# Trouble & Strife

The radical feminist magazine

Access: The father threat

Men on menstruation

Photographer in search of an image

Kiranjit Ahluwalia fights for her life

Lesbian vampires bite back

No. 20
£2.50

***Trouble and Strife* is cockney rhyming slang for wife. We chose this name because it acknowledges the reality of conflict in relations between women and men. As radical feminists, our politics come directly from this tension between men's power and women's resistance.**


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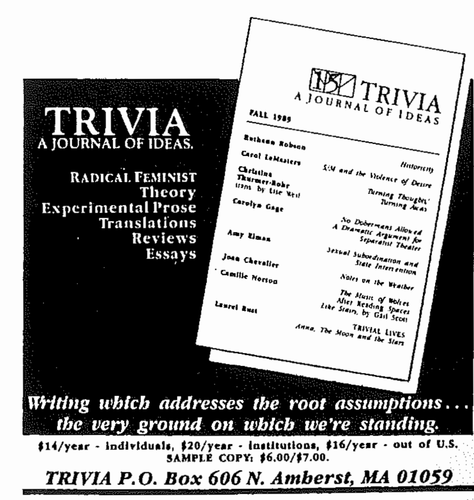


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# Letters

### *West Midlands Anti-Deportation Campaign*

Dear T&S,

A young Asian woman from Tamworth, Staffordshire, faces deportation after failing in her bid to have the House of Lords look at her case. A campaign has now been started to stop the threatened deportation.

Sonia Malhi, 24, is in her present situation because of the problems in her marriage. A campaign spokesperson said, "Sonia had to flee the violence of her husband, but now she finds herself being chased by the Home Office ".

Sonia suffered violence from her husband and his family and was admitted to hospital after a suicide attempt. Since 1987 she has been living with her sister's family. Since the death of her parents in India Sonia has no-one and nothing to return to there. In addition she will suffer the disgrace of being a separated woman.

Until 1988 a person threatened with deportation had the right to appeal to an independent adjudicator who would look into all the circumstances of the case, considering particularly the compassionate factors such as domestic violence, suicide attempts and the death of parents. The 1988 Act took away this right of appeal from everyone except those who had been in the country for seven years.

Sonia Malhi asked the High Court to rule that there should be a right of appeal where the decision to deport was unfair or wrong in law, i.e. where the Home Office exercised its powers improperly. The High Court made this ruling, but the Court of Appeal later reversed it. Although the Act affects thousands of potential deportees, the House of Lords has refused to consider the issue in Sonia's case.

For more information contact: N. Castellino 0922 640424 or Jim Wilson, 021-554 4900, West Midlands Anti-Deportation Campaign

### *Emergency aid in Liberia*

Dear T&S,

As you know, we are a Women's Centre campaigning for the ending of female genital mutilation and all traditional practices that endanger the lives of women such as force feeding, childhood marriage, polygamy and brutal abuse of wives and children. We also provide direct services for battered, destitute, elderly and homeless women; and we campaign vigorously against the spread of AIDS amongst women.

Unfortunately, the civil war in the strife-torn Republic of Liberia in West Africa has further aggravated a difficult situation as some women refugees and children have risked their lives travelling in open boats dug out of tree trunks through the Atlantic Ocean to our Centre. Amongst these women five have been raped, one with a broken bottle , by the rebel soldiers of Charles Taylor's so-called National Patriotic Front (the main rebel group fighting to overthrow President Samuel Doe of Liberia).

According to the women, these atrocities were perpetrated on them because they hailed from the tribe of President Samuel Doe whom the rebels are trying to oust from power as a reprisal against the Liberian Government troops killing of Charles Taylor's tribesmen who are suspected of aiding the rebels.

As women, we cannot remain indifferent to the plight of these unfortunate women, and we cannot turn them away from our Centre. We have therefore been compelled to use all available funds to provide emergency care and services for these our "unexpected strangers" who are suffering from exposure, hunger and disease.

In these circumstances, we are earnestly and sincerely appealing to you to come to our immediate help by donating whatever you can afford for the care of these war victims. For we cannot by ourselves meet with this emergency situation since we are a non-governmental feminist organisation which depends on gifts and donations for the running of our programmes and services. Donations by personal cheques, bank drafts or international money order will be graciously accepted and should be sent by *Registered Mail.*/ Material gifts such as clothing, shoes, medications, etc will also be accepted and their packages should be inscribed "Charity Donation/Not For Sale". Please do not enclose money in packages containing material gifts.

Address all mails to HANNAH EDEMIKPONG (Mrs), c/o Box 185, Eket, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, West Africa.

In sisterhood, Hannah Edemikpong (Contact Person)



# The Family Way

***In the light of the Labour Party's attempts to adopt 'the family' as its new political baby, Jayne Egerton asks, is its recent paper 'The Family Way' at risk of tossing the feminism out with the bath water?***

Both the Tory Party and the Labour Party have made support for the 'family' the key element in their appeal to female voters in the run up to the next election. Labour hopes, effectively, to steal the Tories' clothes in this respect, and is relying upon a feminist authored document to furnish its basic family policy proposals. Anna Coote, Harriet Harman (MP) and Patricia Hewitt co–wrote 'The Family Way' under the auspices of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), a new and independent left wing think tank acting in an advisory capacity to the party. The paper was published strategically in the week prior to the Labour Party conference. Before looking at what 'The Family Way' has to offer women, it could be useful to recap on the current Tory agenda.

A bizarrely comic tribute was paid to Angela Rumbold, the Tory minister for women, after she had opened this year's party conference with a keynote speech on the family. 'Thank you for a wonderful speech, Angela' swooned Dame Margaret Fry, party 'chairman', 'and thank you most of all for being so normal'. The preservation of 'normality' in a climate of moral turpitude was a recurrent theme in the debate which followed. Marital breakdown, single parents, working mothers, homosexuality, illegitimacy, AIDS and neglected and abused children were ritually denounced by speaker after speaker as byproducts of the disintegration of married life and the family unit. Angela Rumbold, however, was not swayed by emotional appeals from Tory fogeys for the enforced restoration of the Persil family. A brisk modernist, she stressed the limitations of any governmental intervention in people's 'private' lives. The party of the family showed itself to be confused and in disarray, as traditionalists and modernists, men and women, slugged it out. If there was any consensus at all it was simply that 'help' for the family needs to be moved to political centre stage and plugged mercilessly in the hope of winning women's hearts, minds and votes.

The conference found itself fraught with political irreconcilables: how could capital's increasing need for women workers be reconciled with an injunction for mothers to stay at home? Should there be more child care provision or a tax and benefit system which discourages mothers from paid employment? Could the Tories crusade in favour of parenthood in stable marriages yet still claim to be the party of 'free choice'? The immediate territory for reform which was marked out, in the end, relates as much to the economic cost of family breakdown as to its political implications. Female poverty costs the government dearly: single parent families receive £4 billion in benefits. In addition, many Tories identify a social cost: they insist that the absence of the natural father, as breadwinner, and disciplinarian, contributes to crime, delinquency and child abuse (by stepfathers and boyfriends). It therefore follows that if only couples could be discouraged from divorce, or, failing that, ex–husbands or biological fathers compelled to shoulder the financial burden of female poverty, then both the Treasury and the ideologues might be satisfied.

### *Non intervention versus social engineering*

Since the conference there have been a couple of major family policy initiatives which would appear, quite neatly, to echo this 'dual' goal. They are currently working their way through

the political machine: a report from the Law Commission on divorce law reform which has just been published could make for easier divorce by removing the 'fault' grounds, but may be tempered by the requirement that divorcing couples have a 'cooling off' period of a year prior to instigating proceedings, during which time they could receive counselling, with a view to patching things up or to reaching agreements on money and children with the minimum of angst. This has yet to be considered in parliament and raises difficult issues for the Tories in terms of 'non intervention' versus 'social engineering'. A White Paper on maintenance which was published in October proposes to establish an administrative, as opposed to judicial, agency to chase recalcitrant fathers (post divorce). This latter development, again a bold step into people's 'personal' affairs, is now a fait accompli. Angela Rumbold will, no doubt, be turning her attention to issues relating to other 'family' issues such as child care and social security in the year ahead, but for the time being, the government has focused its mind on its priorities for the family.

Such reforms do not ignite the passions of the more zealous brand of family fundamentalists. Their myopic focus on sexual 'deviancy' as the main enemy of the family fuelled the passage of Section 28 of the Local Government Act. Local council adoption policies look set to be their latest target. An Early Day Motion (EDM) has been tabled in the House of Commons by Harry Greenaway, Tory MP, which abhors the recent decision by Newcastle City Council to place a disabled child with a lesbian couple. It is noteworthy that it has received 30 signatures, double the number for the EDM which precipitated Section 28. It is on the cards that a group of mainly Tory MPs will draft an amendment, in the context of the incipient Adoption Law review, which would forbid local authorities from placing any children with lesbians or gay men. The same forces which mobilised around both the Section as well as the anti lesbian amendment to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill are cranking themselves into gear yet again.

Judy Stevens

## *(Lab)orious competition*

In the wake of such critical Tory manoeuvrings on 'the family', feminists need to remind ourselves of what kinds of changes and policies we would endorse. The Labour Party leadership's achilles heel is its determination to outflank the Tory Party prior to the election. Anything the Tories do they can do better – be it warmongering in the Gulf or squashing the trade union movement. Rarely fond, these days, of questioning the parameters of debate set by the Tories, they vigorously championed themselves as the 'true' party of the family at their annual conference. They focused to a large degree on children's needs and rights, a position which may have been inspired by the IPPR paper. The fact that this paper is so intimately linked to Labour's electoral aspirations might make any feminist (or socialist, for that matter) doubt its capacity to deliver radical policies. Having Neil Kinnock breathing down your neck would be likely to inhibit even the liveliest political imagination. But I would, nevertheless, have expected more and better from these women.

Any social policy proposals conceived in the name of feminism must surely have the empowerment of women as their starting point. 'The Family Way' considers women's interests only as a spin off of children's interests. The entire document is based on the principle of 'welfarism' – that 'children come first'. This principle has always failed to accord women the status of individuals once they become mothers, and to deny that they have rights which are independent to those of their children. It mimics precisely the centrality which the Tories purport to accord to children's welfare, albeit with a socialist feminist gloss. It is not that feminists should ride rough shod over the rights of children, but rather that these should not be granted at women's expense. This paper too readily elides children's and women's interests, as if there is never any conflict between the two. The authors tell us that 'families need strong self reliant women' as if female autonomy is only valuable in so far as it serves children and husbands. It is difficult to distinguish, in essence, this approach from that of the Tories.

## *Labour's 'pretended family'*

The fundamental premise of 'The Family Way' is that social policy needs to be rooted in the recognition that the family is socially constructed rather than naturally preordained. The authors begin with a historical analysis of left wing and right wing approaches to the family in the recent past, followed by an account of the changing patterns of family life over the past twenty years. The paper asserts, uncontroversially, that the Victorian middle class ideal is long since dead and that cohabitation and single parenthood are now the order of the day. It argues that the Right still harks back to this model, thus stigmatising the many who live in non traditional families, whereas the Left (Labour Party left) has been moving in the direction of endorsing 'equality and choice'. Before long it becomes obvious that this is a selective and sanitised history; there are already some startling omissions. The Conservative government's attacks on lesbian and gay rights do not merit even a cursory mention, nor does the increasing visibility of lesbian families. The fact that the Right has manipulated public anxiety about AIDS to legitimate homophobia and reassert traditional family values is similarly overlooked. It would be disingenuous of any of us to attribute these omissions to lack of space. Lesbian mother, for instance, is only two words. Nor does it seem likely that the omission of such crucial issues was a teensy oversight. We are talking here about a serious failure of political nerve, a failure which informs the entire document.

The authors would have us believe that non heterosexual families are implicitly covered by reference to non traditional families. These are not the times (if they ever were) when lesbians, or gay men, need 'implicit' support. Anna Coote has attributed their failure to cover Section 28's assault on 'pretended families' to not having closely followed the political debate at the time. The authors must clearly have imbibed a very powerful sleeping draught order that period. It is a curious state of affairs when socialist feminist policy makers claim to know nothing about a historically unprecedented, parliamentary attack on lesbians' rights to be parents. the absences in the historical overview predetermine the paper's subsequent content. There is no mention, for instance, of lesbians' loss of their children in custody cases; and when it comes to policy recommendations in the areas of parental leave and access to fertility services, it is spelled out that they are referring to heterosexual couples only. Single women are not even mentioned as the possible beneficiaries of fertility clinics. Perhaps this is because the authors have chosen to give so little attention to women who have families outside of a heterosexual relationship, unless they can be represented as the unfortunate victims of circumstance. The paper does, at points, comment on the abuse of women and children

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which is perpetuated by a frightening number of fathers, yet it finds itself incapable of validating the alternatives which some women have chosen. There is a sustained rebuttal of the links which are made between single parenthood and every manner of social evil, but no real attempt to positively take issue with the 'families need fathers' position.

## *Money matters*

At least some of the policy changes which are suggested in the later parts of the paper, particularly those in the areas of child care and benefits, would undoubtedly be welcomed by many women. Any moves to empower women financially and reduce their double work burden are a good thing. But the authors also aim to bring men back into the bosom of the family, from which they claim they have been exiled by the world of work for too long. The Tories are condemned for highlighting the financial role of the father at the expense of his potential emotional role. There is repeated mention of the fact that half of all divorced fathers fail to keep in touch with their children two years after the marriage has broken down, which is argued to be a consequence of their failure to build lasting bonds with their children. The authors would like to see social policy shaping men's behaviour – if men had access to flexible working and parental leave surely this would encourage them to be more caring and committed? The problem is that there is no evidence to suggest that men in significant numbers do relish these kinds of changes. The voices of men have been remarkably absent in campaigns for shorter working days and nursery provision. Social policy could, of course, facilitate some changes in individual men but its power is exaggerated by this document. Many unemployed men have little contact with their children, a reality implicitly denied by the authors' thesis. Fathers still often conceive their role as being about power rather than responsibility, and it will take more than a little tinkering with social policy to challenge this state of affairs. The authors should, perhaps, have looked at other historical attempts to manipulate people's behaviour via social policy: the Cuban family code is a fascinating example of a failed attempt to encourage men to share domestic chores. Let's none of us underestimate the resilience and power of the roles ascribed to men and women.

As divorce and maintenance are two key areas which the government has chosen to focus on it is worth looking at how these same issues are addressed in the paper. They oppose proposals to institute an enforced 'cooling off' period on the grounds that this is coercive and potentially dangerous for women and children who have been exposed to violence. This seems fair enough. But they endorse proposals to move towards a system of fault free 'morally neutral' divorce where both partners are agreed that is what they want. This seems problematic to the extent that it depoliticises women's disappointment with marriage. Most women initiate divorce and do so on the ground of 'unreasonable behaviour'. It would be acceptable in circumstances in which the break up is amicable, the women are financially independent and there are no children. But I cannot see how it would benefit women in other circumstances. It is odd that all the inequalities between men and women that the paper refers to throughout are suddenly lost sight of when it comes to divorce.

The paper also, in principle, supports family courts and conciliation services in order to reduce conflict and guarantee the interests of the children. Such proposals raise exactly the same problems as the introduction of fault free divorce across the board. I do not want to see women reaching 'negotiated' agreements which are against their interests, within forums which are unable to address the fundamental power imbalances in most marriages. There is also the danger that family courts, like family therapy, would decriminalise men's violence. When it comes to maintenance, the authors are, broadly speaking, in favour of an agency to chase up errant fathers, unless naming the father would compel women to have renewed contact with men who have been abusive (I would have liked the authors to name rape and incest in a more upfront way here). But what of situations in which women simply have no desire to have a dependent relationship with men and would prefer to be dependent on the state? What of women who have used known donors in order to get pregnant and do not wish to seek money from them? These are dilemmas the authors do not recognise. In fact, women's financial independence, though theoretically central to the document, is never tackled at heart.

