, London, South African Writers, 1989.

34. At the Still Point, op. cit., p. 35.

35. ibid., p. 37.

36. ibid., p. 222.

37. ibid., p. 120.

38. Death Is Part of the Process, op. cit., p. 149.

39. ibid., p. 174.

40. But for support and an explanation of this stereotype see Bessie Head: The Collector of Treasures, London, Heinemann Educational, 1977.

41. A Life To Live, Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1973, p. 24.

42. ibid. p. 7.

43. ibid. p. 33.

44. The Virgins, op. cit. The title suggests the emphasis on the novel is Annie's desire - liberation through sexual experience.

45. ibid. p. 17.

46. ibid. p. 121.

47. ibid. p. 14.

48. A Revolutionary Woman, op. cit. p. 45.

49. ibid. p. 134.

50. ibid. p. 26.

51. ibid. p. 142.

52. A State of Fear, op. cit. p. 175.

53. ibid. p. 171.

54. ibid. p. 174. This image of rain as foretelling change is a familiar one in literature. Menan du Plessis' words here echo Nashe's Song.

> "Brightness falls from the air,
> Queens have died young and fair..."

Penguin Book of Elizabethan Verse. ed. Edward Lucie-Smith. Penguin 1965, p. 199.

55. *A State of Fear*, op. cit. p. 91.

56. Menan du Plessis' second novel, *Longlive!* David Philip, Cape Town and Johannesburg, is published too late for this thesis, unfortunately.

Chapter 6

Bessie Head. 1937 - 1986

Bssie Head's writing is a terrible indictment of the racist divisions created by colonialism in South Africa not only because of her criticism of the political system, but because, as a great woman writer, she represents the undefeated spirit of the African people. Her life and work answer the question - "What happened to Sartje and Annie?" - raised by Olive Schreiner's novel From Man To Man, and Mrs Millin's novels[1]. Her life was full of material and emotional difficulties; her awareness of the fundamental evils of racism from the point of view of the coloured who is neither a black African nor a white, and the transformation of her experience into her novel and short stores make her work very disturbing and illuminating.

Like other modern writers Bessie Head has recorded the facts of her life in interviews as well as using them in her novels. A collection of her letters is to be published shortly[2]. She describes the shocking start to her life in an interview with Lee Nichols in a simple, ironic way:

> "...there is a sort of tragedy attached to my birth. My mother was a white woman of a very upper class family. Her family was very wealthy and she acquired me out of wedlock from a black man. This caused such a disturbance in the family they succeeded in getting my mother classified insane and by the time I was born she had been committed to the Pietermaritzberg mental hospital where I was born."[3]

The only fact she knew about her father was that he worked in the stables looking after race horses; her name Bessie Emery came from her mother. Bessie Head considered that this was

> "the only honour South Africans ever did me - naming me after this unknown, lonely and unpredictable woman."[4]

Bessie Head gives the sad experience of her birth and childhood as well as a similar name to the character, Elizabeth, in her last novel A Question of Power, relating it clearly and simply to the formation of Elizabeth's character and her fate:

> "She seemed to have that element of the sudden, the startling, the explosive detail in her destiny and, for a long time, an abounding sense of humour to go with it."[5]

The humour disappeared when Elizabeth had her first breakdown but it is an essential element also in Bessie Head's writing, helping to balance the potential tragedy.

Bessie Head lived with coloured foster parents until she was thirteen and then went to a mission orphanage. Her mother, who died about this time left money for Bessie's education so that she went to High School until she was 18. She taught for two years in an elementary school, then left to work as a journalist for the Golden City Post - sister paper to Drum. She wrote two columns for Home Post, a weekly magazine - "Hyah, Teenagers!" and "Dear Gang" for younger children.

Susan Gardner and Patricia Scott quote a passage from "Dear Gang" which, they suggest, indicates Bessie Head's character; she has the qualities of rebellion, curiosity, a reluctance to accept the status quo, and a feminist attitude which are shared also by her heroines:

> "I think I'm an adventurous kind of person and because of that I always seem to be getting into trouble...Agh! I just hated dolls. I wanted to know about boxing, and race horses and everything a girl shouldn't know. A short while ago I was a school teacher and it seemed to me I wasn't going to see the world that way, so I gave it up..."[6]

Bessie Head married another journalist who was involved politically with the Unity Movement but the marriage broke up after about eighteen months. As she had a small baby and no money she answered an advertisement for teachers in Botswana. She was made to obtain a passport because she had been on the fringe of anti-apartheid activity; she had to leave on a one-way permit and for fourteen long years she waited to obtain her nationality papers in Botswana. But she immediately felt at home in the village of Serowe, two hundred miles

from Gabarone. She lived there for the rest of her life because she felt it suited her literary themes. She preferred to be with ordinary people:

> "'I have the courtesies, and love of the poeple.' she said. 'What other life can I live?'"[7]

She wrote a tribute to the people of Serowe, and published a collection of short stories[8]. Although she published short stories and articles while in South Africa and apparently wrote some poetry and, maybe a novel while still there it was not until she was living in Botswana that she felt free to write seriously; she was also under financial pressure. Her first novel When Rain Clouds Gather[9] was commissioned through her agent by a New York publisher who had seen an article about Serowe in the "New Statesman". As she had just lost her teaching job (an experience shared with Elizabeth in A Question of Power) she used the 80 dollars advance to pay for writing materials. The novel was immediately successful in the States and the Botswana Government also used it to help train foreign volunteers in the country's way of life.

At this period there was no publishing house in Botswana and there was a tradition of oral literature rather than of reading for the majority of the population[10]. The desire for education is described in Maru[11] and A Question of Power. Bessie Head admitted to Lee Nichols that she sometimes felt a bit envious of American writers who could get grants. She found it "extremely difficult to live on one's own writing" and added:

> "I, as a side line, keep a little vegetable garden going and I do some peddling, and that brings me in a little

> bit of petty cash but it's a tremendous struggle to keep going."[12]

Some of the most lyrical passages in A Question of Power describe Elizabeth's garden.

Although she was in great literary demand in the last decade of her life - for instance, she spent four months at Iowa State University on a grant - she preferred to live in Botswana in spite of her financial problems. Her life was so different from that of a white woman writer like Nadine Gordimer who can travel freely and can choose where she lives, either in her flat in London or in South Africa: this illustrates in yet another way the difficulties non-whites endure because of the apartheid system. So Bessie Head, an outsider in South Africa because of her birth, an outsider in Botswana because of her refugee status, was also an outsider in the literary world for much of her working life, although towards the end of her life this situation changed, as she was invited to conferences. Her novels, particularly A Question of Power reflect this position. Questions of identity are very important to her characters. Living in Botswana as an outsider allowed Bessie Head to examine political changes from colonialism to independence in her adopted country, which could be related to South Africa. But it was the peace she felt in Botswana which freed her to write from her heart:

> "South Africa, with its sense of ravages and horror, has lost that image of an Africa, ancient and existing since time immemorial, but in Botswana the presence of the timeless and immemorial is everywhere - in people, in animals, in everyday life and in custom and tradition... From an earlier background, I knew of a deep commitment

to people, an involvement in questions of poverty and exploitation and a commitment to illuminaging the future for younger generations. I needed an internal and continuous world against which to work out these preoccupations."[13]

Bessie Head draws the themes for her novels from these preoccupations, as her characters struggle to find inner peace:

> I think that my whole life has been shaped by my South African experience. What we are mainly very bothered about has been the dehumanizing of black people...You have merely offered your view of a grander world, of a world that's much grander than the one we've had already."[14]

Her novels change in style to reflect an increasing interest in the inner life of the main character as he or she reacts to the external world. Lewis Nkosi points out that although she began to write at the same period as the so called <u>Drum</u> school of black South African writers - all men incidentally - it would be misleading to connect Bessie Head with this group, "if it means a common style." He also stresses that

> "for most of the time Bessie Head seems politically ignorant,"[15]

perhaps in comparison with this group to which he belonged. Bessie Head agreed with this assessment. She wrote that

> "I knew some time ago that I am a useless kind of person in any liberation movement or revolution. I can't stand them, or the people who organise them."[16]

This attitude is also given to Elizabeth[17]. However, she had a feeling for pan-Africanism as expounded by Robert Sobukwe because it

"generally included all things African, with an edge of harshness in it that forced me to make an identification with being African and a sense of belonging to Africa..."[18]

Her novels, especially A Question of Power discuss the principles of African politics. When Rain Clouds Gather and Maru are also involved with the movement of change in Botswana away from colonialism and corrupt misuse of power by the Chiefs towards a more democratic involvement of the people. In both these novels Bessie Head describes how men who misuse political power are expelled from their villages by the ordinary people, led by a charismatic hero who has a deeper insight into the situation as well as a position of status.

