

THE GORDIMERIAN STYLE

Faisal M Mahmud

There have been much said, already, about Nadine Gordimer's political convictions. Then how about letting us delve right into her works, especially novels, seriously; skipping or without going through her biographical life sketch and personal and private life.

Most of Gordimer's main characters are involved in the very serious business of finding suitable moral apparatus to cope with the excruciating mental difficulties of living white, with a conscience, in a minority within a greater South African minority.

Viewed as a group, Gordimer's male and female protagonists show a parallel development of consciousness towards a point at which most moral options appear to be exhausted (two of her later heroes end up running away, blindly, to nowhere).

In Helen Shaw, Jessie Stillwell, and Liz van den Sandt, the heroines of *The Lying Days*, *Occasion for Loving*, and *The Late Bourgeois World* respectively, Gordimer charts development from the racially exclusive confines of a white childhood in South Africa, to

the discovery of the "freedom" of adult liberal thinking, and from there to the point where personal sacrifice becomes necessary for the sake of political integrity. In *The Lying Days*, Helen Shaw triumphs against the provincial narrowness and racial bigotry of her parents' mining village exist-



Nadine Gordimer

tence, yet she discovers that she, too, is sealed within her social limitations when she watches, from behind the windshield of a car, a riot in a black township in which a man is shot dead by the police. As is the case with a number of Gordimer's characters, Helen Shaw's sense of moral failure is realised within and suggested by the failure of a love relationship in which certain moral suppositions function as a way of life. She goes away, to Europe, aware of a need for new sustenance, but essentially disillusioned.

She is succeeded by Jessie Stillwell, an older version of Helen, back from Europe, now married and running a family, and committed to a makeshift liberal ideology of being open to one's kind, because the general (white) South African way of life is unacceptable. Yet this ideology is shown to be vulnerable and in danger of hypocrisy by the action of the novel, in which Jessie's world is "invaded" by an illicit love affair between a black artist and a young woman from England.

The liberal idea of openness is belied by Jessie's wish to be

glimpse human reactions to left to her own kind of semi-romantic isolation, and all the situation are bedeviled by a factor the Stillwells profess not to take undue account of skin colour. In *The Late Bourgeois World* the developments in *The Lying Days* and *Occasion for Loving* find a conclusion.

For Liz van den Sandt, the old liberal "way of life" is already dead when the book opens — her liberal activist former husband has just committed suicide — while her present existence is nothing more than a kind of helpless withdrawal, reflected by a particularly pallid love affair she is conducting.

She faces her moment of truth when a black friend, an activist, challenges her to step outside the sealed area of respectability and conscience, and "do something to help, at considerable personal risk."

Now let's turn our attention to her short stories. There's an excerpt from her story "Livingstones Companion", where her ability to make the reader visualize the scene is enormous. It appears to the

mind of her reader as a scene from a classic art film.

"An old European image was lodged in his tiredness: the mirage, if the road ever ended, of some sort of Southern resort village, coloured umbrellas, a street of white hotels beside water and boats.

As the road unravelled from the pass into open bush, there came that moment when, if he had had a companion, they would have stopped talking.

Two, three miles; the car rolled in past the ruins of an arched building to the barking of dogs, the horizontal streak of water behind the bush, outhouses and water-tanks, a raw new house. A young man in bathing trunks with his back to the car stood on the portico steps, pushing a slipper off one foot with the toes of the other. As he hopped for balance he looked round. Blond wet curls licked the small head on the tall body, vividly empty blue eyes were the eyes of some nocturnal animal dragged out in daylight."

In 42 years Nadine has produced only about 10 novels and 200 stories. It reassures the minds of literary connoisseurs that the good old saying, "It's the quality that matters, not the quantity," is not elusive nowadays.

BREAKING BARRIERS

By Lindsey Darking

GILL'S eight-year-old son wasn't happy about her marrying a man 11 years her junior. "When Mike's 50, you'll be an ancient old crone," he said, illustrating the fact that society's disapproval of women with younger partners starts early.

The hostility is often justified on biological grounds. Men, so the argument goes, are driven to sow their seed as far and wide as possible, and if the next season's crop is to be even bigger and bulkier than this, then the more firm, fit and wrinkle-free the bodies they do it in, the better for humankind.