The piecemeal benefit and taxation reforms which the paper suggests cannot tackle the mutual dependency which is enshrined within the marriage contract. Until women have an independent, viable income either from work or, less satisfactorily, the state, there will be no radical changes. The authors refuse to critique marriage as an institution which creates a legal relationship which systematically disadvantages women (and any 'alternative' family types). The abolition of the married men's tax allowance, though better than nothing, is not enough and never will be. In the end, the authors would have to look at the entire structure of marriage if they were to take so many of the problems which they identify really seriously. But they fight shy of recommendations which go beyond the existing legal framework. There is a further problem in the single minded focus on family income, social support and the relationship between work and family (the three main areas in which reforms are suggested). So many other policy areas impact on women's lives, i.e. employment, housing and immigration. The effect of syphoning off family policy from all these other areas is that it unwittingly seems to reproduce the privatised notion of family life which the authors identify as a conservative approach.

If there is any lesson to be learnt from the inadequacies of 'The Family Way' it is the hopelessness of any attempt to produce bold and innovative reforms in family policy with one eye on the approval of the Labour Party leadership. This is a tepid and uninspired document which, ultimately, cannot engage with the inequalities between men and women which it is forced to acknowledge. It will not cause offence to Kinnock et al, and the fact that it offends, disappoints and betrays those of us who are seriously interested in challenging men's power in the family is clearly not a major concern of the authors. □

Judy Stevens

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# Women on the Verge

***After conversations with Debbie Clarke, Mo Ross and Avan Wadia, Sophie Laws reports on Shanti Women's Counselling Service, Brixton, South London, their innovative work and belief that psychotherapy has something to offer in the face of poverty and oppression.***

Feminists have always understood that there is a close connection between women's individual mental suffering and women's oppression. In the 'first wave' of organised feminism, women like Charlotte Perkins Gilman[1] looked at their own 'illness', and at their treatment, and saw how the doctors were trying to soothe them into submission. In the 'seventies the slogans "Don't get mad, get angry" and its still more bitter sister "Don't get mad, get even" adorned many a kitchen wall.

For many women, it was in making the connection between what they had seen as unique personal pain and a system of oppression, or perhaps several systems of oppression, generating both pain and some self-defeating ways of dealing with pain, which marked the beginning of their emergence as feminists. For many of us, feminism has been therapeutic. For some this led to a position against therapy, seeing it as being about adjusting the woman to the situation rather than about changing the world.

But women continue to suffer far more often than men from depression and anxiety, and some women go over the edge into what this society (under its breath) calls madness. What help is there then? The psychiatric system, while not untouched by new ideas, remains a very unsafe place for most people. Private psychotherapy, a popular profession amongst middle class London feminists, is expensive: £20 to £25 per hour, and you may find yourself going twice a week, once you get into it. Some therapists operate a sliding scale, but it doesn't slide down low enough to make private therapy an option for most women – and who wants to bargain over what they should pay another woman for her work?

When a woman is in a serious crisis, the old choices remain – the GP, leading maybe to a psychiatric referral and nearly always drug treatment; self-help groups of various sorts, often selling very specific solutions; going home to mother and hoping to recover by oneself. The community around her may try to support her, but they will still have only their own resources to draw on, and the strain on others can be devastating. Few private therapists will even see someone who carries a label from the psychiatric system – but someone who is too distressed to hold down a job would be unlikely to be able to pay for psychotherapy in any case.

It is across this bleak scene that Shanti, a Women's Counselling Service in Brixton, seems like such a breath of fresh air. Shanti is a rare service within the NHS, providing free, brief, psychotherapy to women resident in the West Lambeth Health Authority area. The workers are all women, but diverse in other respects – in culture, ethnicity, age and sexuality. Shanti prioritises women who would have difficulty getting good access to other services: ethnic minority women, lesbians, older women, working class women and women with disabilities. There is a crèche where women can leave their children while they see the counsellor. An individual assessment of one to one and a half hours can be offered to any woman who lives in the catchment area and is over 16. That assessment is a chance for the woman to find out about Shanti and the service on offer, as well as for the counsellor to assess her as a potential client. Following this, the group of counsellors meet and discuss how best to proceed. If they feel Shanti can help the woman, they will usually offer 16 sessions of individual psychotherapy. Shanti also runs a befriending service, and some therapy groups.

Women go to Shanti because they are stressed, distressed, in turmoil over what they are currently facing. It may be that something has happened which means that their feelings are less certain or less clear than previously. Change or uncertainty can bring up issues which derive from poverty, poor housing, abuse, perhaps dislocation across continents. Often women's problems may have to do with the difficulties their parents had previously: loss and change in parental figures are common experiences.

In studying depression in women, Brown and Harris[2] found that one of the factors which seemed to protect women, including women with plenty of material problems, was an intimate, confiding relationship – whether with a partner or with someone else. In therapy one of the important things which happens is the building of a relationship of trust between the counsellor and the client. This should enable the client both to look at difficult feelings in the safety of that situation, and, in a sense, to practise sharing feelings and developing trust with another person. This can help her to make relationships with other people in which she succeeds in getting her own feelings listened to.

One of the things the counsellors at Shanti see as special is that the counsellors see their own life experience as part of their training. They also work within a political analysis of what makes a woman a woman in the external world, and how this is taken in by women. For example, Mo says, "for a black woman, seeing how we have internalised how society has decided what we are to be as black women: we don't just look at the external as a political analysis would: we don't just look at the internal as a straight psychoanalytical psychotherapist would, we look at the interaction between the two".

Shanti workers see who is delivering the service as extremely important, and the first assessment always includes a negotiation between the counsellor and the client as to what the background of a particular counsellor might mean to the client. Out of that negotiation it may be agreed that, for example, a Latin American woman will work with a Latin American woman, or a lesbian with a lesbian. This, they believe, can help women to look at the issues they have about their own ethnic identity and how they see themselves as women.

Shanti takes psychotherapy to a population of women who are rarely offered it. Do they welcome it, or is psychotherapy a middle-class way of dealing with problems? Mo turns the question back, to look at it another way: who says this is a middle-class thing? Maybe Freud and Co hijacked something ordinary people did all the time anyway. After all, at bottom psychotherapy is simply about talking to someone who "will not judge you, not lash you down with blame, or top you up with guilt, not tell you to pull yourself together, or pull yourself up by your socks, but give you a sympathetic hearing". That has a history, with roots much wider than the middle class.

The Shanti workers are angered by the idea behind this suggestion, that you need to reach a certain level of 'civilisation' to feel angst, to feel psychic pain: a racist, classist justification for treating working class people in appalling ways. There is, they say, an entrenched class system within the mental health services which assumes that working class or black women's problems are basically all materially-based, while those of middle-class women are more subtle and internal.

These issues are reflected in various ways in Shanti's own work. They offer only short term therapy. Sixteen weeks is a very short time in terms of the expectations of the psychotherapy world, and can feel like obliging women to 'make do'. But on the other hand, most people don't at all expect to be in therapy for years. So while the short-term work is partly a matter of making their resources stretch to as many women as possible, they feel that it also, in practice, makes the service more accessible, since many women would themselves feel that a few months is quite as much time and energy as they can devote to therapy. Their experience is that women make very good use of their 16 sessions.

Shanti's location, in a council block near the centre of Brixton, means that they do not vanish completely from women's lives after the therapy is over. Workers frequently bump into ex-clients in the street. The community location has its hazards, though. There are moments in life when a counsellor would really rather not bump into her clients!

So how did Shanti come into being, and what effect does it have that it is part of a Health Authority? The project was initiated by Caroline Langridge, an innovative General

Manager of West Lambeth Health Authority's Community Unit, in 1987. Funding was sought from the Inner City Partnership scheme, for a project modelled on the White City Counselling Project. Its original name is often quoted by Shanti workers, as symbolic of the Health Authority's attitude to many projects: Mental Illness Primary Prevention Project (MIPPP). As with so many projects, the early planning seems to have amounted to writing two sides of A4 for the grant application.

The original idea was for this MIPPP to be located on the Stockwell Park Estate, and to serve only that estate. Avan recalls that no research was done into what the community might want or need – certainly the women on the estate were never asked. In particular the needs of the Bengali and Vietnamese communities were not considered at the planning stage, leaving Shanti with difficulties in meeting their particular needs. The local community, not surprisingly, resented the implication that their estate had special mental health problems.

At another level, there was resentment among some local activists based on a perception that the Health Authority had succeeded in winning money which might otherwise have gone to voluntary sector groups. Some people took the line: "we're not crazy, what we need is better housing" – not seeing the creative possibilities of such a service.

The present Shanti group believe the original plan was built on a misconception of 'community' as existing in one small geographical area. Communities, for example the Latin American community or the lesbian, or black lesbian communities, work through friendship and family networks which in practice now bring women into Shanti from all over the area. The boundary was finally set to cover the whole of West Lambeth District Health Authority, a narrow strip from the river at Waterloo, through Brixton to Streatham.



At the start, the Shanti workers had to struggle against being seen by the Health Authority as nutty, aggressive women. Initially everyone could project their fantasy of what a women-only service would be like onto Shanti. When Debbie and Avan first visited the Health Authority's offices, they were told (joke) that the offices were for men only. Their regular open days have dispelled some of the nonsense, and they are held in some regard by local GPs and social workers, as well as women who recommend the service to their friends.

### *Internal structure*

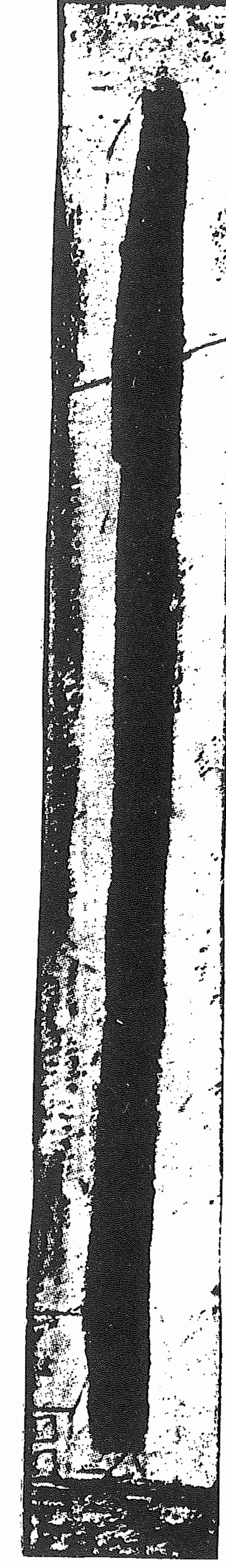
It was a conscious aim of the managers who appointed Shanti's workers to put together a group of diverse ethnic origins. The present workers refer back often to a remark made by one of their managers: "Well, we got the ethnic mix right". This symbolises to them how little the Health Authority managers thought about the difficulties experienced by the group in trying to work out how to deal with the differences between them properly. Mo is reminded of Madeleine Bell's song about the "melting pot" – the blurring of ethnic differences as the ideal. "Garbage", she says – no thought was given to the implications for the group of people who would have to act out being their "proper ethnic mix". The power relationships of the outside world appear regularly as issues amongst the staff group, and in clients' and others' assumptions. If alliances emerge between individual workers in the group which follow lines for example of ethnicity or of sexuality, they are likely to be seen as particularly threatening by others. Shanti's workers have struggled with these issues constantly within the group, and have learnt a lot, but the issues, inevitably, remain unresolved.

Shanti exists within the NHS, an extremely hierarchical bureaucracy, where everyone is paid according to their place within the professional hierarchies. Counsellors may be qualified psychologists, psychiatric nurses or social workers, with further training in psychotherapy. Asked about their internal structure Avan says they "try to work as a collective". The obvious contradictions are too tender to discuss on the day I visited. The creche workers, not seen as particularly important by the managers who planned the service, have worked hard to gain a place within the staff group.

The women at Shanti often feel that they survive despite the Health Authority rather than because of it. The problems created by working within the NHS are very raw at Shanti at present. Last year, Shanti's special ICP funding finished, and it was only after a great struggle that short-term continuation of funding was won. This will be under threat again soon. Thus a major potential benefit for workers of being 'part of the system' – a secure future income – has never been forthcoming. They feel misunderstood and undervalued by their managers. West Lambeth Health Authority has massive financial problems, and has recently been obliged to impose wave after wave of cuts upon its service – Lambeth, the local authority, is also in trouble, and unlikely to be able to bail out either individual clients or 'community care' services, whatever its wishes. Shanti workers sometimes wonder if the project would have fared better in the voluntary sector. But it has to be said that most voluntary sector groups in the area are also in great difficulty; many workers have been continually on one month's notice this year, as the Council seems constantly on the verge of cutting even its promised funding to the voluntary sector.

The good times are when someone bumps into an ex-client looking so different they hardly recognise them, or when someone gets a card in thanks for help they have given; the simple fact of being "all girls together". It is good to hear about clients who move on, make changes: new jobs, perhaps, or new children, and feeling better with them. Many people are interested in their work, and they have had many visitors.

One of my concerns is about what happens to women seen as really 'mad' rather than depressed or distressed. Shanti's counsellors are aware of their limitations, and agree that at times, they have not been able to take on all the women who come to them – particularly those defined as too 'mad' for many psychotherapists to take on. The brief psychotherapy they offer would not be sufficient to help all women.



1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Virago Press 1981). First editition, 1899, USA, Boston, Small, Maynard and Co. From the *New England Magazine*, Jan 1892.

"John (my husband) is a physician, and *perhaps* – (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind) – *perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster . . .

"There comes John, and I must put this away, – he hates to have me write a word."

2. G.W. Brown and T. Harris, *Social origins of depression: A study of psychiatric disorders in women* (London: Tavistock, 1968).

Shanti believe this can be the result as much of damage caused by these women's history of abuse within the psychiatric system as of their individual problems. But they will see any woman from their catchment area for an assessment – they do not judge a woman by any label applied by the person referring them. While someone else may suggest Shanti to a woman, she will have to take the initiative to arrange the first visit herself. They judge that they probably do see women who might be turned away by other therapists, and are aware that what they can do is limited. Shanti certainly see women who have begun to 'break down' before they begin work with them, and others who go through this during therapy.

Shanti are also aware of the criticism that they might only see the 'worried well'. They challenge the suggestion that only people who are 'really ill' merit attention. Such an approach presumably also favours waiting till a major crisis is reached before giving any help. On the other hand, they say that "the women we see have had lots and lots of pain, sometimes at the very start of their lives, sometimes before they even start their lives, because of the pain their carers, whoever they are, have experienced – pain to body and spirit".

### Future plans?

Avan, the Co-ordinator, is leaving for another job, and gave notice the day I visited for this interview. This had brought up very sharply the issue of Shanti's future, which is always there in the background. Will Shanti survive? What sort of future do its workers want to see? Looking at Shanti in November 1990, they see some major successes and some problems. Mo sees the idea of working in a women-only setting certainly as a success, but as a black woman she feels that "the goal of working out positively what it means for such a diverse group to work together has at times seemed elusive".

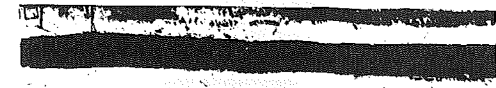
Debbie points out how difficult it is, in the face of an insecure future, to believe that all their effort to work together is worth it. If it's only for six months, is it worth all the hard work? Permanent funding would at least give Shanti a solidity which has never been there for them so far.

Shanti is evaluating its work – to defend it, of course, but also because they want to produce a formal published analysis of their results, not just rely on anecdotes. Initial results indicate that they are reaching working class women, some ethnic minority women and lesbians as well. One worker is Chilean, and can help women whose first language is Spanish or Portuguese, but there is still a lack of provision for Vietnamese and Bengali women; they are seeing fewer older women than they would like to, and the service has not proved very accessible to women with disabilities. The building was and remains inaccessible to wheelchair users, and the workers are self-critical about how they carry their own able-bodied assumptions with them, allowing disabled women to fall off the bottom of their agenda.