Bessie Head believes that the balance of the inner life between good and evil must be right before any changes can occur in the outside world. Every character has his or her own kingdom of the soul in which they live their true existence. Each novel illustrates this position in increasing depth until in A Question of Power Bessie Head describes a woman who becomes mad because of her experiences in South Africa. At the same time the novels are set firmly in the real world of changing seasons which affect the land and the rhythms of village life. The main characters relate closely to nature, and become integrated into the movement of the village, although at the beginning they are outsiders. Each hero or heroine in this way reflects Bessie Head's own experiences.

When Rain Clouds Gather, Bessie Head's first novel, describes the love story of two outsiders in Golema Mmidi and the ways

their relationship is shaped, not only by their present awareness of the needs of village life, but by their painful experiences of the past and their belief in the future. It also becomes an explicit account of the struggle between good and evil in the sense that Makhaya, a South African political refugee, together with Gilbert, a volunteer from England, and the local white policeman become a united force and lead the people to get rid of the stranglehold of corrupt traditional Chiefs on the land, which is preventing its development. The novel ends with the author directing the reader's understanding of Matenge's breakdown and suicide from the villagers' viewpoint.

> "The end of it was that Matenge had to barricade himself up, not because the villagers were about to rise up and tear him to shreds, but because he was an evil pervert and knew it. Only you could not understand why a man like that stood there crying like a forlorn and lonely child."[19]

This passage indicates the moral certainty which is characteristic of Bessie Head's writing as well as, in the comparison of the Chief with a sad child, her compassion. A failure of the inner life has led to his self destruction. This belief runs through all Bessie Head's writing:

> "People only function well when their inner lives are secure and peaceful."[20]

The villagers, who accept all the outsiders with interest, feel themselves to be part of the natural world. The drought is destructive of their lands, cattle, and even kills a child; so they identify with rain:

> "'You may see no rivers on the ground but we keep the

rivers inside us. That is why all good things and all good people are called rain. Sometimes we see the rain clouds gather even though not a cloud appears in the sky. It is all in our heart.'"[21]

This image, which appears in the title of the novel, takes on additional meaning from the experiences of physical and spiritual death and rebirth in the novel and Makhaya grasps this statement "in his heart." Reading the novel is a learning process about personal relationships as well as about the country and people of Botswana.

The villagers depend on the land to survive and Bessie Head describes the changes which the outsider, Gilbert, is attempting to make in their traditional farming methods, which together with the drought and the Chief's ownership of the land have begun to destroy the land. These changes are connected closely with education and are essential if the people are to survive. But Bessie Head explains that innovations depend on human relationships to introduce principles; Gilbert learns to respect the importance of the role of women in change in Botswana; they work on the land while the

> "men look after the cattle...Perhaps all change in the end depended on the women of the country and perhaps they too could provide a number of solutions to problems he had not yet thought of."[22]

The novel is narrated in the third person from many viewpoints within the village but Makhaya is the dominant character as he discovers not only the village way of life but a resolution to his personal despair. He observes people in terms of the natural world: an old man shuffles along

"as though a small private windstorm was pushing him from behind,"[23]

and an old woman and her granddaughter are "a pair of vultures"[24] who live off the South African refugees. The image of vultures returns as they scavenge for the dead bodies of cattle and a child killed by the drought, and circle the village when the Chief kills himself. Such images continually suggest and reinforce man's connection with his environment. Makhaya

"had the sun inside him all the time"[25]

and the future relationship between himself and Pauline is suggested by her dreaming of a

"loved one who could magically become ten thousand blazing suns."[26]

Such images of light, and others of darkness relate to the struggle between good and evil which Bessie Head is aware of in human nature and the exterior world. The novel is also a love story leading to a discussion of relationships between men and women in the sense that all Makhaya wants now after his experiences in South Africa is a wife and children. Gilbert also marries in the course of the novel, and the first part ends with the marriage ceremony. His wife, Maria, is an uneducated village woman but Gilbert relates to her "inner harmony and peace"[27]. Pauline's unhappy marriage, which ended in her husband's suicide, has led her to fear "the untrustworthiness of men with no strength or moral values"[28]; as an outsider in the village she suffers from isolation. In another simple image from village experience, (also familiar from Western literature), Bessie Head stresses Pauline's loneliness:

"Women who had husbands made the deep well of her own

loneliness more acute to her."[29]

But images have already foreshadowed her marriage to Makhaya and in the second half of the novel once their personal relationship is settled Makhaya is freed to organise the destruction of the Chief. But the novel is not a description of romantic love - the relationships are firmly placed in the context of political change, and of the environment.

An old woman, Mma-Millipede, relates the traditional past to the present and the future, as well as connecting the different characters in the novel through her relationships with them. Bessie Head criticises the tribal marriage system, as well as indicating the possibilities of change for village women even if it means breaking a moral code which benefits men.

> "Surely it was far better to have a country of promiscuous women than a country of dead women?"[30]

Most women, in spite of receiving a little mission education while the men were busy with the cattle had

> "remained their same old tribal selves, docile and inferior."[31]

The village women are like another energetic character in the novel and close observation of their lives provides some humour as when they begin every new project by making tea. To these uneducated women

> "Any little thing was an adventure."[32]

In spite of the personal tragedies and the political problems the novel is full of hope and enjoyment of a changing way of life. Education and cooperative work on the farm are part of this process.

Bessie Head's second novel, Maru, explores the same themes but is more sombre in mood. The inner life of the character becomes more important and much of the action is described in terms of the characters' wordless moral struggles. The structure of the novel is more complex and is developing away from the realism of the familiar "European" novel. The first chapter is the ending of the novel - a description of the marriage between Margaret Cadmore and Maru - and the rest of the novel is an explanation of how this point was reached. Maru, from the kingdom of his soul, "the dreamer of goodness" in his desire to free oppressed people like the Bushmen from racist hatred, fights against his best friend, Moleka, for Margaret's soul. Maru also organises Moleka's marriage to his sister, Dikeledi, because he believes he and Moleka are both kings but

> "Moleka and Dikeledi were the future kings and queens of the African continent, those of stature in character and goodness,"[33]

while his kingdom is in the future.

There are no chapters in this novel and the episodes flow in and out of dreams and thoughts of the four main characters to the real world and back. For instance, Maru and Margaret are clearly connected in their hearts, unknown to Margaret, through images of yellow daisies and a house which both see in their dreams and which she paints, so that Dikeledi, Maru's sister, realises the marriage is inevitable too. The house becomes a reality. The problems of personal relationships are clearly related to those of the country: Margaret is the daughter of an unknown white man and a Masarwa - a Bush woman, who dies giving birth. She is brought up by the wife

of a white missionary who is educating her to contribute to the future of her country. When Margaret appears in the village school as a new teacher it leads to a racist outcry, orchestrated for political reasons. Margaret's arrival is like a catalyst which shakes the traditional prejudices of the hereditary leaders as well as the villagers inside out so that, for instance, they abolish slavery of the Masarwa. She becomes a symbol of the oppressed[34], and her marriage, therefore, becomes a symbol of optimism for the future of the Masarwa, and, by implication, the Africans in South Africa. In familiar simple images which arise naturally from the feelings and events of the novel Bessie Head describes what such a marriage means: Maru gives up personal wealth and power to create a new world.

> "When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom which was blowing throughout the world for all people turned and flowed into the room."[35]

Through the caring attention of Dikeledi and her brother Margaret discovers she can paint. Bessie Head's description of her creative work could be applied to Bessie Head's writing:

> "There was this striking vitality and vigour in her work and yet, for who knew how long, people like her had lived faceless, voiceless, almost nameless in the country."[36]

The rhythmical balance of this sentence in which positive images are opposed to negative ones, (stressed in the repetition of "less") suggests an overwhelming sense of tragedy,

rather than the angry bitterness which sometimes seems to motivate other black writers like Miriam Tlali. Bessie Head makes it clear that in her soul Margaret is Dikeledi's equal and that her sense of being an outsider in Dilepe is alleviated by her relationship with Dikeledi and also with two village goats, whose antics relieve the tension at moments of crisis, by providing a humourous balance to potential tragedy. Margaret is also, like Waldo in The Story of An African Farm, as well as Pauline in When Rain Clouds Gather, described as participating in the natural rhythms of life, based on the changing seasons. Her life becomes filled with "the rhythm of sunrise, the rhythm of sunset."[37] As in her first novel Bessie Head also uses images from nature to suggest character: like Makhaya Moleka is charismatic:

> "Moleka was a sun around which spun a billion satellites."[38]

When Margaret realises Dikeledi is going to marry Moleka the image is developed to explain her sense of death: it was as if the world changed: it was

> "only a still, cold, dead world with no sun."[39]

Such familiar visual images become an integral part of Bessie Head's novels, transformed by the experiences of the characters into a renewed awareness of life and death, good and evil. They help to create another underlying level of meaning which relates the world of the small Botswanan village to the universe.