Any man who fancies someone as old as his aunt or his grand-mother is thus going against nature, and unless the woman is famous, rich or powerful, in which case he is merely exercising a roguish

or indirectly by feminism, younger men may have more to offer, according to feminist psychotherapist Susie Orbach.

"Some women may feel more powerful in relation to younger men in a sense that they don't feel in relation to their peers. It gives them a chance to create a new, less patriarchal structure. Some younger men who have been brought up by women with a feminist consciousness might also be more caring, and not completely divorced from

How do women relate to younger spouses? Are they mere toy boys or equal partners?

and breaking the rules, and that's uncomfortable for me. I've been used to being considered an attractive woman and suddenly his friends and family were seeing me as someone who had ensnared their friend or son — a desperate older woman with children, looking for a way out."

Mike, a 29-year-old lecturer, had no doubts, but his colleagues disapproved. "They did not come right out with it but they would frequently ask if I was sure I was doing the right thing."

Opposition can be the main problem for such relationships, says Zella West-Meads. Children, particular teenagers, may resent their mother for causing them embarrassment amongst friends, and families can sometimes ostracise the couple completely. Although many age-gap relationships are happy and successful, they are considered higher risk.

The female partners can become more insecure, she says, seeing every new wrinkle as a threat. Annie, a 56-year-old bookkeeper married for 13 years to John, 44, a lorry driver, says that in an otherwise happy relationship, blessed by friends and family, this is her only fear.

"I am the only person it bothers. I can see myself getting older, and I worry that he won't be so attracted to me and that it will make a difference to how he feels."

John says that age never put him off, and admits that Annie's independence and maturity was part of the attraction. But in some age-gap relationships, says Zella West-Meads, this can border on a desire to avoid responsibility, since the woman already has children, a career and a home. While not exactly free-loading, the younger man might find the woman less challenging than women of his own age.

As for the psycho-analytical view that such men might be trying to make up for the mothering they did not have, or felt was missing, this is not necessarily a problem, according to Dr Robin Skynner, family therapist and author, with John Cleese, of *Families And How to Survive Them*. "One is always marrying one's mother, father, brothers or sisters anyway, whatever the age, and there's nothing wrong with that."

If one has had a bad mothering or fathering experience that hasn't been worked through earlier then marriage can provide what you need."

Author Frank Ronan, 28, whose book *The Men Who Loved Evelyn Cotton* deals in part with an age gap relationship, and who himself has an older woman partner, says incompatibility between the sexes is far more significant than age. "I'm quite surprised that anyone can have any sort of relationship at all. If you are lucky enough to find someone you love and who you are also prepared to share a bathroom with then you don't stop to worry about their age or what people think — you just grab it."



Elizabeth Taylor and Larry Fortensky: Can the age gap be overcome successfully?

good sense, he is assumed to have something wrong with him. If it is not money, then he must be looking for a mum.

Zella West-Meads, counsellor for the British organisation Rlate (formerly called the Marriage Guidance Council), estimates that around 17 per cent of older women are marrying men substantially younger than themselves. British Government statistics for 1989 list only two marriages between women over 70 and men under 40 (compared to 43 with the sexes the other way round) but relationships with a 10 to 20-year gap are becoming more common.

For women now in their 40s or 50s influenced directly

their feelings." If women in their 30s and 40s are also at their sexual peak, the younger man's greater sexual stamina and absence of beer belly might add to the attraction. Research by Dr David Weeks, principal clinical psychologist at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, suggests that sex across the decades can be good for you. People who have relationships with those younger than themselves, he says, tend to look and feel younger, and are more active, healthy and happy overall.