Our discussion about Shanti's service to lesbians was, worryingly, overshadowed by anxiety created by the recent 'exposé' in the *Sun* of a workshop for women who were questioning their sexuality run by the Women's Therapy Centre. That lesbian workers were employed at Shanti was the result of luck rather than policy on the part of those making the appointments. Yet it is vital that women have access to lesbian counsellors, and do not have to choose between either risking having their sexuality seen as pathological, or letting it be invisible, unmentioned. At Shanti, women can bring all their business to be explored. Having 'out' lesbian counsellors at Shanti has enabled all the counsellors, and clients, whether identified as lesbian or heterosexual, to explore their feelings about relationships with women.

The fear is that funding will be withdrawn arbitrarily, regardless of the value of the work. One can defend Shanti in many languages: as political work to help women to resist many layers of oppression; as a preventative service aimed at some of the most 'disadvantaged' groups in this society, based as it is in a classically 'inner city' area; as a way of keeping people out of psychiatric hospital; as an economical way of keeping a whole community ticking over, for too much depends on the mental health of women. It would be a tragedy for this service to be lost.

For feminists, Shanti defines one model for providing therapeutic help to women which could be part of the solution, rather than yet another part of the problem. □





# Surviving the Blues

***Young and female in the 1980s. Louise Donald analyses her experience of being Scottish in England, the meaning of rebellion in the Thatcher decade and finding a feminist voice in which to speak of such things.***

This year I am going home. That's not exactly true. I am very definitely not going 'home' as in 'Wishaw, a small town near Motherwell, between Glasgow and Edinburgh, in Scotland' home. That place wasn't home even though I was born there and lived there for the first seventeen years of my life. I shall return to Glasgow, where I feel 'at home', which is a completely different thing, I suppose. I haven't lived in Scotland for twelve years. It's strange to see that figure written down. I regard myself as Scottish, yet I have chosen to live down South throughout the last decade, the '80s. True, all my essential family still live in Scotland: my younger sister Pat in Glasgow, my older brother Simon in Edinburgh, and my mum and dad continue to live in Wishaw, as they have done all their lives. I live down here in London, acting the part of the refugee and harking back to Scotland, all things Scottish and particularly all things Glaswegian. 'Oh, the people! Oh, the city! Oh, the SNP! Oh, it's so Labour-controlled! Oh, to be back home!' The truth is plain for all to see, and occasionally someone asks the pointed question, 'Why are you hesitating?'

There is something I have to ask myself: 'Why did I leave?' There were reasons, and they had a great deal to do with the fact that I am a woman, even if I didn't fully recognise that at the time. More than that – I would have denied that my gender had anything whatsoever to do with anything whatsoever. I remember tentatively suggesting in 1978 that Mrs Thatcher was good news, because she was a woman, but for God's sake I was only seventeen, and that was the full extent of my political analysis.

I have to believe that Glasgow will not be the same as Wishaw, now in the 1990s, otherwise I have no choice but to remain in London. Wishaw is a small town in Strathclyde, opposite Ravenscraig, the steel works which occasionally make the news, as part of Mrs Thatcher's proposed shutdown of the steel industry. The glow of Ravenscraig's furnaces can be seen from Wishaw Golf Club, at the foot of the town. It was once a mining village around which Wimpey homes were built – a place people pass through on their way to somewhere else: Motherwell or Hamilton or Glasgow. There was little prosperity. We lived in one of the posher streets, Coltness Road, in my great-granny's house.

There was **nothing** to do in Wishaw. *Emmanuelle I* and *II* played at the pictures until I left, as far as I could tell. You adored the Bay City Rollers, or you were nobody. Everyone read *Jackie*, unless you were male, and every Saturday we hit the Venturers Disco in the Community Hall. The last number was always a 'Moon Dance' (slow song) and if you hadn't got off with someone by that time, you exited pretty fast. At school, you *never* put your hand up to answer a question in class, because that meant you were a swot and a snob. I was seen as both. The teacher's job was to force you to speak.

I just couldn't get a foothold in Wishaw – I had to separate myself, because I wasn't entitled to be part of it. The boys were nicknamed 'Shug', or 'Rusty' or 'Mongo'; they had names, identities. The girls were a 'lumber', or they were 'hackit' (someone to get off with/considered ugly, definitely *not* someone to get off with). Potential lumbers who became actual lumbers then became 'whoors' (whores). There was little or no in-between status, as far as I

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could tell. This system had a certain irresistible logic to it. I, as a woman, couldn't challenge the status quo. The last thing you should do was stand out in any way. Over time I became overwhelmed by the feeling of being used: picked up, used, dropped, used up. Sexual contact was furtive and unpleasant, saying 'No' was a contravention of every unwritten rule. It was why you were there, and so what!

### *Breaking the rules*

Until I met Elaine. Together we could stand out, we could be bad. We determined to use boys, harder and faster than they could use us. It couldn't work, of course, and it didn't. It isn't enough just to break the rules, you have to establish a new order, something I was extremely slow to learn. She and I became more and more isolated, until we were known as the 'punks' and the 'lezzies'. Neither was meant as a term of endearment. We relished rejection, cutting our hair with garden scissors to look like Patti Smith, coating our eyes with kohl and wearing camouflage jackets with boxers' boots. Mum and Dad were well behaved during this period: they just closed their eyes when we came into the room. We invented our own initiation ceremonies, known only to us, and carried them out in the fetid secrecy of Elaine's bedroom. They were meant as symbols of our disconnection from the surrounding social structure, marks of the 'outsiders', emblems of our 'splendid isolation'. They were, in fact, a form of self-mutilation. To this day I have scars on my upper arms and the backs of my hands, where Elaine and I tore our flesh with broken glass.

I was seventeen and, unlike most at Coltness High School, I had the chance to go to university. The plan was to move as far away as possible; down South, if that's what it took. Anywhere as long as it wasn't this grey, dull, soulless landscape. Sheena Easton, from Bellshill, just around the corner, had the same problem, I suspect. Only she found Esther Rantzen, quickly followed by an American accent.

I went to York. Why, oh why, did I choose York University? Failed Oxbridge candidates abounded, and they were strange and alien creatures indeed. I immediately resorted to stereotype, getting excessively drunk on the first night and collapsing in a warren of corridors, unable to make myself understood. I failed every social examination within days. 'And Louise, did you try for Oxbridge?' they mumbled politely. Blank expression: 'Where's that?'

I didn't look right, I didn't sound right. I couldn't find anyone from Wishaw. I was the stranger. I wasn't allowed to forget it either. Received Pronunciation voices quoted Shakespeare's sonnets and picked texts apart in plummy tones, with sweetly rounded vowels. My vocal contributions at seminars and tutorials cut through the vapours of mellifluous harmonies, sounding harsh and jagged, even to my own ears. I had never actually heard my voice before. Now it echoed.

During one particular seminar, I replied to a point made. There was a resounding minute-long silence. Then the lecturer asked: 'Where do you come from, Miss Donald? Are you Irish?' The content of my comment didn't matter. It went unheard. I went unheard. The accent spoke volumes for them. It meant 'rough', or 'uneducated', or 'intellectually unsophisticated', or 'aggressive'. Eventually my accent was deafening to me. Speaking became an almost 'out-of-body experience', as I struggled to separate my voice from what I recognised as myself. I spoke less and less.

This was not an entirely personal issue, although it certainly had personal implications. Wishaw had led me to believe that my sights, as befitting a woman, should remain at some ill-defined but lowly level. I imagined that university would liberate me. I was nervous, but confident. I was greeted with a different sort of diminishment, and my sense of self seriously faltered. Reading seminar papers induced a panic I had never before experienced. People turned and focused, and I felt myself disappear. I was invisible as an individual, and publicly too. It wasn't just *my* voice, *my* accent, that were being ignored, but an experience of a culture different to the one being celebrated around me. I felt shame in my collusion with those who did not and would not understand. My vowels became rounder, my intonation less 'charmingly lilting' and my accent less 'quaint'. At the end of my first year I returned to Wishaw with an affected lisp, such was my confusion. I did not have the strength to insist on my culture as something legitimate or important, and so it gradually became submerged. I learned nothing.

That's not absolutely true. I learned little academically. I managed to manoeuvre through

Clare Harris

the course as anonymously as possible, and emerged at the end with a degree: a peculiar fact in itself. But I was exposed for the first time in my life to the word 'feminist', and had the chance to meet a few of them. Describing those women as 'them' makes them sound as though they were completely unlike myself. I did feel we had nothing in common, that their histories somehow made it possible for them to be feminists, but that mine couldn't accommodate the theory or the practice. Feminism seemed a student preoccupation, and could never be adapted to life in Wishaw. I agreed with almost all they said. I was pro-abortion rights, I knew that women were regarded as inferior, I saw men dominating everything, and yet . . . I wouldn't call myself a feminist.

I was firmly ensconced in a pattern of setting myself apart, of rebellion, that was hard to break. I wasn't going to join any club that would have me as a member. I could beat men at their own game, and I didn't need other women, with their support groups and never-ending sympathy and understanding, to help me. I was tough. I could do it alone.

### *Beyond university*

At the end of the three years, all of the few friends I had made in York moved to London. I traipsed after them, clueless as to what my next step should be. They were going into publishing, and taking secretarial or journalist courses, or going on to drama school. I did the rounds, dossing on everybody's floor (they all seemed to have a home in London) for months. There was a particularly curious stage during the Falklands War, when I camped at No. 11 Downing Street for a week. Geoffrey Howe's son was a friend of mine at York University. At this point I was a punk, with spiky, viciously back-combed blonde hair and a tendency to sport a particular pair of very attractive blue trousers, which unfortunately I had singed at the crotch with an iron: a large triangular singe in the exact formation of public hair. The security police, who stood constantly on guard, never failed to inspect my person whenever I returned to No. 11. The Falklands War was hotting up, and Mr Haig, the US Secretary of State for Defence, was in negotiations with Margaret Thatcher. I sauntered down Downing Street in my short-sighted haphazard way, only to be met by a pack of reporters, awaiting news about war developments from No. 10. There was a most embarrassing scene when I had to knock at No. 10 and wait for an age to be allowed in, so that I could gain access to No. 11. The cameras stopped rolling after they spotted the trousers.

Finally I found somewhere to live in Brixton. This period of my life is hazy and unclear. I was at my lowest ebb; expectations were nil, commitment of any kind was unthinkable. I seemed determined to realise an ambition of passing through my life and leaving no trace. I despised the ambitions and material success of my friends, convinced that I would remain unique in my self-abnegation and in touch with the 'reality' of the world. There was no coherence to my position, although I would have described myself as a socialist. I waitressed for a number of years, rising late in the day and working late into the night. The restaurant was a disco/fast food nightclub which stayed open until 3 a.m. The waitresses all wore black, with short skirts: our uniform. There was no basic pay, we depended on service and tips. This only made financial sense on Friday or Saturday night. On weekdays we would make £10 for eight hours' work, cash in hand. There was a central unit of women who supported each other when nights were particularly bad, and a peripheral group who never settled in and left soon after starting. The cashier was a man called Allie, who remained quiet and serene in the midst of a nightclub's sweat and noise. Admittedly he was safe in a protective little booth, but when we needed solace he was there to listen and comfort. He told us tales of fasting and purging on mountain tops and of the people of Brazil demonstrating against rises in public transport fares by walking to work *en masse*. Some of the other women saw him as a kind of 'wise man', but I remained sceptical.

I was getting stick at work from our ex-SAS manager because of my hair, which was matted with hair spray and stood approximately a foot above my head by now. He considered it unfeminine and too aggressively punky. I saw it as a symbol of resistance. Practically, it certainly was a problem in the rain, when it would unstick and collapse irretrievably. I whinged to Allie about the fascist manager and his sexist comments. Allie had a different analysis: I was constrained and limited by my hair and should shave it off and move on. 'What utter crap!' I thought. 'What is the stupid old hippy talking about?'

But something rang true. My 'symbols of resistance', which encompassed everything from my hair and clothes to my twilight and subterranean existence, had effectively held me motionless for five whole years. The anger and fear I felt were expressed in my appearance and the occasional outburst of uncontrollable rage. That anger was justified and necessary, but I had separated myself from the world I wanted to act in and change. Instead of shouting aloud and making demands, I was sullen and incoherent. I edged myself into corners of employment where I would have least effect, bemoaned my sorry lot and retired to bed, satisfied that I was being ignored.

My next job was as a cleaner. I have to confess that this was no ordinary cleaning job. An acquaintance of mine had been working for the Olivier family, helping them to clean and prepare their new house in London. He had to leave the country and suggested that I replace him. I was introduced to their interior designer, who was to give me the once-over. I got the job. Thus began two years as cleaner for the Olivier family. I was cleaning the 'best' toilets, polishing the 'best' silver, and nobody talked to me as though I was the cleaner – we would chat over lunch together – but it was more invisibility. As a cleaner, when you're working and 'someone' walks into the room, you leave the room.

I don't know why it was that my friends in London and my employers were from a class of extreme privilege. It had something to do with going to York and meeting the people I did; time and place. It also had something to do with the fact that somewhere along the line I had bought into their world and its value system. I had attempted to make myself acceptable to them. I certainly couldn't bear to be rejected by them. To an extent I had embraced those evaluations I rejected most volubly. I felt inadequate because I believed I was less than them.

I was struggling to pay bills and rent, because cleaners' wages don't go far: 2.50 per hour. Well, after all, most cleaners are women, aren't they? What would they do with a living wage?

The Oliviers' housekeeper was a young Scottish woman, from the Islands. She initially seemed wary and suspicious of me, but we became friendly over time. After some months she confessed that her mistrust of me was due to the reference I had been given by the interior designer: 'Her name's Louise. She's Glaswegian, and seems a bit rough and common.' Hold on a minute! I've refined my accent, for God's sake. I've been to university. Some of my friends are quite posh. It was as if I was branded. And after all, I was just the cleaner. It all added up for him: Glaswegian = thick, cleaner = thick – in other words, totally thick. I realised then that I couldn't 'buy' into this class of manners and money, even if I wanted to. I needed their approval less and less, and began to feel a stubborn sense of pride about who I was.

His attitude is not exceptional or remarkable in the South of England. It is an expression of a general sense of innate superiority, and our implied inferiority, with all that entails for those at the receiving end. The 'our' may apply to those of a particular class, race or gender. It is the notion that Scots, for example, are not capable of depth of thought or feeling or understanding concerning anything other than our own parochial, and by definition narrow, lives. Our dialect and language, in both common usage and in our art, is granted no worth outside its natural borders – not only that, we are seen as wilful and deliberately obscure if we insist on maintaining it outside those prescribed limits. Except, of course, in the last couple of years, when a few individuals have become quite the trendy thing.

Things were becoming extremely difficult at the Olivier household. Jeannie, the housekeeper, was leaving to set up in business, and they were looking for a replacement. They eventually found one. I knew from the beginning that it meant trouble for me. The new housekeeper had strong 'beliefs' about unemployment and was convinced the three and a half million were scroungers. She had her suspicions about me, and we had some unpleasant exchanges around the question of: 'Why didn't I have a proper job, with my education?' I was a classic example as far as she was concerned. I just didn't want to work, that was the problem. Never mind the fact that I was doing a job she considered far beneath her. I knew I had to get out.

Pat, my sister, was unemployed in Glasgow at this point, but her experience of living on benefit was different to my life on low wages in London. She was living in a flat with five other friends, who were on and off the dole. This meant everyone had access to exactly the same limited resources, and curiously money almost ceased to be an issue. They went to the same pubs and cafes, because that's what

everyone could afford, paid equal shares of the bills and picked up part-time work where they could. They didn't feel exceptional or odd because they were on the broo. Everybody knew the problems involved and there was some mutual support for that.

For my dad, it was different again. He had been made redundant twice already in the '80s, having worked for thirty years. There was no support for him, only an increasing sense of isolation as time went on and the prospect of work retreated further. He was now living on thirty pounds a week.