Both Dikeledi and Margaret suffer extremes of feeling before settling down in the marriages Maru organises for them. Other women in the novel are shadowy figures used to illustrate the characters of the two men. Makeledi's mother looks

after the children from his many affairs while Maru's girl-friends break down when he leaves them - they have no kingdoms of their own. Maru prophesies to Moleka that their close friendship will end because of a woman. The two men are inseparable and seem, perhaps, at times to be the same man: in the first chapter Maru's house has two rooms -

> "In one his wife totally loved him: in another room, she totally loved Moleka."[40]

In a similar way Dan and Sello in A Question of Power sometimes seem to be opposing aspects of the same man. But like Makhaya in When Rain Clouds Gather who comes to represent an ideal African as he becomes at peace with himself, so Maru and Moleka represent two different but equally useful kinds of African for the future - the spiritual leader who listens to his gods - and the political leader who takes up the role of Chief.

A Question of Power, Bessie Head's last novel, which seems to have been very closely related to her adult experiences, is again placed firmly in the village setting and related to the changing seasons. She was aware, however, that it is the most painful and difficult of her novels to read.

> "What is violently disturbing is that you get a reader in the helpless position of coming along with the writer. It's like as you open the book you're going into a dark tunnel. And once people sense that they're being pulled down into a dark tunnel where horrible things may happen to them they withdraw."[41]

But like Olive Schreiner, Bessie Head hoped her novel would help troubled minds[42].

The novel is narrated in the third person but mainly from Elizabeth's viewpoint, although her son occasionally widens the perspective with comments on her state of mind. Elizabeth breaks down twice - the second time into a prolonged period of madness - as a consequence of her experiences in South Africa. At the same time she loses her job as a teacher, and begins to work as a market gardener for a collective organised by volunteers from many countries. In her breakdowns her mind fragments and two men in the village whom she knows only slightly come to represent aspects of power - spiritual, political and sexual. Through them she explores racism and male domination - evils which shift and change through Dan and Sello who can also transform themselves into characters from Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Asian mythology, and Western literature. Descriptions of her madness become a kaleidoscope of shifting, changing named personalities. A first reading of the novel gives an impression of a fight against overwhelming evil and perversion but on a second reading it seems that Bessie Head is, after all, in control of her writing, and has successfully achieved a novel about madness which is balanced by a compassionate understanding of the South African situation as well as a sense of the real - as described in the village life and personal relationships.

Often Elizabeth as she becomes mad is

> "not sure if she was awake or asleep, and often after that the dividing line between dream perceptions and waking reality was to become confused."[43]

Like Maru Elizabeth believes everyone has a kingdom of the soul; the first part of the novel concerned with her first breakdown examines who controls the kingdom - and questions

the meaning and relevance of God to the individual and to Africa; it seems as if every night

> "The hard conflict of good and evil in arid terrain crashed into her consciousness as soon as she closed her eyes in the dark."[44]

In such passages Bessie Head explains the allegorical content of Elizabeth's manifestations of Sello and Medusa, and creates such sympathy for Elizabeth that passages of the novel become difficult to read. For instance, at one point Sello changes into Medusa who emphasises that Elizabeth is an outsider in Botswana as well as South Africa.

> "'You're not linked up to the people. You don't know any African languages.'"[45]

A record begins playing in Elizabeth's head which continually stresses her inferiority. But even in her madness Elizabeth is able to discuss the implications of her personal situation and analyse how, for example, victims of racism are created by propaganda. Her own desire to be ordinary and live unnoticed results in her awareness of her vulnerability: living in Botswana has freed her to examine her soul.

> "'Something happened to me here... It was the total demystifying of all illusions. The human soul is alone in the battle of life... I can be destroyed.'"[46]

These words to a Danish volunteer worker emphasise Elizabeth's ability to make strong friendships in whom she can confide. Bessie Head's portrayal of her character concentrates almost entirely on Elizabeth's personality. Elizabeth's honesty in her search for truth is reflected in the clear lyrical simplicity of the writing. Passages of madness are contrasted with description and dialogue as Elizabeth responds to her natural surroundings and to people. Bessie Head emphasises

her literal closeness with nature when Elizabeth is living in a mud hut, as opposed to her slum life in South Africa:

> "It was like living with the trees and insects right indoors, because there was no sharp distinction between the circling mud walls of a hut and the earth outside."[47]

Bessie Head stresses Elizabeth's enjoyment of growing vegetables and organising the market garden; she thinks of them as human. She introduces new plants to the village like the Cape Gooseberry, which could be a symbol of her own life. When her mind clears Elizabeth always responds to birds' song and looks towards the sky after periods of madness. Images of light and darkness shadow Elizabeth's state of mind. Her madness is a learning process in which Sello and Dan teach her about the real and the spiritual world. At the end of the first part the dawn symbolises for her a new beginning.

> "The soft, cool air, so fresh and full of the perfume of the bush, swirled around her face and form as she stood watching the sun thrust one powerful, majestic golden arm above the horizon.
>
> "'Oh God,' she said softly. 'May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds.'"[48]

Alliteration stresses Elizabeth's new peace of mind and the recurring images take on meaning from their use in other cultures, as well as from within the novel itself. Elizabeth's son is worried about falling off the edge of the world and flying his aeroplane in case it too disappears: after her second period of madness Elizabeth listens to the poem he has made about his fears and this image suggests to her that he seems almost to have "travelled the journey alongside her."[49] Her conclusion is hopeful; as her mind

and body find peace at last: she understands that religion, which places God above man and separate from him, has helped to create a destructive system of power. In Africa

> "She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man. As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging."[50]

But as in her previous novels, although not to such an extent, humour balances the tragedy. The small boy's demands provide a relief from tension; Kenosi's problems with organising the garden make Elizabeth laugh.

The novel is so complex with its intricate interweaving of symbolism and reality that it seems like an allegorical epic poem rather than a novel, as it describes the spiritual journey of a suffering woman. Bessie Head's three novels seem also to be part of one work - an increasingly painful exploration of the effects of the South African experience on the lives of the people. Her main characters illustrate the effects that racism has had on their lives, and become symbolic of the strength of the African people to survive. She describes also the problems of moving away from traditions like witch-craft, the system of lobola and the misuse of power by the Chiefs which had been encouraged by colonialism. In the first two novels marriage symbolises an acceptance of love, and its importance in a world in which men like Dan have been encouraged to use women so that the family system has broken up. Pauline refuses to react like many other women by becoming promiscuous because she is lonely. Such women

and men like Makhaya and Maru who make a commitment to each other without being pressurised by tradition or influenced by the breakdown of society or by their loneliness, indicate how Bessie Head draws political conclusions from personal experiences. In the final novel Elizabeth, however, does not want to solve her personal problems through marriage but to resolve them independently first.

> "'I want to live the way I am without anyone dictating to me. Maybe in some other life I'll just be a woman cooking food and having babies, but just now Shylock is demanding his pound of flesh.'"[51]

This feminist position is explored in more detail in Bessie Head's short stories.

The heroines in Bessie Head's novels all contribute to change in the village society in which they are living. Pauline Seboso, for instance, is described as a natural leader of the village women because she has "a strong dominating personality."[52] The women follow her lead in organising the tobacco cooperative. Elizabeth in A Question of Power creates the market garden. Dikeledi is "a drastic revolutionary"[53] in her reaction against her traditional role as a Chief's daughter. Bessie Head is suggesting through such women who are educated and natural leaders how a process of change led by women with unity of purpose will overcome all traditional objections. Such women come to represent the strength and purpose, as well as the humour and understanding, of African women. As mothers Pauline and Elizabeth also symbolise African motherhood; Bessie Head emphasises the importance of education for children in the novels, particularly the first two, for the future of Africa. But the children are

also individuals who have independent lives, and take more part in village life than their mothers.

Village life is related to the natural rhythms of nature and compared in the novels with the alternative, destructive world of the South African townships. The importance of the land is described in the work of many other writers from Olive Schreiner to Lauretta Ngcobo, but Bessie Head's characters understand the physical reality of the work and the relevance to the future of post-colonial Africa of the ownership of the land. Bessie Head identified herself, through her characters and in a statement about her work, with the ordinary people:-

> "I think of myself as a woman of Southern Africa - not as a black woman but as an ordinary and humble woman... I have solved nothing. I am like everyone else - perplexed, bewildered and desperate."[54]

The urge to create, which she describes in the character of Margaret Cadmore, is related in Bessie Head's writing to the urge to teach her readers about Africa.

Notes

1. See Sheila Marks: Not Either An Experimental Doll, London, Women's Press, 1988, for the story of an African girl, desperate for education, but who ended up in a mental hospital as a result of her negative experiences.

