

SNOW WHITE

& ROSE GREEN

OR SOME NOTES ON SEXISM, RACISM, AND THE CRAFT OF WRITING

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Quel est l'effet du sexisme et du racisme sur une femme écrivain? En examinant le développement de ses propres nouvelles et poèmes, une femme indienne de l'Inde qui écrit au Canada, discute des choix dont elle dispose pour son oeuvre créative — en terme du contenu, de son public et de la langue même dont elle se sert pour communiquer avec ses lecteurs.

How does sexism affect a woman writer once she gets down to writing, having overcome the economic and social inhibitions? There is an obvious answer. A writer is dependent on her audience. The words in a poem do not just mean what she

wants them to mean, they also mean what her readers understand them to mean. The writer herself has some control in that she is using them in a particular context. If the writer does not share a great many of the ideas, assumptions, and experience of her readers, then there is going to be a problem. If, furthermore, the very language she is using is saturated with ideas she wishes to question and with experiences different from her own, then the problem is going to be compounded.

What is she going to do?

1. She can establish her own frame of reference by painstakingly creating the very texture of her world (Alice Munro, Margaret Laurence).

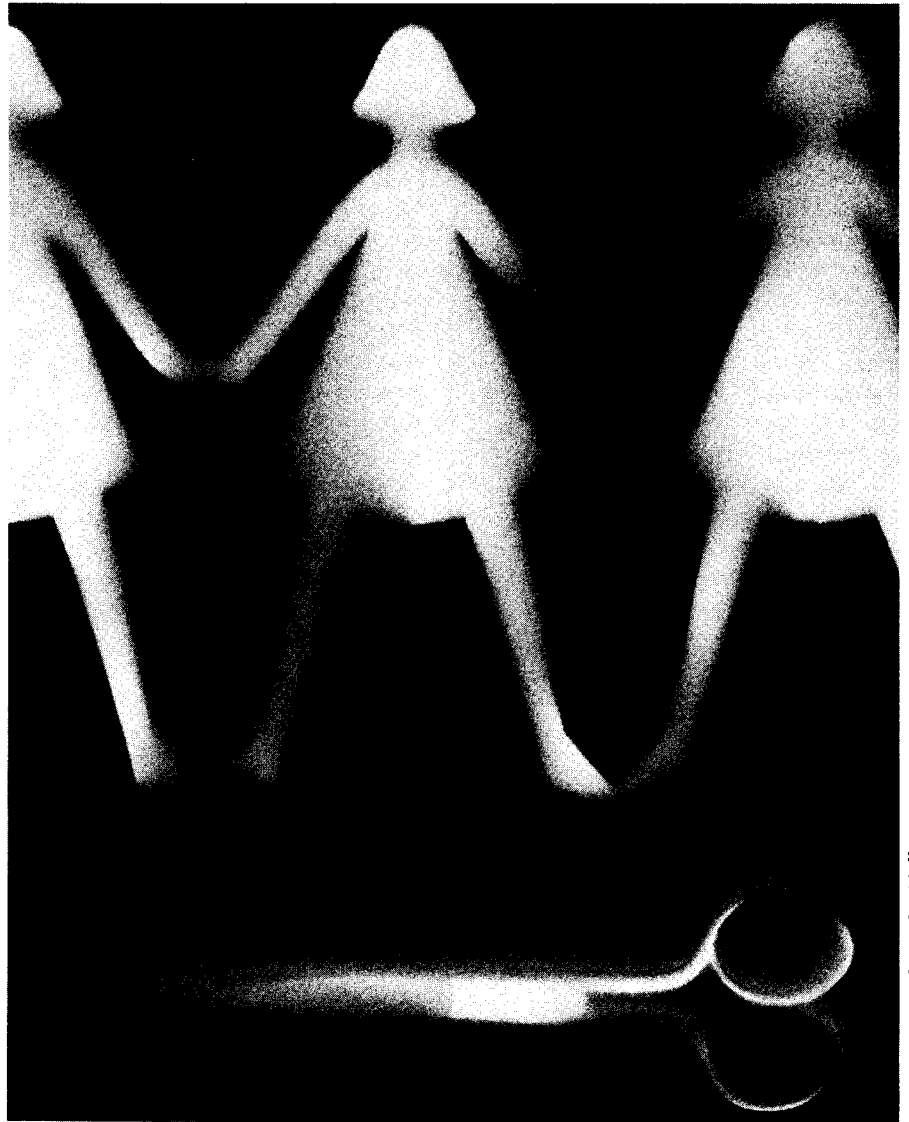


Illustration: B. Alexandra Hall

This is probably easier to do in a novel than in a lyric poem.