Maggie Smith, who was a good friend of Joan Plowright (married to Laurence Olivier), often came to stay at their home when she was rehearsing a play in London. We sometimes chatted in the kitchen as I cleaned the kitchen sink or washed their floor. I liked her. Her mother was from Anniesland in Glasgow, and we enjoyed putting on 'funny' Scottish accents together. She recognised the humour, because it was a part of her own history. Finally, she invited me to become her personal assistant and dresser throughout the production of a new West End play. The situation with the new housekeeper had become intolerable so I accepted the job with relief. I didn't like the play, but I loved Maggie. Thus began a stretch in theatre life, once again working late at night and sleeping through the day. I still hadn't emerged from the twilight zone. The job seemed mainly to consist of quick changes behind the scenes and hours of crossword-solving with Maggie, which suited me fine.

In 1987 my dad was made redundant yet again, for the third time. He was beginning to take it personally. Unemployment was a massive problem in Scotland throughout the '80s. Today the Conservatives like to pretend that the Job Club has put paid to all that. Unemployment is apparently not an issue any more. For my own family it wasn't until 1988, when my sister finally entered college, and 1989, when my dad found another job, that we were off the statistics for real. In many parts of Scotland, the dole is as popular as ever. You wouldn't know it from where I sit in London.

It had to happen, I suppose. I was beginning to feel discontented with my self-imposed lot of low wages and even less job satisfaction. I wanted to affirm my existence for a change. I wanted to effect change somewhere in the world, if that was possible. I wanted to speak, but I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to say.

## *Finding feminism*

I applied for the post of School Administrator at the London Contemporary Dance School and got it – a surprise to me, given that I knew zilch about contemporary dance. I wasn't exactly biting my tongue to restrain myself from raising my voice about modern dance technique, but the job gave me the sense that I could function fully and with some confidence. I didn't need to apologise for taking up space any more.

A friend who also worked at the School had recently become involved with the Campaign Against Pornography. She was excited at the prospect of a group of women forming an active campaign which would challenge certain attitudes at the core of our society. The idea that all women were defined as potential 'prey', as illustrated by pornography, simply because of their gender, was about to be questioned – loudly. How could we hope for freedom, in any real sense, when we couldn't get beyond our bodies? How could we believe that anyone heard us in any sphere of our lives, when we were rendered silent about the fundamental lies being told about us? How could we aspire to equality for women of ethnic groups, when they were being represented in completely racist terms by the images and text in pornography?

Her excitement was contagious and I wanted to be part of it. Here was something I wanted to shout and scream about, and I didn't care who heard me.

I had never been actively involved in campaigning before and it was an opportunity to work with women I liked and respected. I got stuck in. Within months it felt as though I had never *not* been campaigning. A full-time and demanding job was supplemented by meetings with never-ending agendas, and leaflet-writing into the night. To be honest, I wasn't up to literature-writing. I saw my role as entertainer for those who were exhausted and doing the real work during our late-night sessions. I watched a lot of television and so I became CAP's media monitor. This felt reasonably safe.

Late one Friday night, I accidentally tuned into the 'James Whale Radio Show'. I couldn't believe my eyes or ears. This man loves to humiliate women. This is his joy and pleasure and forte. He is very good at it. The Media Monitor (note I have gone upper case) immediately rang the Director of CAP; 'I've been monitoring the media. We have to do something, anything, about James Whale. I think we should call "Right to Reply".' 'Okay, Louise. Do it!' What, me? The person who only recently had a severe panic attack at a school faculty meeting? Nobody said anything about Media Participation, only monitoring. Well, I'd monitored, hadn't I? Oh God!

I phoned 'Right to Reply'. Worse was to come – they were interested. I wrote the minute-long video-box monologue, thinking, 'This is okay. Like a passport photo-booth or something. Nothing too exposed.' I took time off work and went to Channel 4 studios, with the support of CAP's Director. They liked the piece, but really wanted to get the Executive Producer of the show into a studio discussion. With me. They wanted someone else to read the video-box, and in the meantime they tried to persuade the makers of 'The James Whale Radio Show' to appear. I prayed that they would fail. I think I looked unperturbed throughout this frantic session. They had no idea what they were dealing with – how could they? I looked normal on the outside. I felt satisfied that they would soon regret putting me through this agony. I would cry on television and then they would be sorry.

I phoned a friend who agreed to come in to read the video section. The researchers said they would call me the next afternoon to let me know if I was due to go on, but it looked unlikely. The programme makers were resisting. I was elated.

On Thursday afternoon *they* were elated. It was on! We would record the discussion the next afternoon. I went to the doctor and begged for beta-blockers, drugs which suppress the physical symptoms of anxiety. The wonderful woman gave them to me.

## *The right to a voice*

Why this long, detailed description of me going on television? It meant I was going to have to speak, out loud, in front of thousands of people. We're not just talking about a seminar paper here, or a ten-sentence-long report at a faculty meeting. The woman whose breath left her body when she was listened to was about to address the nation. (I do know that 'Right to Reply' has a limited audience, but this is how I felt.) The Campaign wouldn't stand for such nonsense. I had to find voice for the women who switched the television off in total incredulity and disgust. For the first time it was important to me that I find the strength to say something and remain in focus.

I didn't feel strong. That evening, myself and a representative from a child abuse study unit met for the first time to go through our material. I know we both wanted to scream with terror, but couldn't allow the fear to take grip, in case we completely unnerved each other.

The next day we met in a café, just before we were due to film. We both took the pills, and entered the studios.

They miked us up, did a voice test. The Executive Producer, our enemy, appeared on the monitor. I remember thinking, 'I can just leave. I won't die, just because I get up and leave.' The programme was 'as live'. I wasn't. I can't remember anything else.

I was joined in the 'hospitality' room by two women from CAP. I had the strongest sensation of love for both of them.

The next afternoon I watched 'Right to Reply'. The Executive Producer was dreadful. We were good! I had won something for other women – and for me.

I am not suggesting that this was some miracle cure. That was it! There you go, a voice. Work for CAP involved many more such sweaty incidents. I consumed a bottle of beta-blockers within a month. *Once* I did a radio interview chemically unaided. I now knew that it was not impossible. Someone – somewhere – had listened, and that counted.

I feel as though I have finally broken through the cocoon which held me warm, but muffled. I seem to be breathing air at last, the medium through which sound waves travel. And I want to go back to Scotland, my home. Not, I hope, for nostalgic reasons. And not without strong reservations. If Scots remain unrepresented and unheard, politically and socially in Britain, then women are equally invisible in Scottish culture (not for want of trying to be seen). We have our own bigotries to combat – and there seems to be a reluctance to expose those prejudices publicly, in case we justify the contempt in which we are held across England. The fact that Scotland has voted in landslide fashion in the last two elections for Labour, and sometimes for the SNP, does not make us a socialist state camping in enemy territory. We loathe the Conservatives, but we are conservative. Nowhere is this more obvious than in prevailing attitudes to women. I established contact in Glasgow with those women who are in the process of naming and debating the issues. But I am optimistic! I don't intend to lose my voice again. □

# Fighting for her Life

***In May 1989 after ten years of brutality Kiranjit Ahluwalia poured petrol on her sleeping husband's feet and set it alight. He died. At the trial Kiranjit pleaded guilty to manslaughter, although she never intended to kill him, simply to do "just enough for him to know what it was like to feel pain". The judge did not accept her defence and called the violence she had experienced "not serious".***

***Kiranjit was found guilty of murder and sentenced for life.***

***Crawley Women's Aid and Southall Black Sisters are co- ordinating a campaign against both her conviction and sentence.***

***An open meeting attended by over a hundred people was held in Crawley in June. The meeting began with a taped message from Kiranjit, which we print here in translation.***

Dear Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all I want to thank you from my heart for taking some of your precious time in order to come to this meeting. Although I cannot be present with you, your loving sympathy gives me courage in enduring this sentence. I will always be obliged to you for having understood my pain and helplessness.

My heart is full of things to say, but it is difficult to decide how and where to start telling my story. My culture is like my blood coursing through every vein of my body. It is the culture into which I was born and where I grew up which sees the woman as the honour of the house. In order to uphold this false 'honour' and 'glory', she is taught to endure many kinds of oppression and pain, in silence. In addition, religion also teaches her that her husband is her God and fulfilling his every desire is her religious duty. A woman who does not follow this path in our society, has no respect or place in it. She suffers from all kinds of slanders against her character. And she has to face all sorts of attacks and hurt entirely alone. She is responsible not only for her husband but also his entire family's happiness.

For ten years, I tried wholeheartedly to fulfil the duties endorsed by religion. I don't wish

to compliment myself but I was a very good daughter-in-law, wife and mother. I tried to make my husband and in-laws happy in every way possible. I put up with everything. But, I also tried several times to escape from the trap of my anguished married life. But each time, my husband and family put pressure on me, in the name of upholding their 'izzat', their honour. The desire to keep up appearances also stopped me leaving. The result – at my age I am undergoing imprisonment in jail; far from my children. Were they at fault that they should have their mother's love snatched from them? Not only have they lost their father's love but their mother's as well.

I didn't even want to become a mother, because I was so unhappy in my marriage. For five years I managed to avoid it. I didn't want my children to have to suffer as well as me. But my mother-in-law's insults and my husband's beatings made me a mother twice over. In my culture, if a woman doesn't have a baby soon after marriage then she has to endure constant taunts. Today, writing all this down, I realise that first marriage was forced on me, then a denial of divorce was forced on me and then motherhood was forced on me. What combination of force and helplessness was it that kept me in a ten year sentence; and now sentences me legally to punish me for who knows how long?

After my marriage I forgot how to laugh. I could not eat or drink when I wanted to; I could not make friends with whoever I wanted to; I could not see my family and other relatives too often – I didn't have permission to. Small things were always flaring up into big fights. It wasn't only me but my small children who suffered as well. They were always scared and cowed down. But even though I tried to compromise as much as I could, I was made use of in every way possible. I could not make either my in-laws or my husband happy.

Today, I have come out of my husband's jail and entered the jail of the law. But I have found a new life, in this legal jail. It's in this cage that I have found a kind of freedom. I have been given love by the officers; love which I never found outside. Meeting others, I had the freedom to talk to them – which when I was free, I never had. I have met many different kinds of people, experienced their environment, and learnt many things. But I am sad that I am not getting a proper education here. This is a world apart from my world. My world was just my home, and my children. That's all.

My greatest sorrow, the punishment inflicted on me, is that I have been separated from my children. I think about them all the time. I cannot eat properly, or sleep properly. They need me and I need them. They are still very little, so I cannot explain things to them. Every time they come here they say, "Mummy, come home". How can I tell them where Mummy is? Or where home is? I have lost everything. I never thought in my wildest dreams that my mistake would have this result. That night, I had lost the strength to reason or think. I never thought that I would be wounded for life. A wound that would never heal.

For ten years, I lived a life of beatings and degradation and no-one noticed. Now the law has decreed that I should serve a sentence for life. *Why?*

No-one asked *why* all this had happened. Though I had two little children, I worked without rest for 50 or 60 hours a week in order to build up my home. *Why would I set fire to that house? Why did everyone use me as they chose?* Up to the point that though I was the mother of two children I couldn't take any decision on my own. I could not even name my children as I chose. This is the essence of my culture, society, religion. Where a woman is a toy, a plaything – she can be stuck together at will, broken at will. Everybody did what they wanted with me. No-one ever bothered to find out what kind of life I was leading after I was married . . . one of physical and mental torture.

Now at least, I am grateful that everyone has tried to understand my pain, to share in it and to continue doing that. From all sides. my friends and relatives are helping me. Even if this meeting does not result in any specific help for me I will not be disappointed. I would never want any sister or friend to ever undergo such suffering. There are countless women who have been subjected to such oppression – there is only one thing that prevents them from challenging or being freed from this kind of married life. That is my society, religion and culture. I will never let this religion and culture influence my children. I will never let them be stifled by the bondage of arranged marriages. I will give them the right to live their own lives.

In jail, I have seen women who fought for their rights. I have seen them making their own decisions. I, too, must become strong to make decisions on my own, for my future. Being in jail, has opened up new possibilities which I never had before. Beyond this I do no t want to say anything more for the moment. Before I end I want to express my heartfelt thanks to Crawley Women's Aid, Southall Black Sisters, National Union of Students, social workers and Crawley probation officers who have helped me in so many different ways. If my words have caused any offence, I ask your forgiveness.

Thank you

Yours faithfully,

Kiranjit Ahluwalia

For more information write to or ring
Southall Black Sisters, 52 Norwood Road, Southall, Middlesex. Tel No: (081) 571 9595;
or Crawley Women's Centre, Barnfield Road, Crawley, West Sussex. Tel no: (0293) 20478

Money is desperately needed as there is no legal aid for appeals. Send donations to the Kiranjit Ahluwalia Campaign, c/o Crawley Women's Centre.

# In Search of an Image

***In words and photographs, Mumtaz Karimjee explores how her creative work reflects her life, identity and politics.***

I describe myself as a photographer particularly challenging what I see as mainstream photojournalism's tendency to reinforce stereotypes under the guise of saying we have to show the news. I believe that there are ways of showing the news that reflect peoples' struggles, that reflect peoples' reality, without constantly reproducing only certain kinds of images. This is what informed my earliest work – pieces on China and then on Palestine. When I think of the Palestinians it's always the terrorist image or the image of war and violence that is shown without any explanation of why there is so much violence in their lives.

In terms of South Asian women I feel that the stereotype created by the dominant mainstream media is closely connected to our historical past as women from countries that were colonised. The justification for a lot of colonial and economic exploitation even today is "we're bringing civilisation, we're going to save these poor victims from their oppressions" – whether they are religious oppressions, specifically patriarchal oppressions or other ones.

In 1985/6 I worked on an exhibition called *Aurat Shakti* with three other women: Amina Patel, Manju Mukherjee and Vibha Osbon. Aurat means woman, it's one of the words for woman in the Northern Indian Sanskrit-based languages. Shakti is female power, a concept that comes from Hindu and particularly Tantric philosophy. So *Aurat Shakti*: women's power. The exhibition consisted of about 24 panels, each giving space to an individual woman or women's group. We interviewed them, photographed them and asked them to give us photographs of themselves at different stages of their lives which we then reproduced and included on the panels. The intention was to create multiple images of ourselves, to show the complexity of our lives and the experience of South Asian women.

What I felt when working on this was that our image as women of South Asian descent in this country can't be separated from the image of women in the Indian subcontinent. I felt it was very, very important to make links. Although our struggles are very separate because we're living in two very different parts of the globe, and our priorities are different because of the different places in which we live, we still have a common thread. The global context for the world is still the western patriarchal context which was the colonial context and today manifests itself in only a slightly different way.

In 1987 my ideas gelled, and I put together a proposal and got my fare paid to go to India for six weeks to begin work on a project I called *My Mothers My Sisters* (what is significant here is who paid my fare: The Women's Solidarity Fund. I've only ever had very small grants from arts organisations.) I went with an open brief. I felt what I had to do first of all was talk to women.

I arrived in India a few months after a sati incident where a young woman had been burnt on the pyre of her husband in Rajastan. I was in a state of shock and felt as though there was no way I could deal with this: it's not my place from the outside to be talking about women in India because they've got to talk about it themselves in the way they want to. But I did talk to lots of women and spent time in Bombay, Bangalore and Delhi and what I found I'd come back with was I think a very powerful set of portraits of women. They are personal to me and I suppose personal to the individual women. That piece is quite big, sixteen or more images, individual portraits to images from a demonstration against sati in Bombay, to portraits of self-employed women who do piece work at home, to craftswomen.