2. Randolph Vigne, Ed.: Selected Letters of Bessie Head, to be published by SA Writers, June 1990. (See South African Review of Books, Vol 3, No 2, Issue 12, Dec. 1981/Jan. 1990, p. 17.)

3. "Interview with Lee Nicholls. Serowe, Botswana, Sept. 25th 1976", in Conversations with African Writers, Washington D.C., Voice of America, 1981, p. 49.

4. "Witchcraft", Ms. quoted in Bessie Head: A Bibliography, Grahamstown, N.E.L.M. Bibliographies, I, 1986, p. 4.

5. A Question of Power, London, Davis Poynter, 1974. Reissued London, Heinemann African Writers Series, 1974. Reissued 1987. p. 18.

6. "Dear Gang" conducted by Bessie. "Home Post" 28 June 1959, p. 7. Quoted in Bessie Head: A Bibliography, op. cit., p. 6.

7. "Interview with Lee Nicholls", op. cit., p. 50.

8. Serowe: Village of the Rain-Wind, London, Heinemann

Books, 1981.

The Collector of Treasures, London, African Writers Series, Heinemann Educational Books, 1977.

9. *When Rain Clouds Gather*, London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1969. Reissued London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1972. Reissued London, African Writers Series, 1987.

10. See: Charles R. Larsen: *The Emergence of African Fiction*, London, MacMillan, 1978, p. 246.
He makes the point that developing countries concentrate on "utilitarian needs".

11. *Maru*, London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1971.
Reissued London, Heinemann African Writers Series, 1972.
This edition 1987.

12. "Interview with Lee Nicholls," op. cit., p. 56.

13. From an article: "A Search for Historical Continuity and Roots" in *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*, M.J. Daymond, J.V. Jacobs, Margaret Lenta, Eds., Natal, University of Natal, 1984, p. 278.

14. "Interview with Lee Nicholls," op. cit., p. 56.

15. Lewis Nkosi: *Tasks and Masks*, London, Longman, 1981, p. 99.

16. "Some Notes on Novel Writing," 1976 Gaberone Writers Workshop, Botswana. Published in *New Classic*, 1978 (No.

5) pp. 30-32, in Bessie Head: A Bibliography, op. cit. p. 8.

17. A Question of Power, p. 133.

18. From a letter to Charles Sarron in his chapter on her work in Women in African Literature Today, ed. Eldred Durosini Jones, London, Africa World Press/Currey, 1987, p. 84.

19. When Rain Clouds Gather, op. cit. p. 177.

20. A Question of Power, op. cit. p. 49.

21. When Rain Clouds Gather, op. cit. p. 169.

22. ibid. p. 43.

23. ibid. p. 25.

24. ibid. p. 14.

25. ibid. p. 65.

26. ibid. p. 77.

27. ibid. p. 33.

28. ibid. p. 93.

29. ibid. p. 151.

30. ibid. p. 99.

31. ibid. p. 68.

32. ibid. p. 105.

33. Maru, op. cit. p. 72.

34. ibid. p. 108.

35. ibid. p. 127.

36. ibid. p. 108.

37. ibid. p. 93.

38. ibid. p. 58.

39. ibid. p. 119.

40. ibid. p. 8.
For a discussion of this point see:-
Arthur Ravenscroft: "The Novels of Bessie Head" in Aspects of South African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood, London, Heinemann 1976. p. 179.

41. "Interview with Lee Nicholls" op. cit. p. 54.
See also Lewis Nkosi: Tasks and Masks, op. cit. p. 102 and Arthur Ravenscroft "The Novels of Bessie Head", op. cit. p. 183. Lewis Nkosi believes Bessie Head loses control of her material but Arthur Ravenscroft takes

the opposite point of view.

42. See Letter quoted to Charles Sarron in Women in African Literature Today, op. cit. p. 87.

43. A Question of Power, op. cit. p. 22.

44. ibid. p. 61.

45. ibid. p. 44.

46. ibid. p. 86.

47. ibid. p. 60.

48. ibid. p. 100. Elizabeth suffers most at night. There are continual references to light and dark, sun and shadow, and to journeys throughout the novel.

49. ibid. p. 205.

50. ibid. p. 206.

51. ibid. p. 192.

52. When Rain Clouds Gather, op. cit. p. 75.

53. Maru, op. cit. p. 25.

54. "For Serowe: a village in Africa" in New African Vol 4 No 10 p. 230, in Bessie Head: A Bibliography, op. cit.

Chapter 7

Other Novels by Black South African Women Writers

South Africa seems, at the present time, to have only three black women novelists, apart from Bessie Head; Miriam Tlali, Lauretta Ngcobo and Farida Karodia are all writing today, but, between them they have only published four novels. It is depressing but not surprising that this is so: the reasons are now well-documented in, for example, autobiographies by women like Noni Jabavu[1]. There are also a number of recent non-fiction books which record the lives of black women in South Africa, for example Working Women[2], as well as comparative studies of the lives of women in the world, such as Sisterhood Is Global, Comparative Perspectives of Third World Women, and Women In The World: An International Atlas[3]. Such books mark a response by the feminist movement in South Africa, and in the West to a growing awareness of

the suffering of women in the Third World from the consequences of colonialism.

Also in the last few years, a number of anthologies of poetry, autobiographical writing and short stories by women have been published by feminist publishers in the West like Virago and the Women's Press, but there is still so little work compared with that of white women and black men. An interesting development which reflects what has happened in Nigeria is a black women's publishing cooperative which is encouraging women's writing[4].

Miriam Tlali, the only black woman novelist still living in South Africa, in Soweto, recently explained in an interview with Mineka Schipper that there are limited opportunities for black women to publish[5]. She herself first published stories and articles in South African newspapers like _The Rand Daily Mail_, _The Star_ and also in _Staffrider_. Her first novel, _Muriel At Metropolitan_[6] was begun when she had to look after her sick mother-in-law. Like _Muriel At Metropolitan_ her second novel, _Amandla_[7], was banned for a while by the Government. The publisher, Ravan, also wanted to make cuts before publishing. Miriam Tlali has also published two anthologies of her journalistic work and her short stories _Mihloti_[8] and _Soweto Stories_[9]. In the same interview she makes it clear, however, that although the political system makes it difficult for black men to find the opportunity to write in South Africa, black women have additional problems because of what society expects from them:

> "...women have so much less time, because they have to run the house in addition to holding down a job.

It is very rare for a black man to help with domestic chores. All of which means that women don't write as much as men."[10]

There are so few women who write novels because:

"Most women authors write mainly poetry. Short stories and poetry are naturally the most popular genres because of the situation. Short pieces of text can be mulled over while you're busy with other things, and it doesn't take long to write them down once you've got it all clear in your head."[11]

Compared with white women novelists whose freedom to write is based on black labour, even if they do not directly employ servants, black women may even have difficulty in finding a space to lay out their paper. Another South African woman, Gcina Mhlope, now living in England, some of whose poems and short stories have been published in an anthology, describes in her story, "The Toilet" how she began to write in a public lavatory on her way to work. It was the only place in which she could find the necessary peace and quiet in which to read and write. But, like Olive Schreiner, she felt compelled to express her feelings.

"there was this other strong feeling or longing inside me. It was some kind of pain that pushed me to do everything at double speed and run to my toilet... I wrote anything that came into my head - in the same way I would have done if I'd had a friend to talk to..."[12]

This sad, humourous, probably autobiographical story symbolises for me the isolation of black women writers as well as their difficulties. Gcina Mhlope's experience is far removed from that of white South African middle class women, like Rebecca

in From Man To Man who can have a room of their own.

In a more recent interview Miriam Tlali develops her point that women writers need more time by themselves if they are to write novels:

> "You have to analyse situations, and all that needs peace of mind and time. It needs a long time and you have to think about it. And you have to dream about it and black women do not have time to dream."[13]

As a woman Miriam Tlali was expected to give up work to look after her husband's mother: when she was not needed to nurse she typed her novel on a forty-year old Remington. She was born in 1933 and went to the University of the Witwatersrand but could not follow her chosen medical course because there was no place for her. She then went to study in Lesotho but ran out of money and had to return to Johannesburg where she went to Secretarial School. She found work in a shop and this experience is used in Muriel at Metropolitan. She is married and has two children. Since her books were published she has been able to travel to writers' conferences but she is committed to remaining in Soweto with her people. Knowing that she is a writer people come to tell her their experiences, which she uses in her work[14]. The interviews she has given, as well as her published work, give the impression of a very hard-working, seriously committed writer, who sees her role as an interpreter of life for black people in South Africa through a period of change.