Gill, 40, had known Mike as a friend before the relationship became serious, and was unsettled by people's reactions. "I feel as if I'm outside society

Debt Default and Poverty Alleviation

PROFESSOR Rehman Sobhan may be credited to be amongst few social scientists in Bangladesh who have authored seminal books on a broad perspective. Linguistically he is possibly a marginal Bengali, even educationally so. But there are few amongst our social scientists who are so committed to the cause of Bangladesh and the poor of Bangladesh. He authored the first basic critique of Basic Democracy with data and solid evidence to prove its exploitative character. This remains today the only authoritative source book on such a politico-administrative matter. The reviewer jointly wrote on *Public Enterprise in an Intermediate Regime* which has again been acclaimed by the reviewers worldwide as a basic contribution on the subject. It was followed by *The Crisis of External Dependence*, the number of reprints it has gone through is a testimony of its high quality and usefulness.

Rehman then took upon himself the befitting role of a doyen. The first outcome of which is a sequel to external dependence. From *Aid Dependence to Self Reliance* is not only an evaluation of the

nature of dependence but how much self reliance was attainable given the neo-classical economic planning model. The current volume on Debt Default is a continuation of the

borrowers of the DFIs. The findings confirm absence of a viable dynamic entrenched and mature entrepreneurial class. The majority are new comers and few actually set up and

bring in generalised managerial skill and leadership quality. This class has been ambitious reflecting the habit of thinking big without evaluating properly their ability to operate big enterprises. DFIs have not demonstrated professional quality in identification, appraisal implementation monitoring and end use supervision. Liberal loan policy at low rates of interest led to pervasive dependence as owner virtually put no real equity at all. This basic fact alone indicates the root cause of crisis of DFIs and private sector enterprises manifested in debt default.

The next chapter discusses the structure of DFI sponsored investment. Rehman and Ahsan found out that the projects were highly capital intensive. They were invariably dependent on import of machinery, spares and even raw materials and consumables. They were again concentrated in and around metropolitan areas. There was no strategy for intensive capacity and capital utilisation reflected in the sanctioned projects.

In chapter four, Rehman and Ahsan discussed the problems of repayment followed by three chapters on trends in repayment. The repayment is poor because the projects do not perform as envisaged. It is so because at the time of project identification markets studies were poor, proper costing at the time of evaluation was not done (or advantage of inflated cost was taken advantage of by the sly borrowers) and shaky financial base of the borrower made project implementation totally dependent on disbursement by DFIs. The study found that the units which were operating on profit did not keep the repayment schedule and became willful defaulter and profitability and capacity utilization are related. The long gestation lag between sanction and commission and failure to keep good debt service record when the projects are operational indicates how the inefficiency and willful has created a lobby that is politically powerful and wasteful for the economy. The proverbial efficiency of the private sector is hard to detect. The default is widespread but less so in service, paper, electrical and non-metallic products. Projects in non-metropolitan areas could not overcome infrastructural difficulties nor could they attain scale economies. Over the years the default has deepened due to concentration of default amongst few large projects. The remedy requires both punitive as well as assistive measures which need be determined by an impartial management audit of the enterprise and the entrepreneurs. All measures so far taken has not improved the repayment status of DFIs substantially and the defaulters have been protected by policies of rescheduling, restructuring, waiver of interest on loan etc. The book is not only topical but very informative. I wish Rehman had studied some good and bad enterprises as cases as well as management and decision making of DFIs more incisively. That would have enriched the book.

Loan-rescheduling, interest waiver, perpetuating of default has an economic as well as social cost which is borne by the GOB and taxpayers. While these concessions and subventions have created a new class of rich people, the opposite is the case of rural poor which has been discussed by Rehman Sobhan in the second book named above in the broader context of international scenario and donor dialectics. He

concludes that "the balance sheet on public intervention in agricultural sector in the areas of public expenditure, aid and pricing policy is mixed and far from clear as to its impact on the poor." Bangladesh, as shown with data, registered the most adverse performance for agriculture even though growth in public expenditure on agriculture was continued in real terms, however the ratio of agricultural gross domestic product over gross domestic product to total public expenditure in agriculture to total public expenditure declined in recent years. There was no information available for gross fixed capital formation per capita of agricultural labour force. It can be presumed even if there were any, it was negligible per capita official development assistance to agriculture was low but increased in 80s as was the allocation for poverty oriented projects increased in the 80s.