In the process of producing this exhibition I realised I'd left something out of it: myself. When we produced *Aurat Shakti* it wasn't just panels about other women – we also included panels with our own statements about ourselves. Since people often ask me how I cope with being a voyeur because they see my photography as voyeuristic, in my statement I spoke of how I saw my photographic work. I said that my photography was about making visible what would otherwise remain invisible and I made the connection between that and the steps I'd had to take to make myself visible here in the context of racism. One of the ways racism has manifested itself is by making Black people invisible. In my case, I had been sent from Tanzania to boarding school in this country at the age of eleven and then spent a lot of time travelling which felt as though it was the only way I could handle not belonging, not being a visible part of this society, and finally having to make a conscious decision to stop running away any more and choose to make this country my home. That choice involved making myself visible here, demanding and claiming for myself rights that white people seemed to take for granted. That choice meant threatening to take legal action against ILEA for refusing me a grant on the grounds that I had not lived in this country for long enough, was the only way to secure my right to a grant and subsequently challenging the University of Newcastle upon Tyne's employment procedures under the Race Relations Act. Making myself visible here proved quite difficult, it brought up all kinds of conflicts and pointed towards them.

The same issue came up for me as well when working on *My Mothers My Sisters*. What was I doing? Was I just making other women visible? What was my element in this going to be, the element that was personal to me? During the production process I realised that for me personally the question of sexuality was missing, my sexuality. The only way I felt I could incorporate this into the exhibition was through a series of self-portraits, not portraits of other South Asian lesbians. So, my own element in this became *In Search Of An Image*. When the exhibition was first shown it had grown to become *My Mothers My Sisters Myself*, the 'Myself' section being *In Search Of An Image*. It was first shown as part of Spectrum Women's Photography Festival in October 1988 at Sisterwrite.

My work often grows out of reading and collecting material. It is usually a combination of image and text, the text giving the viewer a context in which to look at the images, or provoking the viewer to question how she looks at the images by juxtaposing them with the text in such a way that the text does not provide simple explanations.

There was one book that really helped me through my visit to India in coming to terms with the amount of violence towards women that I was constantly being bombarded with, and my own role as a photographer. I'd come across Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands*, and for me it's been one of the most influential books. In it Gloria Anzaldua reclaims her own cultural, linguistic and spiritual roots, but she does so critically and without compromising her political or anti-racist perspective. She explains that she has consciously chosen her sexuality and asserts that 'For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behaviour. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality.

> Though I'll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by non-mexicanos, I abhor some of my culture's ways, how it cripples its women . . . No, I do not buy all the myths of the tribe into which I was born.

Reading this book helped me to resolve some of the contradictions and conflicts I continually face regarding my right to make my own statement about what is acceptable or unacceptable to me particularly when this relates to the South Asian community.

I was also reading *Europe's Myths of Orient* by Rana Kabbani, a Middle-Eastern woman. The book deals with the myths Europe has created around the Orient. The racism, thc

projection; it completely debunks the famous orientalists, people like Burton, the painters, travellers, etc. It does it from a psychological as well as analytic point of view. Much of the book focuses on the Victorian era, but I feel that the West is still projecting its sexuality away onto the East, onto Africa, onto other races, this applies whether you are talking about the exoticisation of women or sexuality generally.

*In Search Of An Image* consists of three panels, two of which are respectively *The Eastern Disease?* and *The Western Disease?* both juxtaposing text with image. The third is the title panel.

*The Eastern Disease?* begins by setting the context with a quote from Burton's *A Thousand Nights*, used by Rana Kabbani in her book in which he describes the Moslem Harem as a great school for this 'Lesbian love '.

The second quote first came out in Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* and is referred to by Rana Kabbani. Faderman uses the story of 'The Scotch Verdict' to introduce her chapter on the 'Asexual Woman'. *The Scotch Verdict* is about a 19th century libel case in Scotland in which two women running a boarding school won a case of libel against the grandmother of one of their pupils who had claimed they were lesbians. The verdict was based on the fact that the young girl who had complained to her grandmother about the activities of the two women was half Indian, her knowledge of such perverse sexuality coming from her Indian upbringing. In other words, women from the East are depraved and perverse in their sexuality while the purity of the European woman is based on the fact that she has no sexuality.

One of the stereotypes that we've had to deal with as South Asian women regardless of whether we are heterosexual women or lesbian women has constantly been one of the oversexed female. And these two texts just dig a bit further. I end this section with a portrait of myself captioned, 'The Eastern Disease?'.

The other series, 'The Western Disease?' deals with the fact that in my own community homosexuality, and particularly, lesbianism, is often seen as a 'modern product of the West'. It begins by taking up the issue that women carry the burden of male honour in patriarchal societies. While I feel that this happens across cultures and is not only a feature of 'non-western' societies, I am referring here to the particular situation in my own community where 'honour' or 'Izzat' is still profoundly important. The second quote in this section is taken from *Borderlands*. I used it because I felt that Gloria Anzaldua expressed the need to separate, criticise and transform in a powerful way. The last image in this series is of myself reading a newspaper article which I was given in 1988 of two women police constables in India who got married to each other in a temple, went back to their work place and were then sacked. These two are very ordinary women, with no contact with the west. It is a reply to the idea that lesbianism, the whole gay movement, is a western product, and so I ask the question 'The Western Disease?'.

For me I have to take on both the racism of the society in which I live and the homophobia of my own community. Both deny me a space in which I can safely explore my own sexuality, a sexuality which is mine and not a result of my ethnic origins or the fact that I live here in the west.

Earlier this year my most recent work was included in a group exhibition called *Autoportraits*, again self-portraiture. It was the first commissioned exhibition of Black photographers by Autograph, the Association of Black Photographers.

During the year leading up to the opening of the exhibition my life was filled with trauma, beginning with my father's death which opened up all kinds of old wounds. It made me understand to what extent my life had been dominated by fear, how much of my energy had been spent simply dealing with the fact that I was always terrified. So, when it came to actually producing the work for the exhibition I felt I couldn't just present 'pretty' pictures of myself and the work I did produce explored fear. Portraits of myself as a small child, cowering in the corner of a bed mirror each other and lead to a central image of myself running away. The context for these images are photographs of my mother's grave and my father's flat as I was packing it up after his death and the text:

**Fear**
**Alienates**
**The small child**
**Runs**
**Adult**
**Dreams**
**Shatter.**

The responses I have had to this work from some women have been very helpful. They have been about how the images do not just express fear and vulnerability, but also anger. Producing it has also been part of the process of resolving many of those feelings and reclaiming my own power. This brings me back to why I feel photography is so important: the photograph is one of the most common forms of visual imagery we have around us today but in the way that it has been used it has more often than not disempowered us as women, and in the case of Black women either deformed our image or simply made us invisible by ignoring us. Creating our own imagery which challenges the way others see us is one way to self- empowerment. □

*From the Hall-Carpenter Oral History Collection at the National Sound Archives (interview with Margot Farnham).*

# In Search of an Image

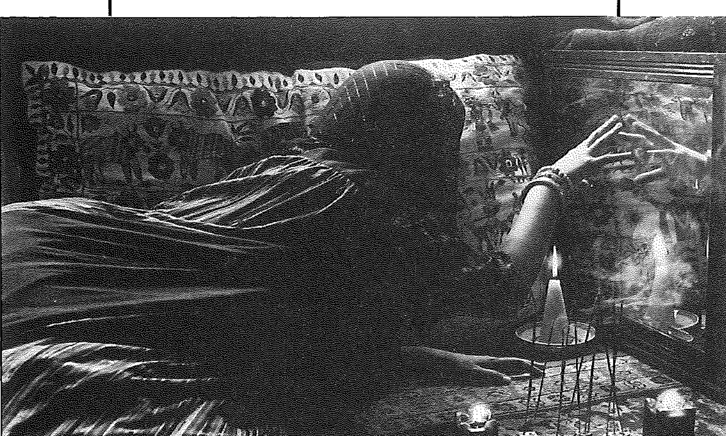
## The Eastern Disease?

**The Moslem Harem is a great school for this 'Lesbian (which I call Atossan) love'; these tribades* are mostly known by peculiarities of form and features, hairy cheeks and upper lips, gruff voices, hircine** odour and the large projecting clitoris with erectile powers.**

**Burton, *Thousand Nights*, vol. ii, p. 234 as quoted by Rana Kabbani, Europe's *Myths of Orient*, p 53 (Pandora Press).**

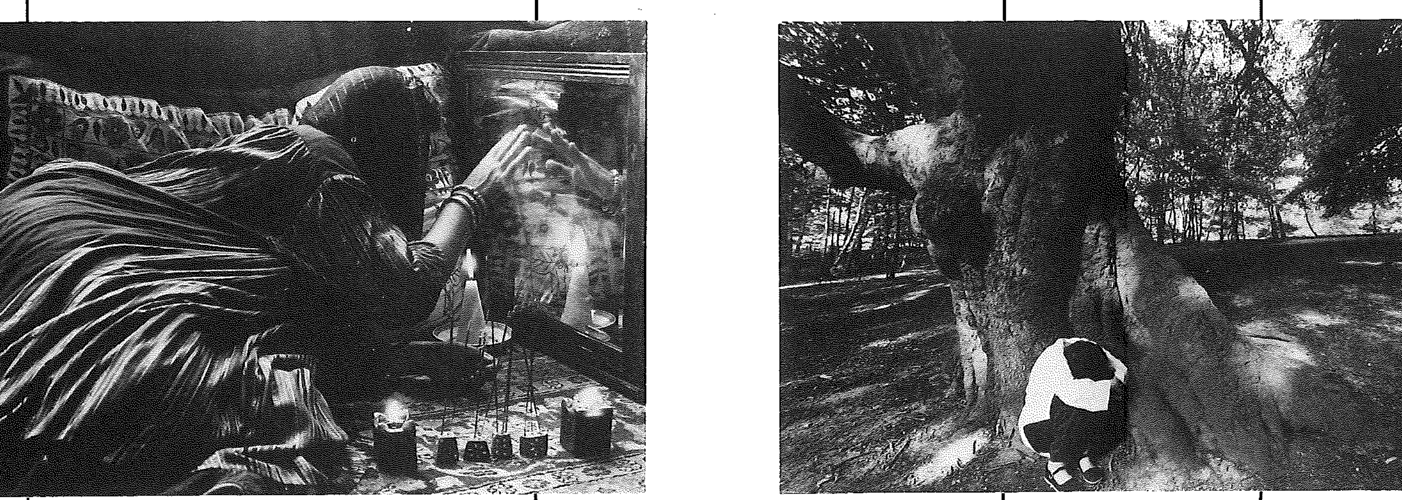
***A woman who practises unnatural vice with other women – The Shorter Oxford Dictionary**

****of, belonging to, or resembling a goat; having a goatish smell – The Shorter Oxford Dictionary**



**". . . indignant at Miss Cumming (who was half Indian) for having made such an accusation in the first place:**

**The judges suggested that Miss Cumming, having been raised in the lascivious East, had no idea of the horror such an accusation would stir in Britain.**



**Lord Meadowbank explained . . . that he had been to India, and he would venture to guess that Miss Cumming had developed her curiosity about sexual matters from her lewd Indian nurses, who were, in contrast to British women, entirely capable of obscene chatter on such subjects.**

**Lord Boyle, on the other hand, did not believe tribadism impossible among savages, but certainly improbable in civilised Britain."**

**Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York, 1981) pp. 148-50.**

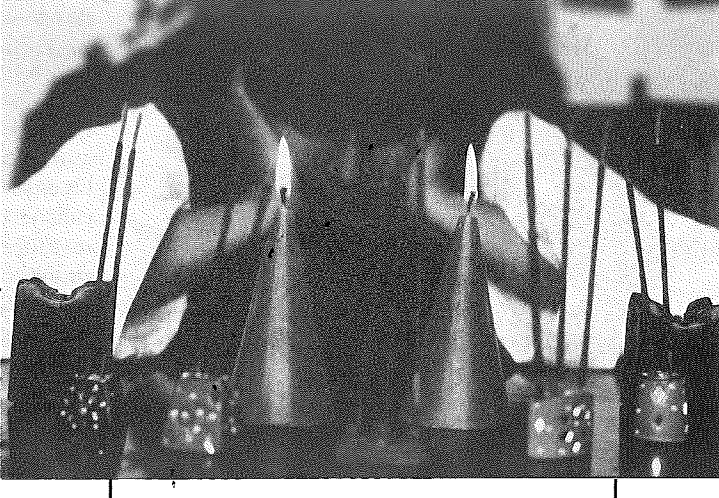
## The Western Disease?

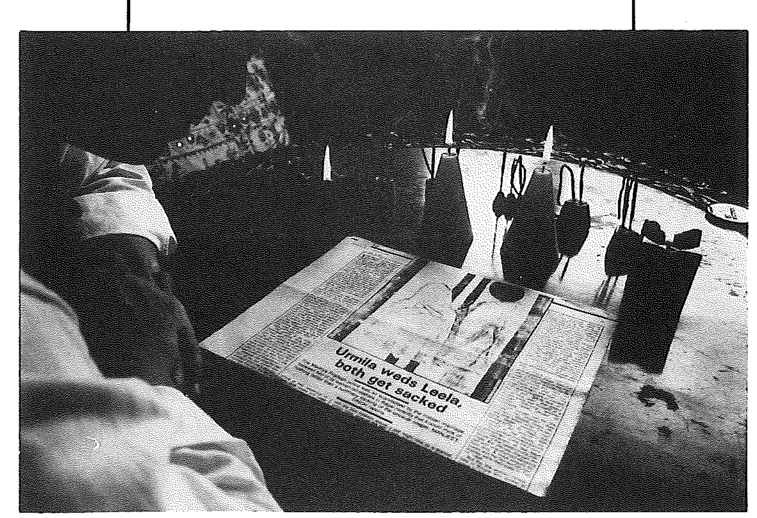
**Burdened with carrying the weight of the honour of the patriarchal society and injured in the name of protecting that honour.**

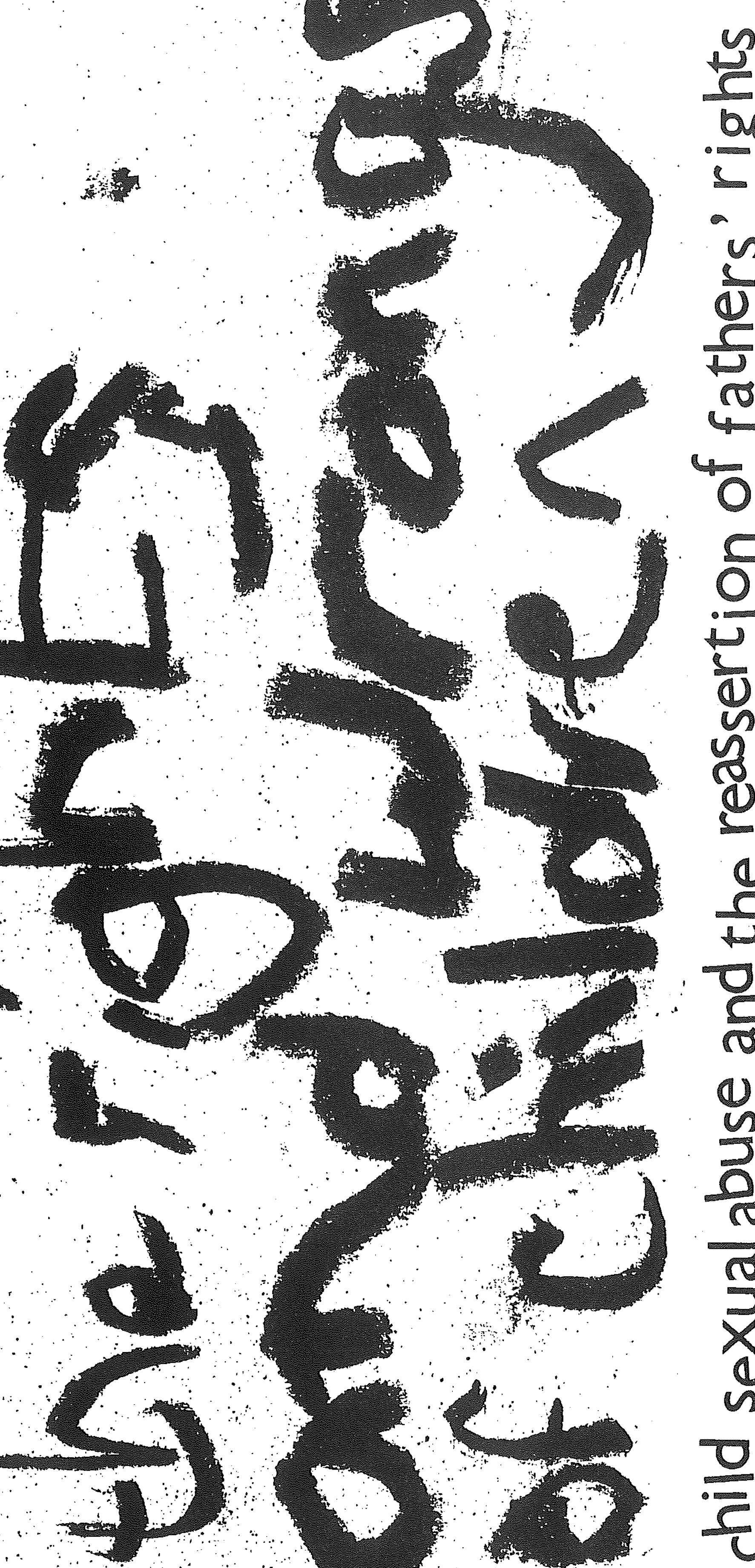
**So, don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures – white, Moslem*, Indian. I want to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture – una cultura mestiza – with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.**

**Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands / La Frontera*, p. 22, Spinsters/Aunt Lute**

***In putting together this piece of work, I have changed 'Mexican' for 'Moslem' – Mumtaz Karimjee**








# child sexual abuse and the reassertion of fathers' rights

***Maureen O'Hara asks, is the courts' and government's recent interest in the rights of children simply a cover–up for reasserting the power and control of men?***

Last year a High Court judge in Yorkshire warned a woman that if she didn't comply with his order giving unsupervised access to her children by their father, who she said had sexually abused them, he would give the father custody of the children. The lower courts had believed her and had stopped the father's access. The High Court decided that although the children probably had been sexually abused, it was not necessarily by their father. As is usual, the report of the case made no mention of what the children themselves had said. The woman left the country with her children but was later traced. Her ex-husband persuaded her to return and had her arrested as soon as she did so. The judge carried out his threat. The children now live with their father and their mother sees them on access visits.