Miriam Tlali's novels describe the lives of people in Soweto; in her first novel, Muriel At Metropolitan, she discusses the problems which they meet at work through the eyes of

a young married woman with a child. Petty apartheid restrictions even decide which lavatory Muriel can use. The novel's description of the apartheid system, and its effects on whites and blacks develops into a bitter indictment. Muriel perceives how apartheid corrupts white people with their casual racist attitudes, and materialistic values, and how black people lose their integrity, and even their lives, under a system which affects education, work, and where people can live. At the end of the novel Muriel resigns from her job, determined never to work for whites again. It is clear that Miriam Tlali believes that this is one way in which blacks can attack the system.

The novel is written in a series of episodes, narrated in the first person, each of which illustrates a different aspect of apartheid, upon which Muriel comments. The events rarely move outside the office: this gives the novel unity and makes the scenes outside the office more dramatic by contrast. The office and the people come to represent the world of black South Africa; (just as the white world is is represented by farms in white writer's novels.) The characters are quickly established in Miriam Tlali's clear, direct, concise style. For instance, Muriel's physical appearance and her life outside the office, except for some brief comments on her relationship with her mother, supportive husband and small child, are ignored. The writer concentrates on character and feelings: Muriel introduces her position at the beginning of the novel:

"I am no authority in the study of human behaviour. I do not profess great knowledge. I am not a writer. But I do not have to be any of these to know about

Africans, their feelings, hopes, desires and aspirations."[15]

Muriel's intelligence, interest in her work, and her efficiency, eventually, after some humiliating experiences establish her key position in the office so that she even has her own black assistant, but she is always aware that neither white office workers nor the black customers trust her. Her home in the township is the only place in which she can find peace.

The black and white worlds created by apartheid are seen by Muriel as being completely separate in spite of Muriel's increasing acceptance as an individual by the white women clerks on the level of domestic interests such as cooking and sewing as well as personal tragedy. But Muriel realises that for whites work is not "a matter of life and death" as it is for blacks who can, by law, be dismissed at a moment's notice from their poorly paid jobs. To her the black township experience is

> "...poor, pathetically neglected and disorganised - voiceless, oppressed, restless, confused and unarmed - a world in transition, irrevocably weaned from all tribal ties..."[16]

The long list of adjectives reflects Muriel's angry, bitter searching for precise words that can describe the effects of the apartheid system.

Muriel's compassionate, perceptive nature observes without condemnation the moral disintegration of the blacks who work for the Metropolitan because she relates it to the apartheid

system. Many Africans described in the novel illustrate her point; for instance, the office cleaner, known only as Adam:

> "The long, painful years of contact with the whites had developed within him a hard protective core of indifference to all their (whites) constant abusive reprimands. He was dead inside, I thought."[17]

Other characters, like Ben, who makes extra money by letting his room in the township to black and white couples while he sits in the lavatory, and Agrippa, who turns to his tribal origins and witch doctors for support, confide in Muriel, whose first loyalty is to them, and not her white employer.

Muriel comes to the conclusion as the novel develops that fear divides the races; this can only be removed if, like her, in her relationship with the white women clerks, blacks are prepared to teach whites that:

> "the black African is no gogga but a human being."[18]

But Muriel observes that racism is built into the system and that black and white workers who are exploited by the same employers may support each other on a human level, but the alliance is fragile:

> "The crux of the matter was that the white workers did not want to acknowledge their commonness with their black colleagues. As long as the system granted them certain priveleges that the other racial groups did not enjoy, then they were contented. If they were treated the same, they grew resentful."[19]

Such passages of analysis develop naturally from the experiences

Muriel describes in the novel, and create a feeling of tragedy which is, however, balanced by the many humourous episodes and passages of dialogue. But the humour often has a sad aspect, as when the workers are trying to steal radios. The Africans make jokes against the whites in the vernacular which Muriel, who speaks English, Afrikaans and several African languages, can understand. Sometimes in a rare moment, humour unites the more educated black and white women, as when they are filing: Mrs Stein comments on the African names.

> "'Imagine naming your child Ostrich or Spinkaan or Oor! I mean, Spinkaan means locust and Oor means Ear...I mean, really!'
>
> "It was funny and none of us could help laughing. Mrs Stein asked me from the other side, 'Muriel, why do the natives like to give their children such funny names? We have one boy, Spirit...'"[20]

The moment of contact through humour is negated by the fact that blacks' and whites' names are filed separately, and that the Africans have English or Afrikaans names, not African names.

The mood of the novel becomes increasingly sombre as Muriel observes more of the effects of apartheid on black people's lives. Her mother, living in Lesotho to escape the system, uses a metaphor from everyday experience to emphasise the chasm between black and white created by the apartheid system:

> "'I would sooner have you selling cakes than sitting in there and asking for people's passes.'"[21]

There is no white experience comparable with the daily humiliation of blacks under apartheid: in a rare image in this

novel Miriam Tlali relates Muriel's present experience to the past and future. She recalls the forced removal of Africans from Sophiatown.

> "I looked at the 'koppie' where the tears of the African women and children soaked deep in the soil. I do not think they will ever dry. They have built their 'Triomf' on top of them. Whether they have triumphed or not, time alone will tell."[22]

In comparison, the Jewish owner of the Metropolitan, Mr Bloch is described as having made so much money from exploiting his workers and customers that he has bought a farm in Swaziland as an investment. His fears about possible guerilla attacks stesss the insecurity Miriam Tlali feels in the white position. At the same time she stresses the dependence of whites on black labour in Mr Bloch's superficially comic relationship with Agrippa, whose job is to repossess goods from the township.

Muriel is seen to suffer as a black and as a woman; her work as a clerk is below her ability and even the coloured radio engineer patronises her.

> "'You know, I thought you couldn't use your brains like most women, but now I can see that you can think.'"[23]

However the novel is mainly concerned with the exploitation of black people and the need for unity to oppose apartheid, rather than with the position of women. But Muriel's intelligence and humanity, as well as her growing belief that it is better to be poorer than to work for white people give her the image of a strong black woman, who keeps her integrity while living under a cruel political system.

Miriam Tlali's second novel, Amandla, is a fictional response to the events of the Soweto uprising of 1976. It is much longer and more complex than Muriel At Metropolitan: there are more characters and the narrative is carried forward from several viewpoints, both male and female. The characters draw conclusions from their experiences, which are explained through dialogue and political speeches rather than comments as in Muriel At Metropolitan. The novel's apparently chaotic structure reflects the problems of this period in which people responded to immediate difficulties. However, unity is provided through the central character, Pholoso - everyone else is connected with either himself or his family - and through Miriam Tlali's awareness of how the political situation affects everyone, so that personal concerns begin to take second place to political ones.

Pholoso becomes politicised in response to events and becomes an underground leader of the Unity Movement. However, the role of women is also examined closely and is seen as an essential part of the struggle in supporting the stability of the family generally under the stresses of the apartheid system, and, more immediately, in a period of violent unrest. Pholoso's grandmother is left to look after her grandchildren by herself:

> "'It is always us, the womenfolk, who, as we say "grab the sharp end of the knife". After all it is true what the old people say: "Ngwana mosetsana ke Mme - gaa - loye: We mosimane gaare yalo - A female child says Mother is no witch, whilst a son does not say that."'"[24]

The old woman finds consolation in the familiar proverbs passed down through the generations. The novelist, in this

way, connects past and present with the future. The dialogue in this novel indicates shades of feeling through the different speech rhythms of the characters. The past experiences of the much-loved old woman help to put immediate events in perspective. Former happier times are symbolised for her by the white "neatly pressed shirts" she used to prepare for her husband[25]. Granny's determination to follow tradition serves as a model for her daughter:

> "'Your courage and determination have really been a great lesson to us all, Granny.'"[26]

She hides Pholoso from the police, and dies without complaining, once she has seen him again. She is central to the complex family relationships and her moral judgments serve as one of the standards by which behaviour is judged in the novel. This compassionate portrait of a dying woman, who is so poor that she shares a bed with her grandchildren, is in strong contrast with the description of the old rich, unwanted white woman in Nadine Gordimer's The Late Bourgeois World. Gramsy, like Pholoso, also plays a part in unifying other elements of the novel: she hides sweets wrapped in gold paper given to her as a treat by her sister who, in turn, received them from her white employer. Granny gives one to Pholoso, her favorite grandson, who then gives it to Felling as a parting gift. The sweet becomes a symbol linking black and white, expressing different aspects of love between the characters. It indicates the Africans' material poverty, and their spiritual strength.

The novel also stresses how men discover the importance of women to the survival of the Africans, from a personal and political viewpoint. Agnes' alcoholic husband concludes,

after she has left him that:

> "Without a home - a happy one - you are nothing, you lack a back bone."[27]

Women support each other through this period in which children are disappearing and being killed. They reassess their personal situations and their commitment to the struggle. In an atmosphere of tension

> "...They sought assurance in the feelings of others."[28]

Women like Nana have learned to cope with personal tragedy, like the accidental shooting of her son, by placing it in the context of apartheid, and by hoping for a better future.