2. She can assume that an audience exists to whom she will make sense (Dorothy Livesay, possibly Margaret Atwood). When this strategy works, it works beautifully, and the very confidence of the writer will engage the attention of a much wider audience. When it doesn't work, the result is a ludicrous miscalculation of effect. My guess is that for this strategy to work the hidden audience must, in fact, exist and must be accessible.

3. She can decide not to worry about the audience (Emily Dickinson). But this requires genius, not merely talent, and luck — the luck that Dickinson's poems were not destroyed. (That she herself was not destroyed I attribute to genius.)

4. She can re-create language, insist on an audience, and insist that the audience start relearning the alphabet. (Marguerite Duras? I don't know. I'm not familiar with her work.)

5. She can compromise. She can use the structures, stereotypes, and assumptions inherent in the language and in the tradition, but use them in a context that alters and modifies them. (I'm not using the word "subverts," because I think compromise implies continuing tradition.) In my opinion most women writers use this method and in doing so modify sexist assumptions at least to some extent. The very fact that a woman is writing alters the long tradition of a male-dominated literature. The drawback is that while the woman writer may be modifying one set of sexist assumptions, she may very well be reinforcing another set of them (Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh).

What we are left with is the interdependence of the poet and society — the poet desperately trying to make readers question the language that they are using by means of that very language. I think what this means is that we cannot have a feminist writer without a feminist audience. Perhaps because even a work with obvious feminist implications will not be read as such by a non-feminist reader? *The Yellow Wall-*

paper? Jane Eyre? Or perhaps all I mean is that a sexist society is likely to produce sexist writers and sexist interpretations. Then why have we had exceptions? The answer to that, I suppose, is that society is not homogeneous and the writer herself does have some control. The point is, though, however elitist or non-conformist the writer, she (or he — why not?) is concerned with public opinion, because "public opinion" is an aspect of that much more acceptable phrase, "the terms of reference." A word means what most people think it means. Is that good sense? Not entirely, because some people have twenty votes, others none at all, and many, of course, don't go to the polls. . .

The connections between racism and sexism are also fairly obvious.

1. Women have been defined rather than self-defining. So have non-English-speaking peoples. This amounts to tautology in that English-speaking people have defined non-English-speaking peoples in English.

2. These definitions have been largely in terms of their relationship and value to the definers. Good mother. Good wife. Easy to govern, *not* easy to govern, and so forth.

3. Women have internalized the definitions and values (the language) of the definers, as have the colonials.

There is one big difference, however, between women and foreigners. How many times does a Canadian or an East Indian occur in English literature? Not frequently. How often do women occur in English literature, being coy, noble, sluttish, whatever, but still occurring? Frequently.

Either way we are faceless (not maskless) and I'm not sure which constitutes the greater technical problem: being defined out of existence (being overdefined) or hardly being defined at all (i.e., being vaguely defined as "foreign").

And there is a difference here between the Canadian writer writing in English and the East Indian writing in English. The great temptation for the English Canadian writer is laziness. The English words and his Canadian experience almost match. (They don't quite match, but

they almost do, so why not pretend that, in fact, they do?)

The great temptation for the Indian writer writing in English is to give up or to submerge himself in an extreme aestheticism and forget about the connection between life and literature. The English words and the Indian experience fall apart. The great consolation for the English Canadian writer is that with the passage of time, Canadian English will express the Canadian experience — it is the only language that the English Canadian has. But English in India is an imitated language. The great consolation for the Indian writer is that it is of very little consequence if he fails. There are other languages, other writers, the soil is thick with blood and ashes, what has to be said has been said and will be said again. And if these other writers and these other languages are not entirely accessible to him, because as a result of imperialism, he himself happens to think almost entirely in English, well, even that doesn't matter much.

In the last paragraph I used the words "he," "him," "his," "himself" repeatedly. There is a reason for that. Women have not been the legal inheritors of the "civilization of man," not in Canada or in Britain or in India. (I realize now that as a child and as a young woman in India I used to play off the Western tradition against the Indian tradition and use whichever bits of either happened to suit me in order to prevent myself from being put down as a woman.)