This is the most extreme example so far (that I know about) of what looks like a growing trend in Britain. In parts of the United States the granting of access to, and in many cases custody of, children to abusive fathers has been going on for several years. Many women have gone underground with their children and feminists have set up a Sanctuary movement to support them.[1]

Feminist campaigns in Britain against the sexual abuse of children go back at least fifteen years during this wave of feminism, but it is only during the last three to four years that there has been widespread public acknowledgment of its existence. It is probable that during that time there has been a large increase in the number of access disputes involving sexual abuse coming before the courts. As awareness of sexual abuse increases it seems that it's becoming more likely that abusers will be given access and that women will be punished by the courts for refusing to let abusers see their children.

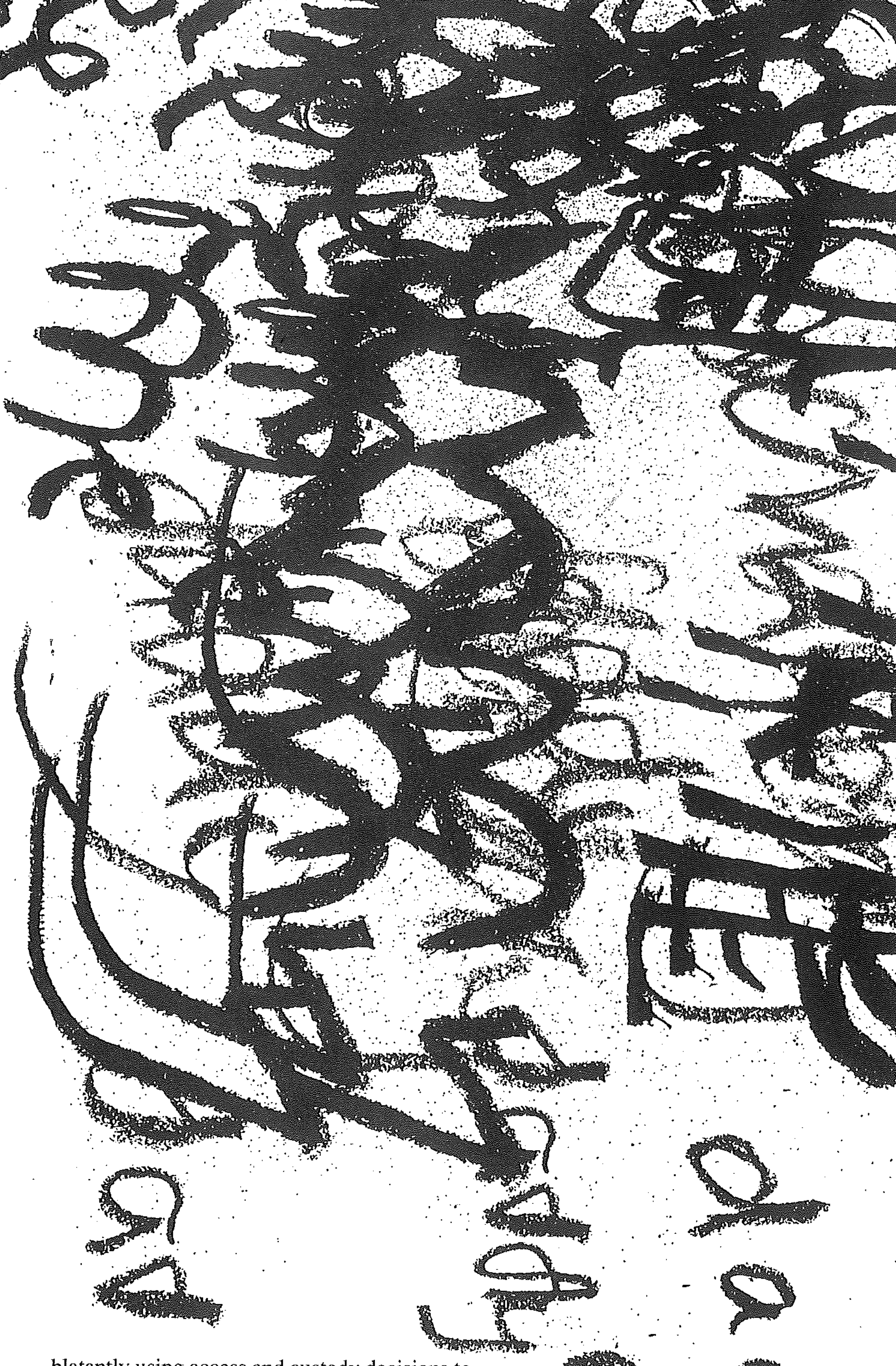
Part of my work involves giving legal advice, particularly in connection with child abuse. Most of the requests I get for advice are from mothers who are either trying to stop access by abusive fathers or trying to get it adequately supervised. Usually the children involved are under ten, which makes it particularly unlikely either that their fathers will have been prosecuted for the abuse or that the courts will think them capable of making their own decision about seeing their fathers. If children don't want to see their fathers the courts assume it's because of their mothers' influence, even when the children are clinging to furniture and screaming that they don't want to go. Mothers are threatened with contempt of court charges, and sometimes with care proceedings, if they refuse to send their children on access visits.

In cases where there has been no criminal prosecution for abuse (which is most cases) a civil court may still find that, 'on the balance of probability', a father has sexually abused a child. In care proceedings such a finding is likely to mean no access by an abuser or very tightly supervised access. When it is a mother attempting to protect a child, rather than the state, access is likely to be given and any supervision order is likely to be a token gesture which totally fails to address the realities of sexual abuse and take seriously the child's safety. 'Supervision' by relatives of the abuser, whom judges know do not believe the child, is often ordered and the child may then be put under considerable pressure to retract the allegations of abuse. Often mothers are castigated by professionals for 'colluding' with abuse and 'failure to protect' their children. When mothers do make independent efforts to protect their children they are seen as either paranoid and over-protective, or as malicious liars.

It has become less acceptable during the last few years to blatantly dismiss children alleging sexual abuse as fantasists and liars. There has been much discussion within the judiciary of child witnesses in criminal trials involving sexual violence, echoing earlier discussions about the position of adult women in rape trials.

Important shifts have taken place in thinking and practice which will make it easier for some children to give evidence and more changes are under way. But there is another side to these changes, one aspect of which is the shifting of judicial assumptions about children's dishonesty and malice onto mothers, and particularly mothers already deemed to be embittered and vengeful because they are undergoing a divorce.

Certain US states have a long tradition of blatantly using access and custody decisions to uphold male supremacy and to punish women who are seen as challenging male power.[2] In Britain such uses of judicial power have been directed mainly at lesbian mothers. In general courts in Britain have worked on the principle that it is usually in children's interests to live with their mothers after divorce. This principle sprang in part from a concept of children as



property and has sometimes worked against children who have not wanted to live with their mothers. I would support a move towards genuine respect for the wishes and feelings of children in access and custody disputes, recognising children as individuals separate from either parent, within a context of awareness of the power relationships within families. Recent moves away from the principle that children should remain with their mothers, however, have generally been more in the direction of fathers' rights than the rights of children.

As long as cases where the courts believed that a man had sexually abused his children were relatively rare it seems that abusers were rarely given access.

In the last few years there has been a shift in thinking not only about the 'desirability' of children maintaining contact with abusive fathers, but about relationships between children and divorced fathers more generally. Fatherhood, perceived as being under threat from recent social and political changes, is being reasserted both within and outside of the legal system.

### *Fear of loss of control*

Men's power over women and their power over children are inseparably linked. Male control over women's capacity to reproduce, and over children, whether it be individual male control or control by the state, is central to the maintenance of control of women. Control over children is also an end in itself to which the control of women is a means.

Historically men's power over children has included implicit or explicit sexual access to children in various forms. Legislation against the sexual abuse of children, like that against other forms of sexual violence, represents an attempt to control and regulate such violence in the interests of men – it allows some protection of men's private sexual property in particular women and children and prevents the social disintegration that might result if men's violence were not subject to some controls. The first rape laws we know about defined the rape of an unmarried woman or girl not as a crime against her, but as a crime against her father's property rights. Legislation controlling sexual violence in particular protects the interests of men who are dominant by virtue of class or race.

The government and the legal system are currently struggling to find ways of responding to recent public acknowledgment of the sexual abuse of children, and to criticisms of its own practice, while keeping men's power intact. More broadly they are also attempting to maintain men's control over children while paying lip service to concepts of children's rights and women's equality.

More and more women are giving birth to or bringing up children outside of the control of individual men. Not only are many women having children outside marriage or other forms of stable heterosexual relationships, but one third of all marriages in Britain are now likely to end in divorce. In London the figure is closer to half. Most divorces are initiated by women, 40% of whom cite men's violence as a factor in their decision to leave. Gains fought for by the women's movement, and particularly the increase in public recognition of and debate about sexual and domestic violence, have enabled larger numbers of women to leave abusive men. This opening up of options for women has contributed to the public acknowledgment of the sexual abuse of children, which carries a serious threat of the unmasking of the nature of men's power.

The legal profession, like most professionals whose work involves responding to the sexual abuse of children in some way, is trying to find ways of dealing with abuse without examination of why it happens, its links with sexual violence against women, or the implications of the fact that the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of sexual violence in all its forms are men. At the same time a range of new legislation and changes in professional practice are being introduced which have as one of their central themes the promotion of the concept of fatherhood and the bolstering of men's power over children.

Some recent and proposed legal changes will in some ways help to open up more options for women and children experiencing violence. But, at the same time, many current changes have the potential to absorb and contain the challenges to men's power represented by the increased public discourse about sexual violence, and by the changing patterns of reproduction and child-rearing. Other changes are blatant assertions of men's control of reproduction.

A climate in which fatherhood is being reasserted is being created by a seemingly very disparate range of political groupings and ideologies, from the right wing of the Conservative party to liberal 'children's rights' lobbyists. Liberal and abstract notions of children's rights and 'sexual equality', developed without reference to the nature of real power relationships, are being used to shore up men's power, particularly in relation to children. Changes in attitudes and practice in relation to custody and access, for example, draw upon concepts of children's rights and sexual equality, while in practice they often *increase* men's control over women and children.

### *Criminal law*

In the realm of sexual politics the law always says one thing and does another. Contradictory attitudes and practices are an integral part of any institution which exists primarily to uphold power relationships and the forms of social organisation which rest on them while presenting itself as an arbiter of equal justice for all. The comments of blatantly misogynist judges, reacted to with public outrage and attributed to their age and membership of an isolated elite, in fact express publicly what most other men think, say and act upon in private. The elite status of judges allows them to express their misogyny with impunity, and their comments, despite the outrage, serve a useful purpose in shaping attitudes and deterring women and children from testifying about abuse and publicly naming their abusers.

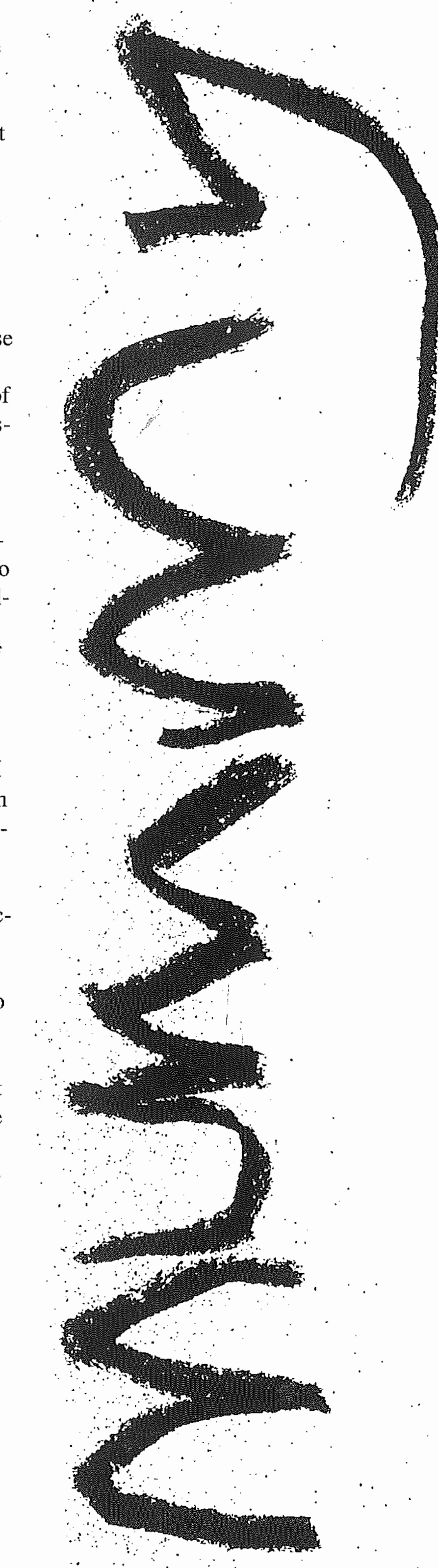
But such tactics can go too far and backfire and a more moderate voice is needed within the judiciary to present a more acceptable face, particularly when its authority and the power interests it represents are under challenge.

In response to feminist campaigns there have been a series of changes in recent years aimed at making it easier for women and children to give evidence in trials for sexual offences. There has also been some change in attitudes towards sexual violence and an apparent move away from the notion of women as sexual property, as, for example in the recognition of rape in marriage in Scotland and moves to establish a similar change in England and Wales.