> "She herself had found courage by making the effort to wipe out grievous memories from her mind."[29]

As in Muriel At Metropolitan Miriam Tlali concentrates on mood and character, rather than physical appearance. Nana's husband both admires her will power and is frightened by it:

> "Her cool composure in the midst of all their trials and tribulations was both a consolation and an invitation to him. But now, as he watched her disappear into the short passage, he almost envied her."[30]

In a sub-plot characters such as Teresa, her husband Mamabola, and her lover, Sergeant Lazarus who is also making love to another woman, one of Gramsy's daughters, reflect the breakdown in society which Bessie Head and Lauretta Ngcobo also comment on. The lobola system, under which Teresa was married, makes her into her husband's possession and her role as wife and step-mother is defined for her: Miriam Tlali implicitly

criticises this aspect of the system in her sympathetic portrait of Teresa. Lazarus seems to be offering a way out of an unhappy marriage, but his contempt for women, and his ambition for material possessions lead to violence and murder:

> "'Women are "shit". They won't leave you alone until they have sucked and milked you dry... It's sex and money, sex and money all the time.'"[31]

Unhappy women are easily deceived by such men, and the old morality based on respect is seen to be falling apart. For love, Seapei has a child by another man to make Lazarus jealous, and, to help his career, betrays her nephew, Pholoso, to the police. Miriam Tlali does not condemn this unhappy situation, but relates it to the corruption of apartheid.

As in Muriel at Metropolitan the characters come to represent aspects of South African life. Felleng, Pholoso's girl friend, is a "new" kind of young woman who is beginning to participate in the struggle within women's groups, if not yet working directly with men:

> "We preach the gospel of liberation in the light of the simple day-to-day issues which affect our lives; and in the easiest language possible."[32]

Like the women in Bessie Head's novels the township women form cooperative groups to grow food, for example.

Miriam Tlali suggests through male characters like Pholoso and Killer that men's political attitudes towards women are changing. In a long speech, one of many discussions in which the political situation is described, Pholoso analyses the position of women whom some men consider inferior and concludes:

> "Let us remember that, if you keep a person down, you

remain down with him."[33]

Pholoso sees the relationship between racist and sexist attitudes; in secret meetings of the group there are no women representatives.

To Pholoso Felleng represents "Mother Africa"[34] and to Felleng Pholoso is the ideal South African male - a freedom fighter. In a rather over-stated, unusually romantic passage in which Pholoso and Felleng say goodbye before he leaves to continue the struggle outside the country, Felleng observes that Pholoso

> "was as handsome as ever. His pitch-black unkempt hair had a carefree appearance of rugged abandonment - a typical 'Azanian' look."[35]

Felleng is left behind to wait in the role of Penelope for the warrior to return. (This seems to contradict the belief in the novel that women should be equal in the home and in the struggle.)

Miriam Tlali's sense of humour in even tragic situations is not as aparent in this novel. But there are still some jokes to relieve the tension. For example, Lazarus and Teresa communicate their love through notes hidden in her husband's uniform hat. Pholoso is rescued from the police van while 'Sponkie', the sexy shebeen queen, distracts the guards.

But the novel is reflecting, and responding to, tragic events. The filthy Rockville Lake, which is full of the rubbish of the township, symbolises the corruption of apartheid. Miriam Tlali makes more use of description and symbolism in this novel to stress her anger at events. Amandla ends with a

belief in the work of the Unity Movement for freedom. Pholoso, who had tried to save a white man's life in a riot, throws away his pendant in a rejection of whites, and commits himself totally to the black struggle. Miriam Tlali clearly intends her writing to educate her black readers; she is therefore taking part in the process of change in South Africa. She is also emphasising the importance of the role of women in this change. She symbolises, as a black woman writer, the spirit of all Azanian women who participate in the struggle.

Like Miriam Tlali in Amandla, Lauretta Ngcobo concentrates on political movement in South Africa, in her first novel Cross of Gold[36]. Unlike Miriam Tlali, Lauretta Ngcobo is living in exile in London. Her novel illustrates many aspects of South African life for Africans, moving from the rural areas to the townships, following the story of one man from birth to death. It is, however, like Amandla, an explanation of the politicisation of the people under apartheid, and focusses on the work of the PAC. Like Pholoso, the hero, Mandla, responds to the system by taking an actual part in the underground struggle, as he grows up in South Africa after Sharpeville[37]. Mandla's father's death and imprisonment on a farm as a young boy, his experiences of the poverty of both township and rural life create a POQO freedom fighter. Lauretta Ngcobo makes it clear that Mandla shares his experiences with other blacks - incidents in the novel are based on real events. In this way, like Pholoso, Mandla becomes symbolic of all male political leaders. Lauretta Ngcobo emphasises this by her use of images - as, for example, in this rather contrived and contradictory image, paradoxically taken from women's experience, of Mandla facing

execution in prison:

> "History stood at the prison gate, confronting him and daring him, ready to swallow him like a womb. Having conceived him, history stretched behind and before him and he knew where time had been leading him to, and that whatever awaited him beyond the iron gate was inescapable."[38]

This kind of image suggests Lauretta Ngcobo's anxiety to educate her readers in the West about South Africa, as she indicates universal experience from the particular.

Like Muriel At Metropolitan, the novel is constructed around a series of episodes, each describing a particular aspect of South African life. Perhaps a weakness in the novel's structure, again included with the purpose of education, is the projection of the characters' experiences into the future with some contrived coincidences, suggesting an eventual reconciliation between black and white. The novel ends, like Nadine Gordimer's A Spirit of Nature with a ceremony celebrating the new state - although the PAC rather than the ANC is the party of liberation[39].

Although most of the events in the novel are experienced through Mandla's understanding Lauretta Ngcobo directs the reader, as in the above quotation, through comments on his experience. The opening episode is described by Mandla's mother, and the Epilogue through his son, giving a sense of the time and the generations involved in the struggle. Like other women writers Lauretta Ngcobo perceives that men are still the main leaders[40]. By making her protagonist male she is able to explore this aspect of life, as well

as, for example, life on a prison farm. Although Mandla's mother, Sindiswe, for example, is politically active, it is made clear in her letter to her children, and in her friend Makelotso's discussion with Marumo, that their work began when their husbands died or were imprisoned. Even while paying tribute to her role in the movement Marumo patronises Makelotso and she accepts his position:

> "I have a responsibility to look after you girls. The only trouble we men haven't even got the time to stop and enjoy knowing you. In a way I've been lucky - the arrest of my friends has revealed to me the worth of our women."[41]

The rather stilted dialogue, compared with Miriam Tlali's sensitive approach to changes in her characters' speech, rather prevents the reader at times from visualising Lauretta Ngcobo's characters as living people. Even Mandla, particularly as an adult, seems to become a vehicle for political attitudes and ideas.

On a personal level, however, the novel is much more successful. Mandla is described as deliberately breaking with tradition by sharing women's work. He carries water for Felleng and looks after Zephu's children. He refuses to marry Felleng in the traditional way, but insists that they live together as equals. Felleng, a village girl, is at first unhappy about this but, romantically, he dominates her:

> "Her love for him forced her will to accept his every wish."[42]

He makes her pregnant knowing that his capture and death are inevitable, and that she will later marry his brother in accordance with tradition. Lauretta Ngcobo is illustrating

through Mandla's relationships with women the weaknesses and strengths of traditional tribal life in the modern world.

Sindiswe and Zephu are also idealised as wives and mothers who are faithful like Makelotso to their husbands. Like Nana in Amandla Zephu is surviving only by positively changing her nature:

> "She seemed to have grown a hide, a dark tough hide in which she hid her tender soul, and the daily grind seemed to leave her duty-bound and willing."[43]

Lauretta Ngcobo stresses that self respect is crucial to the survival of black women: Zephu, who lives in the township in terrible poverty nevertheless keeps three pots of water boiling on her stove, because

> "it gave her a promise of bounty."[44]

This sad image illustrates Lauretta Ngcobo's skill in conveying the painful day-to-day personal experiences of black people in South Africa. When Zephu's baby dies of malnutrition the family's sense of loss is intensified in a brief image:

> "Never did such a small body occupy so much space."[45]

African motherhood is idealised in the novel as well, through the effect on Mandla of his mother's death and Zephu's care for him, for example. This idealisation is, however, epitomised in the Epilogue when in a melodramatic speech Mandla's son refuses to kill the white man whose father murdered Mandla because he, too, must have a mother:

> "'——a mother, the white man has a mother, he loves his mother, he knows love, he is human.'"[46]

In this disturbed and unhappy period the breakup of the tra-

ditional family is emphasised through violence: a man murders the wife he suspected of jealousy and walks around talking to her severed head; two babies die violently - one is found stuffed down a drain, and another, the result of a liaison between a sexually voracious white woman and a prisoner, is also killed by the mother. This contrasts strongly with Zephu's feeling for her dead child. Like Bessie Head and Miriam Tlali Lauretta Ngcobo believes in the importance of the family in which the good mother is central, as a kind of barrier against the moral corruption which is a result of the apartheid system. In the town

> "People drank and sex flourished with abandon giving nothing in return."[47]

Other writers have also commented on this moral despair.