And so what does all this mean? And where has it left me, an Indian woman writing in Canada? The answer should be apparent: "Still struggling." I want to conclude these notes with a few examples of the gap between intention and achievement from my own work as well as some comments about where I think I have failed and where I think I have done rather well.



Aphrodisiac

Being wedded and bedded
and not pig-headed,
He sought the horn

From the Travels of Gulliver

And I fell in love with a woman so tall that
when I looked at her eyes I had to go star-gazing.

Tall treasure-houses, moon-
maidenly silence. . . Someday I'll teach you
to smile on me. She sways, sighs,
turns in her sleep. Did a feather fall?
Thor's hammer blow makes no effects.

I'm told that it's unnatural
to love giantesses.

In the morning small dogs bark.
Giantesses strut, fell trees like toothpicks,
while we just stand there, gaze up
their thighs, foreshortened, of course,
but astonishingly pretty.

One day she picked me up off the floor and set
me on her nipple. I tried to ride, but consider my
position — indubitably tricky.

To sleep forever in my fair love's arms,
to make of her body my home and habitation. . .
She keeps me about her like a personal worm.

She is not squeamish.

Once,
the giddy and gay were gathered together.
Then she brought me out, bathed me
and kissed me. She put me in a suit
of powder blue silk and set me to sail
in a tepid cup of tea. There
I fought out the storm of their laughter.
I performed valiantly.

I love to hear her laugh,
would not see her grieve,
but a teacup of brine would have seemed
more seemly. I could sail in such a cup,
be swayed by her sighs.

She gluts me on the milk
of healthy giantesses:
"Poor little mannikin,
will nothing make you grow?"
I grow. I am growing. You should
see me in her dreams.

Of the white unicorn,
For the world is an ugly woman.

I wrote this fifteen years ago.
When I was cleaning up the manu-
script of *The Jackass and the Lady* for
publication, I scrapped it. I was try-
ing to express disenchantment, but
the consciousness is so irredeemably
male-centred and heterosexist that I
really did not see how I might sal-
vage the poem.

Manichean Poem

White bird on green sea
is bemused by her own shape
lengthening and widening
on the sea's expanse, but loses
her shadow on a sliding curve, and is
unshadowed white, a singular bird,
unable to drown.

I "cleaned up" this poem by chang-
ing "his" to "her," but the slang
(and sexist) association of "birds"
with women still bothers me. I keep
hoping that whoever is reading the
poem won't make that particular
association.



This particular poem I really rath-
er like, but it grieves me that I had to
use a heterosexual framework. I am
not equating "lesbian" with "femi-
nist." But if there is a difference
between a man writing a poem
about a woman, and a woman writ-
ing a poem about a woman, then it
should be made clear. And if there is
no difference, then that should be
made clear too.

In my next book, *The Authentic Lie*,
the speaker is quite unmistakably a
woman. The first section, "Dis-
course with the Dead," is an elegy
for my father and to my father. I
thought that if I was speaking to
someone so close to me and so specif-
ic and also to someone with whom I
would likely be speaking in English,
I would forget to be self-conscious
about the fact that the setting is in
India. I hoped that the setting would
come through anyway. I don't know
that it does. There is nothing in the
poems that would prove conclusively
that the particular sea I am talking
about is the Arabian Sea. Sometimes
I think that the very way in which I
think about a landscape would have
to make it a particular one. I don't

know. Here is the first poem from
that section.

He died when she was ten in a
distant country and therefore the
dreams wouldn't stop.
She made nightly journeys,
climbed out of bed,
walked to the shore.
Who is that sleeping giant?
Not your father — of his bones
are coral made.
She examined his body — his gills
were slits —
then heaved him up quickly
on the palm
of one hand
(like a gigantic balloon,
like a bloated whale)
hurried home with him.

A reference to Shakespeare's *The
Tempest* is not particularly Indian,
but if it is intelligible and if that is
the one that occurs to me, then why
should I not use it?

By the time I wrote *Feminist Fables*
I had become acutely conscious of
some of the problems I have been
discussing. Writing the fables was
my way of attacking them head-on.