How far judicial thinking is really changing, however, can be seen in the Appeal Court's guidelines on sentencing for incest, written in 1989 by Lord Lane, which looked only at incestuous abuse of girls by fathers. The guidelines clearly derive from a concept of women and girls as property (the sexual abuse of a boy by his father is not defined legally as incest and so the guidelines only discuss the sexual abuse of girls). In the guidelines is a list of several mitigating factors which could reduce sentences. These include previous experience on the part of the girl, the girl's age – on the basis that an older girl might be "willing" or even an "instigating party" – and evidence that the man had 'genuine affection' for his daughter rather than "the intention to use the girl simply as an outlet for his sexual inclinations". The guidelines contain a concept of 'consent' which amounts essentially to acquiescence based on fear. This 'consent' is thought to "render a charge of rape inappropriate".

The guidelines, which contain the same views which make national headlines when expressed by judges in individual trials, caused no outrage in the mainstream press, which generally reported them in a very matter of fact way and commented only on whether the lengths of sentences proposed were appropriate. The maverick judges don't seem to be so maverick after all.

While the guidelines were being produced with the aim of introducing more consistency in sentencing, a lobby advocating therapy as an alternative to custodial sentences for abusers was growing. Made up of probation officers, social workers, leading members of Childline, and sections of the legal profession (including Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, who chaired the Cleveland Enquiry and who since then seems to have been set up as Britain's leading token woman judge), this lobby is gaining increasing ground. The details of their arguments vary, but in most cases what they are saying is that, while there are some abusers whose crimes are so serious and/or persistent that there is no alternative but a custodial sentence, for many abusers and for the children they have abused, custodial sentences are counterproductive. They argue that, particularly for children who have been abused by their fathers, custodial sentences lead to guilt and self-blame. Other members of the family may also blame the child for the fact that their father/husband/breadwinner is in prison. Prison, where therapy is not generally available, will do nothing to reform abusers and may only confirm and increase their desire to abuse children. Therefore, provided they show remorse, they should be compelled by the



courts to participate in therapy programmes as an alternative to prison. Some of the lobby recommend family therapy. Others propose that abusers receive therapy separately from women and children.

So while legal changes are underway which will make it easier to prosecute abusers there is a growing lobby not to send them to prison when they are convicted, but to 'rehabilitate' them instead. 'Rehabilitating' means either returning them to their original family (the preferred option) or making them fit, in the opinion of professionals, to eventually join or establish another family.

Access to the children they have abused is a logical part of any 'rehabilitation' process and is, after all, the child's 'right'. Should a child not want to exercise her right, or actively resist doing so, it is because the mother has probably detached her from her 'natural affections' for her father.[3]

### The fathers' rights lobby

A lobby promoting the rights of divorced (and, increasingly, unmarried) fathers has existed in Britain since 1974, when Families Need Fathers (FNF), still the largest and most influential fathers' rights group, was founded. There are now two other groups lobbying on behalf of fathers – Dads After Divorce and the fathers' group within Parents Against Injustice (PAIN), a mixed organisation set up to challenge what it considered to be abuses of social services powers in cases of alleged or suspected child abuse. Essentially PAIN promotes parents' rights over and against those of state institutions involved in child protection work and makes little meaningful distinction between what it perceives as the rights of 'the family' and those of the children (and women) within it. More than any of the other groups, PAIN is involved in directly responding to legislation and professional practice relating to child abuse.

FNF's lobbying work is directed at promoting the rights of fathers more generally but, using the rhetoric of sexual equality, they describe themselves as a "society for equal parental rights". During the 1980s they organised two conferences – on 'Access' and 'Preserving Family Links' – where speakers included the president of the Family Division of the High Court. They provide 'emotional support and practical advice' to fathers and their publications include a regular journal about access and a men's guide to divorce. This year they were featured in a BBC documentary about non-custodial fathers (fathers living apart from their children) after which they ran a two-hour helpline for 'parents'.

FNF describe themselves as "formed by a group of divorced or separated parents who had unwillingly lost contact with their own children". Their reasoned and gender neutral tone is belied later in the same leaflet when they point out that:

> Sometimes an absent parent reaches a point of desperation and tries to regain access by removing the child from the care of the other parent. This regrettable action is often described emotively as 'snatching' or 'kidnapping'.

FNF are well aware that the vast majority of 'parents' who abduct children are men.

In an interview in the *Independent* last year which featured FNF and Dads After Divorce one man said:

> "You've just got to fight. I fully admit that frightened my wife into doing what she was told . . . What has it got me? Custody of daughters I wouldn't have otherwise."[4]

During the past two years the fathers' rights lobby has had increasing exposure in the media, at a time when in advertising particularly a new image of fatherhood is being presented, showing men caring for, and looking lovingly at, their children. This 'new man' has no substance in reality – within heterosexual couples who are both in paid employment men spend an average of six hours a week in sole care of children. Women generally spend four to five times more than this. But the illusion that the new man exists is a useful part of the current reassertion of fatherhood, particularly at a time when employers want more women to enter certain sections of the paid labour force.

### The Right's traditional family

In reality many divorced and single fathers have little interest in seeing their children and even less in financially maintaining them. The current promotion of the 'traditional family' arises in part because of the cost of providing very large numbers of single mothers with income support. As well as conducting a moral campaign against divorce and particularly against fathers who don't financially support their children, the government has recently proposed a new system for enforcing maintenance payments which is very likely to become law.

Some of the proposals will benefit single mothers and their children, particularly in the case of women who are working and not receiving income support. But women who are receiving income support may be liable to have their benefit cut if they refuse to name their children's fathers. The government have said there will be exceptions to this where it is not in the interests of children, but do not say what they mean by this. A recent DSS survey found that 5% of women they interviewed gave fear of violence as their reason for not naming fathers, but domestic violence is not even mentioned in the White Paper outlining the government's proposals. The guidelines do make exceptions in the case of children born as a result of incestuous abuse and other forms of rape.

Men who are in a position where they cannot avoid maintenance payments often link them to access. Their attitude is often that if they are 'paying for' children then they are entitled to see them and make decisions about their lives, regardless of the children's feelings or of their own previous relationship with the children. In the current climate surrounding access fathers are likely to be able to turn the proposed new maintenance arrangements to their own advantage in access disputes. Although access and maintenance are not directly linked in law or legal practice, the new proposals are likely to contribute to the general strengthening of father's rights. FNF are currently campaigning for the proposed legislation on maintenance to be linked to access. They are unlikely to succeed in changing the law, but may bring about some change in attitudes and practice.

The right wing of the Conservative Party is alarmed not only by the financial implications of high rates of illegitimacy and divorce, but by what it sees as the potential breakdown of the traditional (heterosexual) family. The right wing 'think tank', the Centre for Policy Studies, claims that child abuse is mainly perpetrated by stepfathers or within single-parent families – a feat it manages to achieve partly by very selective use of statistics and partly by refusing to distinguish between sexual, physical and emotional abuse or neglect. It concludes that:

> . . . child abuse is largely a consequence of the decline of the traditional family. To be effective in stemming child abuse, we must end policies which encourage the one parent family, and design policies which bolster the traditional family . . . (Equally) welcome would be a re-examination of local authorities policies towards unmarried mothers on council house waiting lists. The tide has turned against the permissive society and the Conservative Party must show its commitment to the family in legislative action, rather than merely indulging in Party Conference rhetoric.[5]

### Recent legislation

One piece of legislation aimed at reversing the decline of the traditional family (and men's power within it) was Section 28 with its strictures against 'pretended families'. More recently there have been attempts to prevent single women, and particularly lesbians, from having access to artificial insemination from clinics.

Initial amendments to what is now the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 tried to explicitly deny lesbians and single women AID. Opposition to the amendment combined with the traditional preference of the British establishment for indirect forms of discrimination where possible, led to a new amendment stating that:

> A woman shall not be provided with treatment services unless account has been taken of the welfare of any child who may be born as a result of the treatment (including the need of that child for a father), and of any other child who may be affected by the birth.

Exactly how this clause will be interpreted won't be clear until a code of practice has been drawn up by the new Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority to be established under the Act. The clause will certainly give added legitimacy to discrimination against lesbians and single women generally, even if it doesn't make it mandatory. It may also lead to discrimination against other groups of women deemed to be unsuitable mothers.

Attempts to legislate against fostering and adoption of children by lesbians (and gay men) are now a possibility, following outraged comments in some sections of the press. There will probably be a White Paper on adoption during the current parliamentary session and the Conservative Family Campaign is likely to lobby for government guidelines or legislation restricting the right to foster and adopt to heterosexuals (whether inside or outside of the traditional family isn't yet clear).

A piece of legislation introduced in 1987 which will have the effect not of bolstering the

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## Notes

1. See Liz Kelly, "Bitter Ironies: the professionalisation of child sexual abuse", in *Trouble and Strife* No. 16, for a discussion of the Sanctuary movement in the US and the fathers' rights lobby there. The latter is documented in detail in David Hechler, *The Battle and the Backlash: The Child Sexual Abuse War*, Lexington Books, 1988.

2. See Phyllis Chesler, *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody*, Seal Press, 1987.

3. Elizabeth Butler-Sloss was quoted in the *Independent* describing an access dispute as a "not uncommon story" in which the mother had made "groundless" accusations against the father, and then "detached the children from their natural affections for their father". The report was entitled "Divorced parents warned over child access" (20 September 1990).

4. Pamela Nowicka, "Men denied the reasonable right to be parents", in "The children whose fathers fade away", *Independent*, 16 August 1989.

5. Andreas Gledhill and others, *Who Cares? Children at Risk and Social Services*, Centre for Policy Studies, 1989.

traditional family but of strengthening the rights of fathers in the face of its decline, is the Family Law Reform Act, supported by children's rights lobbyists because it removed many of the legal distinctions between marital and non-marital children. At the same time it opened the way to removing most of the distinctions between the rights of marital and non-marital fathers. The main exception to the removal of legal distinctions was the refusal of the government to allow non-marital children to inherit British citizenship from fathers. Under this Act an unmarried father can apply to a court to share "parental rights and duties" equally with a child's mother. This doesn't give the man automatic custody or access – he has to go to court if the mother opposes his contact with the child. But it does create a legal context in which an unmarried father is more likely to get access and in some cases custody, if he wants it even when he has abused the child. The Act, and the shifting attitudes to fatherhood of which it is one manifestation, make it more likely that abusive fathers will be given access to children regardless of whether they have been married to the mother or ever lived with or had a close relationship with the child.

### *Some future possibilities*

The effects of the legal and other changes affecting men's control over children during the last few years are still being worked out. One piece of legislation which is likely to have a significant impact is the Children Act 1989, which will come into effect in Autumn 1991. Much of the impetus behind the Act was provided by the Cleveland controversy, and its effects on children are likely to be double-edged.

The Act is in part an attempt to move away from the legal status of children as, in effect, the property of their parents, and it abolishes the concept of 'custody' because of its connotations of property. Instead it introduces residence orders, which determine who a child will live with, and contact orders, which will replace what is now access. Children will be able to apply in their own right to have orders made, including "prohibitive steps" orders which can be used to prevent an adult contacting them. They have to be considered mature enough to do so by the court, so the effect of this will depend, like much of the rest of the Act, on professional and judicial interpretation.

The Act also strengthens parents' rights to be informed and consulted about social services' decisions affecting their children. Abuses of power by social workers, particularly when they are dealing with working class and black children and families, are widespread and new safeguards on their use of power will be positive for a lot of children and mothers. But the Act makes no explicit distinctions between abusive and non-abusive parents and therefore has the potential to strengthen the position of abusive fathers, depending on how it is interpreted by the courts and professionals generally. It could also decrease children's protection from physically or sexually abusive mothers in some circumstances.

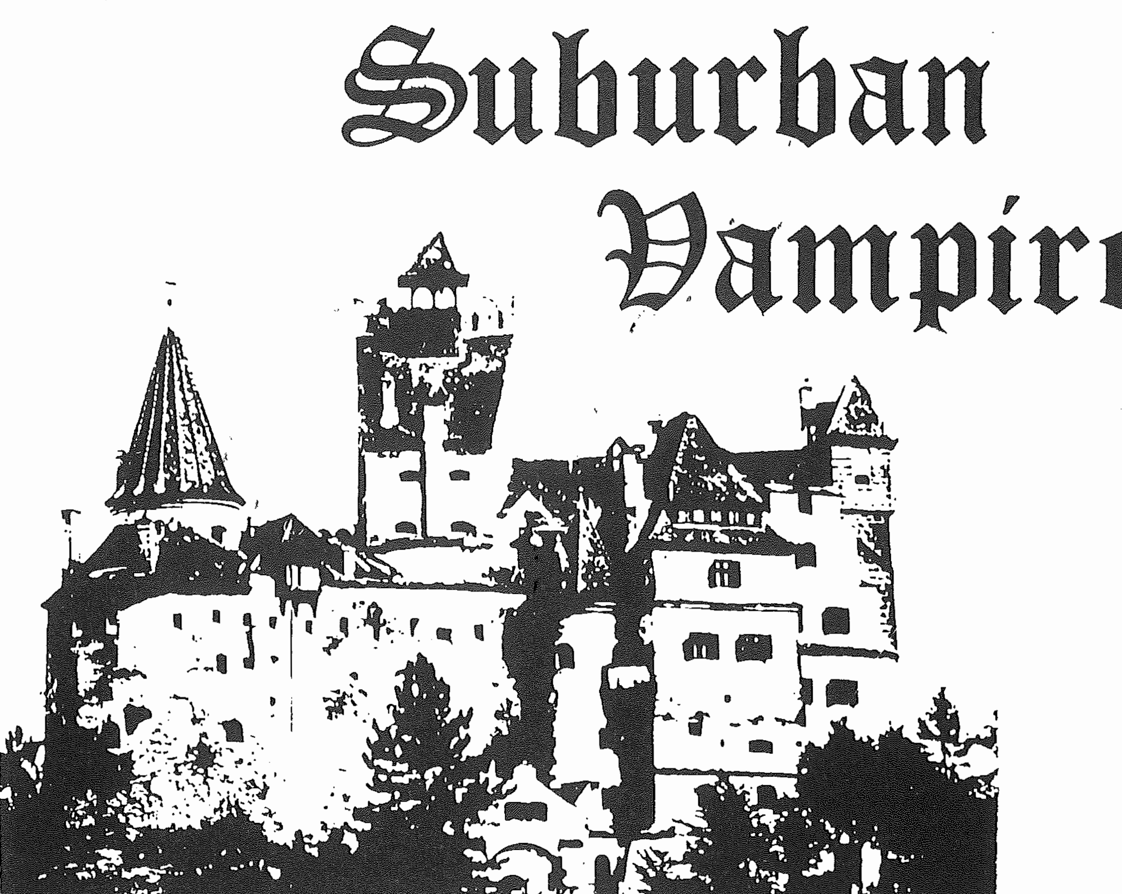
About 3% of perpetrators of sexual abuse are thought to be women. While the sexual abuse of children by women is rare, much larger numbers of women physically and emotionally abuse children. Feminists are only just beginning to take on board abuses of children by women and to develop a feminist perspective which takes seriously the oppression of children by women as well as men.

There is a tension in the Act between its emphasis on the rights of children to be consulted about decisions being made about their lives, and its emphasis on the rights of gender neutral 'parents'. How this tension will work itself out will depend partly on how far feminists working from a children's rights perspective which takes into account the realities of male power can influence the way the Act is interpreted in practice. □

*I am trying to set up a lobbying group to campaign for meaningful consultation with children in access and custody disputes, particularly those involving abuse of the child and/or the threat of violence to the mother – on the basis that violence against mothers is a form of emotional abuse of children. If anyone knows of or is involved in these kinds of disputes it would be very useful to the campaign if you could send me details, on whatever basis of confidentiality you choose. If you want to discuss the campaign and/or contribute to it you can write to me c/o Trouble and Strife.*



# Suburban Vampire



***Rosie Garland delves into a teenage attraction towards vampires. In voyaging through the genre, she questions the basis of society's fascination with this unearthly host and feminist reworkings of the myth.***

Why bother to write an article about female vampires for a feminist publication? What – if anything – is there to be reclaimed about vampires, and especially about the quintessential vampire stereotype, Count Dracula?