The novel's title indicates Lauretta Ngcobo's belief that the deterioration of many Africans is the consequence of their violent exploitation by the capitalist system: South Africa's wealth is based on the price of gold. At the same time people like Zephu and Mandla react by fighting the system with tremendous determination, so that change becomes possible. In this sense the novel is a tribute to the African people.

Farida Karodia's lyrical, sensitive novel, Daughters of the Twilight[48] is much shorter and not so overtly political. It seems to have more in common with The Story of An African Farm, The Lying Days and The Virgins, which are also novels about adolescent girls who grow up concerned with family relationships in a rather isolated way. But Farida Karodia indicates from the beginning of the novel how the apartheid system and racial hatred control the family's life and even-

tually almost destroy it. As a result of her experiences Meena, the youngest daughter, who narrates the story in the first person, decides at the end of the novel that she must join a group working for political change. The novel is written rather like a diary in which the writer evaluates her experience over several years, and learns from it. Although Meena narrates the story the reader is often aware, through the dialogue of the older women, of feelings and actions that Meena does not understand. Often Meena, as a child, records without understanding as when Yasmin, her elder sister, is caught flirting with a white boy and sent home by their grandmother. Yasmin tells Meena:

> "'She's afraid that there's too much of Ma coming out in me and she's not happy about it.'"[50]

As Meena grows up and observes her mother's relationship with a white farmer she slowly begins to understand the implications of such remarks, and of what she sees. When recording conversations Meena is often aware that, in front of the children, the adults are communicating on two levels as when they are having an argument about Yasmin's future:

> "While the conversation continued in this vein, the unsaid hung delicately balanced in the air - innuendoes that the two adults only were supposed to understand but which were intercepted and interpreted for me by Yasmin."[51]

The story is about these family tensions and, on another level, about how family relationships are distorted and organised from outside the family by the political system. Yasmin's desire for education in a girls' boarding school changes her away from her family, as her parents feared it

would, and this change is illustrated, for example, by her rejection of the dresses her mother makes for her. However, more tragically, her desire for independence and a different, bourgeois, way of life unrestricted by the system which has isolated her family, ends in her rape - an act of violence which is condoned by the political system. The novel also begins with an act of violence when Cobus Steyn, a child, son of the Boer landowner, breaks a window in the family's house. Consequently the family begins to break up. Farida Karodia makes it clear that the family have no power to protect themselves. Institutionalised violence means that they have to move from their home under the Group Areas Act because they are the only coloured family in the town. It also means that Meena's mother, who is coloured, secretly arranges for her to be reclassified as coloured, not Indian like her father, so that she can go to a different school in Johannesburg, and, hopefully, have a better life through a good education. Abortion is seen by the family as preferable to bringing up a child of mixed race: Amandla takes the same position. Once born, however, Yasmin rejects her child. Meena's increasing understanding and frustration are reinforced by images of isolation and fear. After the rape, when she realises her sister is pregnant, Meena climbs a kopje on the veld to be alone. As the sun goes down she becomes frightened:

> "I started to run, terrified that these shadows might catch up with me."[52]

The shadows become symbolic of the violence always waiting to destroy the family.

The sisters' grandmother, whose role in the novel is to relate

the family's personal experiences to the outer world, expresses their feeling of powerlessness. It is impossible for them, as their mother has hoped, even to "achieve a small oasis of happiness" in the "desert" of the small town:

> "'Not here, not in this country. It won't be long before they'll be back again with their dogs and their guns.'"[53]

In the context of the novel 'they' and 'their' are as terrifying and impersonal as the shadows.

Even the sisters' relationship is destorted partly by the divisive political system. Unlike Bertie in From Man To Man Meena suffers from jealousy of her sister as she is growing up and this is intensified when Yasmin returns from Boarding School with middle class values. Meena becomes more reflective and introverted. Consciousness of Yasmin even affects Meena's first sexual experience.

> "My response was as natural as if I had done this a hundred times before. ...It was exactly as Yasmin said it would be.
>
> "Then quite suddenly I released him and pulled away. The spell was broken. Yasmin had come between us."[54]

However, after Yasmin has been raped by Cobus Steyn, the novel focusses on her growing dependence on Meena; and eventually the struggle Meena has had all her life for recognition as an individual in her own right by her elder sister is resolved. Like From Man To Man, and Pauline Smith's short stories, this novel emphasises the special relationship of sisters. Meena

> "held her close, sharing in her anguish as only a sister could."[55]

Both Meena's mother and grandmother are also described as attempting to keep their independence within the family, while, paradoxically, trying to hold it together. As a child Meena enjoys the "feeling of camaraderie"[56] created between the women when the father is away but on another level which she only half understands, the two older women are struggling to control the household and the rhythm of the cooking is disturbed. The family unit, as in Cross of Gold and Amandla is described as essential to personal survival; Meena's mother has only one friend - a white woman - and outside the house the situation is always threatening. Meena's father, a religious Indian, who believes in traditions such as arranged marriages, collapses under the strain of moving. Relationships within the family become very intense under the pressures of isolation. Farida Karodia stresses the strengths and individuality of the women under apartheid in which practical considerations have to be balanced against moral ones for survival.

Farida Karodia's novel does not set out to educate the reader as obviously as Amandla and Cross of Gold but, like The Story of An African Farm raises questions of universal interest from the story of individuals and their relationship with the world around them. However, like Miriam Tlali and Lauretta Ngcobo, but unlike Bessie Head, Farida Karodia is writing within the framework of the traditional (European) form of the novel in which the experience of individuals in their relationships is placed firmly in time and space. Only Farida Karodia attempts to relate the inner and outer reality of her characters to observe how they change in response to circumstances.

A different approach to writing fiction about South Africa which is, perhaps, less restrictive than the conventional novel, is that of Zoe Wicomb in her collection of short stories, You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town[57]. The stories describe a series of experiences narrated by one woman, Freda, at different times of her life from childhood. Each episode illustrates her moments of perception about the ways in which her personal life relates to the demands of apartheid. The humourous and tragic aspects of the lives of coloured people in the Cape are described in a lyrical, gentle style reminiscent of Farida Karodia's writing. The freedom from the plot required by the conventional novel seems to have liberated a feeling of movement and change which reflects changing consciousness in the Cape at this period. Perhaps such collections of short stories indicate the way forward for South African prose writing, away from the conventional and rather restrictive novel form, in response to a more fluid situation in South Africa, at the beginning of a new decade.

Notes

1. Noni Jabaru: The Ochre People, London, John Murray, 1963. Reissued JOhannesburg, Ravan, 1982. See Bibliography for a list of other autobiographies.

2. Jacqueline Lock: Working Women. A Portrait of South Africa's Black Women Workers, Johannesburg, a Sached Trust/Ravan Press publication, 1985. See Bibliography for more books on this subject.

3. Robin Morgan, Ed.: Sisterhood is Global, London, Penguin, 1984. Beverly Lindsay, Ed.: Comparative Perspectives of Third World Women. The Impact of Race and Class, New York, Praeger, 1980. Joni Seager and Ann Olsen: An International Atlas, London, a Pluto Press Project, Pan Books, 1986.

4. Ellen Kuzwayo (Forward): Women in South Africa. From the Heart - an Anthology, Johannesburg, Seriti Sechaba (registered as a Section 21 company - Not For Gain), 1988.

5. "Interview with Miriam Tlali", Mineka Schipper: Unheard Worlds, London, Alison and busby, 1985, p. 59. Perhaps this situation is comparable with that of black men writers in the fifties and earlier.

6. Muriel At Metropolitan, First published 1979. Harlow, Longman, 1987.

7. Amandla, Johannesburg, Ravan, 1980.

8. _Mihloti_, Braamfontein, Skotaville Publishers, 1984.

9. _Soweto Stories_, London, Pandora, 1989.

10. "Interview with Miriam Tlali," op. cit. p. 60.

11. ibid. p. 61.

12. Gcina Mhlope: "The Toilet", in _Sometimes When it Rains. Writings by South African Women_, Ann Oisthuzen, Ed., London, Pandora Press, 1987, p. 7.
(This story also illustrates Miriam Tlali's point about the difficulties for black women writers - it is an anthology of black and white writing edited by a white woman, and published by a British feminist press.)