The Giantess

Thousands of years ago in far away India, which is so far away that anything is possible, before the advent of the inevitable Aryans, a giantess was in charge of a little kingdom. It was small by her standards, but perhaps not by our own. Three oceans converged on its triangular tip, and in the north there were mountains, the tallest in the world, which would perhaps account for this singular kingdom. It was not a kingdom, but the word has been lost and I could find no other. There wasn't any king. The giantess governed and there were no other women. The men were innocent and happy and carefree. If they were hurt, they were quickly consoled. For the giantess was kind, and would set them on her knee and tell them they were brave and strong and noble. And if they were hungry, the giantess would feed them. The milk from her breasts was sweeter than honey and more nutritious than mangoes. If they grew fractious, the giantess would sing, and they would clamber up her legs and onto her lap and sleep unruffled. They were a happy people and things might have gone on in this way forever, were it not for the fact that the giantess grew tired. Her knees felt more bony, her voice rasped, and on one or two occasions she showed irritation. They were greatly distressed. "We love you," they said to the tired giantess, "Why won't you sing? Are you angry with us? What have we done?" "You are dear little children," the giantess replied, "but I have grown very tired and it's time for me to go." "Don't you love us anymore? We'll do what you want. We will make you happy. Only please don't go." "Do you know what I want?" the giantess asked. They were silent for a bit, then one of them said, "We'll make you our queen." And another one said, "We'll write you a poem." And a third one shouted (while turning cartwheels), "We'll bring you many gifts of oysters and pearls and pebbles and stones." "No," said the giantess, "No." She turned her back and crossed the mountains.



I rather like this one. When a non-feminist, non-literary friend said to me that she had liked it, I felt so pleased. I thought that perhaps I had managed to speak to her experience. The other reason I like it is because I get in that remark about India, "which is so far away that anything is possible." What troubles me is that such a remark could only be addressed to an English-speaking

Western audience. There would be no point in addressing it to English-speaking Indians. Am I speaking for Indians to the West (mostly feminists and anyone else who cares to listen), but not to Indians? Even though I mock the western notion of an exotic India, I still use it. Some of the fables were published in *Manushi*, an Indian feminist journal which I cannot praise highly enough,

and were well received. I find that consoling.

The manuscript I am working on now is called *From the Bedside Book of Nightmares*. The first section in it is addressed either directly or indirectly to my mother (the same ploy as in *The Authentic Lie*), and there is one poem in it that was meant for my sister.



P. Abrahamson April '82

Snow White and Rose Green

Once upon a time there were two sisters and one got married and one didn't. Or once upon a time there were two piglets and one went to market and one didn't, or one was straight and one wasn't. The point is, whatever they did or failed to do, they were a great disappointment to their poor mother. Luckily for them, the two sisters loved one another. When they saw that their mother was growing more and more unhappy, they proposed to her that she cut them in half and out of the two good halves make one splendid one. Their mother refused in high indignation, but she was so wretched that the dutiful daughters went to a surgeon. The surgeon obligingly sawed them in half, then interchanged halves and stuck them together. But there were still two of them. This was a problem. So they went back home and said to their mother, "Now choose the good one." But their mother was furious that they had even thought of such a scheme. "You did it to mock me," she told them angrily. "You are both bad children." When the two sisters heard her say this, the Good One wept, but the Bad One smirked.

▲ I like this prose poem, but I don't think that my sister would recognize herself in it. And yet I like to think that she might recognize the sensibility as being that of a Maratha (a Maharashtrian, native of Maharashtra, an area near Bombay, on the

west coast of India). The irony, the malice, and the bizarre sense of humour are certainly characteristic of Marathi (the language spoken in Maharashtra), but then I don't know that Marathas are too comfortable with lesbian feminists.

INDUSTRIOUS IN THEIR HABITS...

The Ontario Museum Association, in co-operation with the Department of History and Philosophy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Secondary Education, is sponsoring "Industrious in Their Habits: Rediscovering the World at Work."

The conference will explore the changing nature and processes of women's work in Canada over the past 150 years. Among the topics to be discussed are work in the home, on the farm, in industry, and in business and the professions.

Sessions will be held January 26-29 in Toronto. For more information contact the Ontario Museum Association, 38 Charles Street East, Toronto, Ontario M4Y 1T1.

WOMEN'S HISTORY PROJECT

The Women's History Project, sponsored by the Department of History and Philosophy at OISE, is planning a summer institute to be held from June 13-30, 1983. The purpose of the institute is to bring together members of Canadian women's associations, teachers, and professional historians to study the history of women's associations and associational life in Canada. Participants will work collectively to produce resource materials that document the history of women's associations in Canada. The material will be for use both by participating groups and by schools.

For further information please contact: Paula Bourne, Research Officer, Women in Canadian History Project, OISE, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6.