The book is informative but heavy with much too much data and many of the abbreviations needed to be explained in an annexure for easy reading. The global comparative review suggests a revamp of agricultural sector policy by the government, and donors — as without a significant changes in agriculture there is unlikely to be any sustainable development in any other sector or reversal of deepening of poverty. Rehman Sobhan deserves felicitation for providing us with another set of seminal source books for researchers and policy makers.

BOOKS

- Rehman Sobhan (ed): Debt Default to the Development Finance Institution: The Crisis of State Sponsored Entrepreneurship in Bangladesh, University Press Limited, pp 312+ VIII, Price Tk. 490.00
- Rehman Sobhan: Public Allocative Strategies Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation, University Press Limited, Dhaka, pp 138+VIII, Price Tk. 300.00

Reviewed by Prof Muzaffer Ahmad

politico-economic investigation. Like the *Aid Dependence* this is a collection of related research all done under the inspiration and supervision of Rehman Sobhan.

The book starts with a befitting introduction of DFI and sponsored entrepreneurship in the 60s and later in post liberation Bangladesh. In chapter 2, Rehman Sobhan examines the background of the

even fewer operated the enterprises. The authors raises question about their experience and quality of their experience. Thus large scale lending by DFIs were given to well connected but inexperienced youth who flourished as indentors/ suppliers/ distributors on a patronage system. They were joined by retired or in disguise civil and military officials. Some of this new class could



Carolyn Suzanne Sapp, who was crowned Miss America, poses for photographers outside the Trump Plaza Hotel in Manhattan. Sapp is from Hawaii.

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,
I have been married for 2 years but am not pregnant yet. There is a lot of pressure from my in-laws and my husband too. I teach in a college and am happy with my job. Though having a baby is important, it is not the most important thing in my life. How do I convince my family of that?
Anonymous, Dhaka.

Dear Anonymous,
You should not mind the pressure from your in-laws, they have been doing this for centuries and will continue to do so. Your husband needs to be made to understand that it takes time for some women to get pregnant and there is no need to panic. Consult a good doctor, both of you, and then just relax. It will happen when it is supposed to, meanwhile enjoy these first few years of freedom and togetherness, which you will never get back again.

Dear Mita,
Sometimes I don't like your answers, they are not strong enough. There are times you should condemn one side but you don't. Why do you always have to be so diplomatic? Your job is to give helpful advice, not please a certain type of people. What do you have to say to that?
Rita, Dhanmandi, Dhaka.

Dear Rita,
I enjoyed your letter. I try to look at the other side of a story and read between the lines. In doing so it might have appeared that I am deliberately trying to please a "certain type of people". I agree that my answers are sometimes not strong enough. In a column like this I have to be culturally sensitive. Interestingly enough, I have been accused of answering from a "western" liberal viewpoint. What do you say to that?

Dear Mita,
My best friend thinks I am trying to have an affair with her husband. I am happily married with 2 children and am certainly not interested in him. He likes me and jokes a lot because I am his wife's friend. What can I do to stop her from having such foolish thoughts? It is very insulting for me and embarrassing too.
Anonymous, Dhaka.

Dear Anonymous,
Some people are slightly paranoid about their husbands and will not spare their best friends also. This often happens when the husband is very attractive in some ways and is basically due to a sense of insecurity. I am afraid there is little you can do short of severing all relationship with the couple. You could also try and talk to her. It could be possible that her husband in the past has given her reasons to feel insecure. In either case you should not be victimised.

Dear Mita,
I find housework very boring and tedious. My husband expects a perfect home where everything is in place. The food has to be of the best quality and the children always will behave. I have tried to live up to that expectation but cannot. My husband thinks I haven't tried hard enough. What is the solution? Please advise.
Rehnuma, Shegun Bagicha, Dhaka.

Dear Rehnuma,
You can ask Mr Perfect to help you attain the above mentioned near impossible goals. A slightly untidy house where the food is not always gourmet and children who are rowdy once in a while is not a reflection of your inefficiency. The effort, love and care you put behind all that work is what matters and should be appreciated by your husband. Don't feel guilty about not liking housework. I know very few people who do.

WRITE TO MITA

Run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counsellor, assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer, this column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family laws, and social and interpersonal relationships. Please address letters to Mita, The Daily Star, GPO Box 3257 or to 28/1, Toynebe Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.