13. "Miriam Tlali: An Interview with Cecily Lockett": _Southern African Review of Books_, Vol 2 No 5 Issue 9. June/July 1989. pp. 20-21.

14. Information about her life is from the interviews referred to above.

15. _Muriel At Metropolitan_, op. cit., p. 10.

16. ibid. p. 11.

17. ibid. p. 106.

18. ibid. p. 173.

19. ibid. p. 163.

This point was also made by Phyllis Altman.

20. ibid. p. 129.

21. ibid. p. 140. Ursula Edmonds feels such passages indicate the novel is a direct expression of black consciousness but Muriel is also conscious that the white workers are also exploited in the capitalist system. (<u>A Vision of Order</u>, op. cit. p. 60.)

22. ibid. p. 127.

23. ibid. p. 85.

24. <u>Amandla</u>, op. cit. p. 268. See also Charlotte Bruner: <u>Unwinding Threads</u> for an analysis of the uses of proverbs. London, Heinemann, 1983.

25. ibid. p. 113.

26. ibid. p. 41.

27. ibid. p. 209.

28. ibid. p. 198.

29. ibid. p. 190.

30. ibid. p. 29.

31. ibid. p. 46.

32. ibid. p. 258.

33. ibid. p. 89.

34. ibid. p. 71.

35. ibid. p. 292.

36. Cross of Gold, London, Longman, 1981.

37. Pholoso means "Helper" in English and Mandla means "Power".

38. Cross of Gold, op. cit., p. 269.

39. But Lauretta Ngcobo has said that the publisher wanted her to add an Epilogue. (Talk given at Institute of Commonwealth Studies, November 1988.)

40. See Ed. Christine Qunta: Women in Southern Africa, London, Alison and Busby, 1987, for a different view.

41. Cross of Gold, op. cit., p. 140.

42. ibid. p. 216.

43. ibid. p. 66.

44. ibid. p. 69.

45. ibid. p. 77.

46. ibid. p. 287.

47. ibid. p. 150.

48. _Daughters of the Twilight_, London, Women's Press, 1986.

49. Farida Karodia:

50. _Daughters of the Twilight_, op. cit. p. 34.

51. ibid. p. 42.

52. ibid. p. 138.

53. ibid. p. 150.

54. ibid. p. 84.

55. ibid. p. 149. (Two images in the novel are reminiscent of Campbell's poem about "The Sisters" - p. 43 Roy Campbell: _Collected Poems_, Jonathan Cape 1973, p. 27 - when they ride together and run naked into the refreshing rain, suggesting their closeness.)

56. ibid. p. 9

57. Zoe Wicomb: _You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town_, Virago New Fiction, London 1987.

Conclusion

It seems difficult at first to avoid the conclusion that there is indeed a "dark chasm" separating the work of white and black South African writers[1]. Novelists like Mrs Millin and Nadine Gordimer who try to explain the position of black men and women only succeed in recreating stereotypes and, paradoxically, creating more divisions. However, Phyllis Altman's novel proves that it is possible for a white woman to write a novel which could have been created by a black writer. Bessie Head, in spite of describing the breakdown of a black woman as the result of the misuse of power in the apartheid system, suggests that a common moral perception can unite black and white people from different backgrounds in lasting friendship. Although in the West the position of women can be studied in relation to men, in South Africa it has to be seen in the wider context of the apartheid system

which encourages white women to oppress their black sisters for profit. The racist and sexist positions of the majority of whites are related and described from different viewpoints in the novels.

However, underlying the experience of many of the women characters in the novels, whether by black or white writers, is a sense of male dominance which, like racism, distorts and changes women's natures, limiting their choices. At its worst this male power expresses itself in rape, and through prostitution. In a sense, as Olive Schreiner points out, marriage for security and status can itself be a kind of prostitution. Even novelists sympathetic to marriage discuss women's unhappiness and loneliness within marriage. At the same time, however, the novelists describe extraordinary, ordinary women who survive traumatic experiences with support, sometimes from strangers, sometimes from sisters or friends. Religion seems irrelevant to their lives (except for Andrina), unless they use it as a way of discussing beliefs. (This is surprising because of the use made by religion in developing the country.) Other ways of surviving for women are illustrated through recurring images. "Women's work", such as sewing and cookery, is frequently described and generally gives pleasure[2]. Images of rooms and the houses in which, especially in the early novels, women spent most of their time are used as well to define women's characters and states of mind, as in <u>The Beadle</u>, <u>A World of Strangers</u> and <u>Maru</u>, for example. Natural surroundings indicate the characters' moods: women's relationship with nature is often described as a healing process, leading to an acceptance of the inevitability of death so that they can continue living, as in <u>When Rain Clouds</u>

Gather. Images from the weather such as drought and rain symbolise death and new life and hope, in, for instance, From Man To Man, A Revolutionary Woman and A State of Fear. Gardening, as well as the plants themselves, becomes an image of survival and strength in Amandla and, more poetically in A Question of Power. The novels dispel the myth that many women are entirely self-sacrificing victims of men but show them as finding ways of managing their lives within restrictions imposed on them by individual men and society. Only the prostitute, Bertie, in From Man To Man, becomes a victim, sacrificed as a scapegoat because she upsets the image the society has of itself. Clothes indicate women's attitude to society and mirrors come to symbolise women's search for truth in The Story of An African Farm and The Beadle, for example. Women in the novels like Lyndall, Felleng and Hillela become themselves transformed from individuals into symbols who represent different ideals from different periods, in the process of reading the novels. Types of older women who recur in the novels become images of opposing attitudes. For example, in novels by white women writers like Nadine Gordimer, Yvonne Burgess, Hilda Bernstein and Jillian Becker, the reactionary white middle classes are represented by middle-aged women obsessed by material values and appearances to the extent that they ignore their children. Their use of makeup suggests masks behind which they hide their fears[3]. On the other hand older black women are respected for their knowledge of life; they can pass on cultural traditions and history to the next generation, like Gramsy in Amandla. Unlike the dying grandmother in The Late Bourgeois World they remain part of the family, taking equal responsibility for the children. The implication is that many whites

reject human values for the sake of material possessions while the Africans believe in the importance of the contribution each member makes to the family regardless of age or wealth.

The women in the novels are mainly concerned with personal relationships: Olive Schreiner was attempting in From Man To Man to show how women need more than this, or their worlds can collapse. But it is not until recently that two women writers, Menan du Plessis and Bessie Head, successfully describe women struggling to understand the theory behind the apartheid system, the meaning of good and evil, in relation to their heroines' lives, and to the world. The novels of Olive Schreiner and Bessie Head, the least obviously didactic writers, are able to transform understanding not only of women's lives in South Africa but of the world through their humanity, the strength of their vision and the quality of their writing. It seems strange that the child, Sartje, in From Man To Man took nearly a hundred years to become acknowledged, through the writer Bessie Head, as at least equal to Olive Schreiner. Other novelists describe women's lives within the society of a particular period but Olive Schreiner and Bessie Head see beyond their societies into the future, in their search for truth.

The value of this kind of literary novel, which takes so long to read and write, and is also frequently painful to read because of the conflicts it describes, has to be questioned, as indeed it sometimes is by the writers themselves[4]. It is read by a minority, however influential, as opposed to popular novels such as those by Wilbur Smith, or Rider

Haggard in the past. The media also gives us today immediate and very effective information and analysis of changing political events. This issue is not restricted to South Africa alone, of course, but is more poignant there because of the difficulties of time and space that have to be overcome by women writing about their country. In a revolutionary situation perhaps autobiographies, short stories, and particularly drama and poetry provide a more useful response to the needs of the people (some of whom may be illiterate). Maybe the South African novel has already begun to move away from the restrictive traditional plan to accommodate the demands of the present preoccupations of the middle class acting as a kind of conscience, as in A State of Fear, and maybe it will also continue to be used, as in Amandla, for a fictional, organised record of reality, which is close to the experience of the masses. So far the novel form has survived in South Africa for just over a hundred years: women writers will, hopefully, continue to participate in the process of change until everyone in South Africa is liberated.

Notes

1. See Lauretta Ngcobo: "A Black South African Writing Long After Schreiner" in The Flawed Diamond, Itala Vivan, Ed., Australia, Dangaroo Press, 1989, p. 189. However, Lauretta Ngcobo goes on to make the point that The Story of An African Farm reaches across time to unite black and white women.

2. Women are often described as sewing at traumatic monents in their lives. See Rozsika Parker: The Subversive Stitch for a feminist analysis of sewing. London, The Women's Press, 1984.

3. However, women everywhere are encouraged to wear makeup to hide their real faces, which are ageing, by an enormously profitable industry. The emphasis in the West is on remaining young as long as possible.

4. See particularly A State of Fear, where questioning about the meaning of writing is integral to the novel.

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