Defining a vampire could fill volumes. Every story or film has added its own embellishment to the legends. In brief: a vampire is a reanimated corpse which needs to ingest a certain amount of (human) blood in order to survive. It is generally agreed that vampires are nocturnal and can be destroyed by sunlight, staking through the heart, fire and decapitation. In western christian tradition the vampire recoils (usually with a reptilian hiss) from any of the symbols of christianity such as the cross or holy water. They can be warded off by garlic.

For most of us, vampires are associated with the Hammer Horror movie where they generally appear as the saturnine male in crimson-lined cloak and matching contact lenses, standing at the open window of a woman's bedroom. Women are his – sometimes willing – victims, subdued and overcome by the power of his gaze.

If female vampires are thought of at all they tend to be raven-haired wraiths, sexually predatory and physically alluring.

### *A teenage infatuation*

My first introduction to vampires was on a flickering TV screen, watching forbidden late-night horror films with my finger on the channel button and one ear listening for the parental

footstep. At an early age, I was hooked. All my adolescent rebellion and loneliness coalesced around that figure on the screen. I read voraciously and in secret. I knew I was supposed to feel relieved when the vampire got staked. I didn't. I dreamed and wrote stories in which the vampire emerged triumphant, or survived untroubled by the conventional world. I knew I was supposed to find vampires frightening, and my home, family and their expectations of me comforting, safe. I didn't.

> "All my adolescent rebellion and loneliness coalesced around that figure on the screen."

I identified with the vampires. They were the rebels I wanted to be. *They* didn't have elders bugging them. I dreamed of independence and revelled in the vampires' anarchic force: they spurned families, marriage and other social conventions. They also symbolised escape from loneliness. Although loners themselves, they found others like them and were united by a shared difference against the mass of humanity. Most significant of all, they had no family; instead the companionship of other vampires.

I was attracted to their powerful yet unconventional sexuality. To me it seemed radical to propose a form of sexual expression not focused on male genitalia (it still does).

And vampires provided a channel for anger and revenge against parents. This anger, like vampires, had to be dormant in the daytime. It was kept – and thrived – in the dark. Yet as I continued to read and watch movies, I realised that all was not as positive as I'd imagined. The first thing I became aware of was the difference in the treatment of male and female vampires.

*The Brides of Dracula 1960*

The first male and female fictional vampires appeared in stories written around the beginning of the 19th century, and it is no coincidence that this was also a time of widespread loss of religious belief against the backdrop of the rapid spread of industrialisation. Paradoxically, this so-called "Age of Reason" brought forth monsters: new demons were created and old ones refashioned by those seeking to restore belief in the powers of the old, questioned faiths to destroy 'evil'.

At the same time, the Romantic movement found the perfect anti-hero in the male vampire, as defined by Byron's secretary Polidori in his 1819 story *The Vampyre* and based on Byron himself. This characterisation remained unchanged in essence as it passed from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to more recent incarnations such as Christopher Lee's Dracula in the Hammer movie cycle: he is mad, bad and very dangerous to know.

The traditional (that is, male-created) female vampire is invariably defined in sexual terms. Here lies the root of her evil, whether she is a one-dimensional voluptuary like Clarimonda (in *Clarimonda*, Theophile Gautier 1832) whose sexual allure is strong enough to seduce men away from God, or an independent woman such as Carmilla, the lesbian antiheroine of J.S. Lefanu's novella *Carmilla* (1872). To the male writer the female vampire epitomises the absolute opposite of the traditional weak, dependent, trustworthy, nurturing female role. Equally mad, bad and dangerous – if not more so.

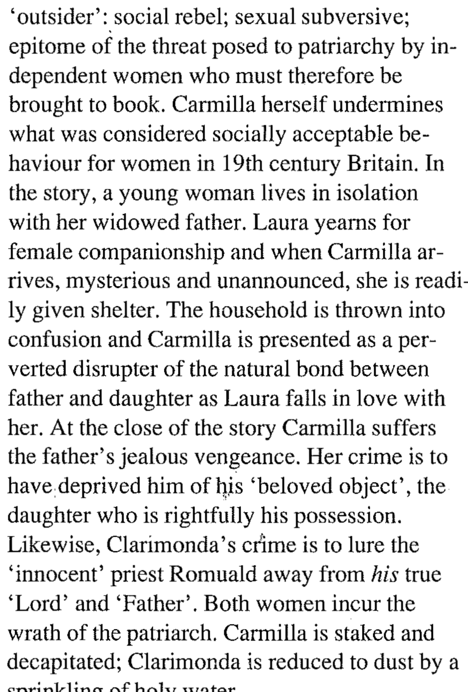
### *Stealing other men's women*

What female and male vampires have in common is that they are perceived as a threat which must be wiped out before it tears apart the fabric of society. The crucial difference is that as a man (and an aristocrat) a male vampire like Dracula is recognised as having a right to the power he wields as "Lord of the Undead". He is destroyed only when he attempts to extend his power beyond its rightful boundaries, when he tries to appropriate the 'good' women who 'belong' to a father, husband or fiancé. His crime is not his power per se but that, by stealing other men's women, he is a bit of a cad. And a foreigner to boot . . .

Female vampires like Carmilla and Clarimonda, on the other hand, are crushed purely because of their 'unnatural' power. To Victorian writers a woman had no right to power; for them the female vampire was a convenient symbol. The sole purpose in creating a woman who has strength and dares to use it is to show that she can and must be annihilated.

*Carmilla* is a good example of these early stories. The female vampire functions as an





'outsider': social rebel; sexual subversive; epitome of the threat posed to patriarchy by independent women who must therefore be brought to book. Carmilla herself undermines what was considered socially acceptable behaviour for women in 19th century Britain. In the story, a young woman lives in isolation with her widowed father. Laura yearns for female companionship and when Carmilla arrives, mysterious and unannounced, she is readily given shelter. The household is thrown into confusion and Carmilla is presented as a perverted disrupter of the natural bond between father and daughter as Laura falls in love with her. At the close of the story Carmilla suffers the father's jealous vengeance. Her crime is to have deprived him of his 'beloved object', the daughter who is rightfully his possession. Likewise, Clarimonda's crime is to lure the 'innocent' priest Romuald away from *his* true 'Lord' and 'Father'. Both women incur the wrath of the patriarch. Carmilla is staked and decapitated; Clarimonda is reduced to dust by a sprinkling of holy water.

Carmilla empowers Laura to rebel. Through their relationships, Laura has a glimpse (albeit brief) of a world neither dominated by nor centred around her father. Laura's father is portrayed as kindly but misguided in his trust of Carmilla; it is a warning for men (and women) to beware women. Lefanu clearly shared the views of contemporary psychologists and sexologists that the fundamental institutions of western society were threatened by the rise of the independent, unmarried, politically aware woman and the militant Women's Movement. Carmilla is just such an independent woman and unlike Laura functions outside the nuclear family and social unit, unchaperoned and therefore dangerous. Lefanu reflects male distrust of women who form close friendships and who are not divided amongst themselves in rivalry for the available men.

Contemporary women writers also made use of the vampire myth, and even then feminist writers showed a far greater awareness of the significance of female vampires in sexual political terms.

The fear society feels when women deviate from the 'norm' and the relevance of this fear to the development of the female vampire persona is brilliantly explored in *The Fate of Madame Cabanel*, a bitterly ironic story published in 1880 by Eliza Lynn Linton, a novelist, journalist and feminist. The 'vampire' is Fanny Campbell, a young, down-to-earth, attractive woman who marries through poverty into a stultifyingly narrow-minded community. She is simply different to the superstitious villagers, both physically and in outlook. Linton highlights approvingly Fanny's no-nonsense approach and lack of mawkish sentimentality. In the story, Fanny's love for her infant stepson is construed as molestation and this, combined with her ruddy good health, is sufficient to have her branded a vampire. The self-righteous villagers become self-appointed executioners and the story closes with Fanny's murder. Linton uses the image of the female vampire to stress the very real destructive power of antifeminism and makes a clear connection between the rise of the women's movement and witch hunts.

An explanation for the popularity of the female vampire in Victorian supernatural literature is not hard to find. She was one of the few images of women with an active sexuality available to the reading public. Over and over again female vampires are described as utterly attractive yet simultaneously repellent, neatly focusing the male inability to come to terms with women's sexuality at all.

Clarimonda's beauty proves she must be "Beelzebub in person"; thus Romuald relieves himself of any personal responsibility for his actions. Once again a man whines "The Devil made me do it" or "The woman made me do it" (the two being for them interchangeable).

The more sexual female vampires are, the more ruthlessly they are destroyed, and when they are staked it is justified as 'good for them'.

### *Voyeuristic interest*

In Carmilla Lefanu created a sexual character who would simultaneously prod his readers into expressions of outrage and disgust while titillating their prurient interest (like any tabloid newspaper). She is a lesbian and when she vampirises Laura, it reads like a sexual encounter:

> Warm lips kissed me, longer and more lovingly as they reached my throat. My heart beat faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly. A sobbing . . . turned into a convulsion in which my senses left me.

A vampire bite or an orgasm?

An overtly sexual passage like the above could not have occurred in a non-supernatural

'realist' novel, let alone a description of a passionate interchange between two women. Under the guise of a moral fable about good overcoming evil, vampire literature allowed male writers to get soft porn on to the mainstream market and gave rein to the free expression of fantasies about sexually dominant 'bad' women in a socially acceptable context: a heady brew of sex, death, politics and religion in an anti-feminist pseudo-moral tale.

These themes continue in present-day depiction of vampires in fiction and film: Ray Garton's *Live Girls* (1989) about female vampires in the porn industry (how tedious); *Love-Starved* (Charles L. Grant, 1979) where blood-hunger and sexual desire become one and once again we are intended to thrill at the vampires' inevitable destruction. These vampires are used to convey the message loud and clear that it is okay for men to have sex with 'bad girls' as long as you can squelch them afterwards. It is okay too – and sexually titillating – for women to be sexually active, even predatory, so long as men retain the ultimate power to, literally, destroy them. Reading stories like these, it is hard to remember that this is supposed to be 'fantasy literature, unconnected to reality; the fact is that the fictional treatment of the female vampire reflects the truth that sexually active women *do* get used by men and killed by men with little more than a ripple in the conscience of patriarchal society. The clearest example of this is the lack of public reaction to the murder of prostitutes in contrast to the moral outrage expressed when a so-called 'good' woman is killed by a man.

**"Over and over again female vampires are described as utterly attractive yet simultaneously repellent."**

Post-Carmilla, and up to the present day, a large number of female vampires have been lesbians. Male authors and screenwriters have used the image to add a frisson of kinky sex to an already highly charged sexual situation. In the film *The Hunger* (Tony Scott, 1983) the distinction between lesbian and vampire blurs: Scott presents both as manipulative, self-centred, power hungry perverts. Nice girls are warned to avoid both.

*Lust for a Vampire* (Jimmy Sangster, 1971; a film which must have singlehandedly financed the push-up bra industry) clearly uses lesbianism as nothing more than a preparation for 'real' (that is, penetrative male) sex.

### *Feminist heroines?*

The way male writers and film-makers use the female vampire betrays a deep-rooted hatred of sexually active women and lesbians; a hatred not, however, shared by feminist writers and filmmakers. For some 20th century women writers, and for lesbian and feminist readers and filmgoers too, the female vampire has come to represent a feminist heroine. There are connections: lesbians too are sexual subversives; lesbian-feminists are social outlaws, rebels who aim to destroy patriarchal order, embodying all that Lefanu saw as negative in Carmilla.

It is not just a case of turning an archetypal heroine around ('if men hate her, she must be good'). The symbol of the female vampire, denied a voice during the story and silenced at its close, is Sterling O'Blivion, the lesbian vampire heroine of *I, Vampire* (Jody Scott, 1986). She is firmly centre stage and narrates her own story, thus defining herself rather than letting herself be defined. She symbolises women's refusal to be spoken for or silenced. The vampire Captain Drake in *Oh Captain, My Captain* (Katherine Forrest, 1989) is, like Sterling O'Blivion, an ambitious, successful woman whose independence is free of negative associations.

Some women have explored the possibilities of female vampires as a force for dynamic, life-affirming change. *Oh Captain, My Captain* is set in a positive and challenging utopia. Lieutenant Harper accompanies Drake on a two-woman flight into outer space and a relationship builds up between them. Nevertheless it is not merely a sexual fantasy which begins and ends in the space shuttle. The story opens with Harper's farewells to her male lover Niklaus and ends with her leavetaking of her lesbian vampire lover. In the interim she has been changed, revolutionised, spurred to recognise her lesbianism. She returns to Earth carrying the seeds of revolt. Similarly, the singing, sax-playing vampire Marie in the film *Because the Dawn* (Amy Goldstein, 1987) is the catalyst for Ariel to acknowledge both her lesbian sexuality and her ability to be a more daring and fulfilled photographer. The lesbianism introduced by male authors to titillate and shock has been turned around to become a metaphor for women's revolution and sexual liberation.

*The Lair of the White Worm 1988*

However, the backlash is ever-present, even in lesbian literature. The vampire Darsen, in *Virago* (Karen Minns, 1990) is treated with a venom bordering on hysteria: "Every atrocity that has ever been committed on this planet can be traced to . . . this virago."

She is a nasty, non-monogamous predator trying to disrupt a nice monogamous lesbian couple; a sexual outsider who must therefore be destroyed. Minns' vampire is – even in this unconventional context – treated with depressing similarity to any number of male-invented female vampires. In this hymn to monogamy, Darsen does not even get to bite anyone – and only the cosy couple get to have sex.

Considering the male tradition of linking female vampires with darkness, blood, pain, inhumanity and the trappings of mechanical sex, it is no surprise to find the image used in s/m fiction. Despite its superficial lesbian gloss, the self-consciously deviant world of *The Vampire* (Pat Califia, 1988) offers no challenge to male authority. Califia creates in the character Kerry what appears to be a feminist, 'alternative' vampire who overpowers men without being overpowered by them. But Califia's motives are deeply rooted in misogyny. Kerry is a whip-toting model based on the Byronic male vampire: "known for her chivalry . . . she could rarely be persuaded to treat women like sides of beef." Her human lover Iduna is a stereotypical femme fatale. Power is eroticised rather than analysed and the story ends up no different to the soft porn peddled by Victorian and contemporary male writers.

**"Vampire literature allowed male writers to get soft porn onto the mainstream market . . ."**

One of the issues at the heart (?) of vampirism is her ability to disrupt the 'natural' social order which is firmly that of middle-class, white, heterosexual male culture. That she has died and risen as undead, defying death, itself marks her out, making her very existence an act of revolt. Male writers, whether of Stoker and Lefanu's school or their 20th century descendants, reflect and reinforce their own social, class, racial and sexual prejudices through their fiction. As Rosemary Jackson notes in her analysis of fantastic literature (*Fantasy*, 1981), they use vampires to symbolise undesirable social realities which can then be destroyed with impunity in the name of exorcising the demonic. The vampire is invariably the alien, the scapegoat to be feared; slandered and wiped out. She is always 'other': no attempt is made to analyse what makes her the alien in the first place.

In feminist fiction and films, there is no doubt as to whose side we are on – female vampires symbolise the need for radical rebellion. Nor are the difficulties this struggle involves trivialised. Sterling O'Blivion is pragmatic about her 'difference' as a vampire (knowing that even this is male-defined) but realises that she will never be liked or accepted by the "so-called normals". Yet her isolation makes her vulnerable and she assumes an outward conformity. The arrival of the alien Benaroya (incarnated in the body of Virginia Woolf) shakes Sterling out of her apathy, rekindles her faith in herself as an 'outsider', and strengthens her confidence to reject the male world and all the sell-out associated with it.

P. Califia, "The Vampire", *Macho Sluts* (Allyson, 1988).

K.V. Forrest, "Oh Captain, My Captain", *Dreams and Swords* (Naiad 1989).

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J.S. Lefanu, "Carmilla", *The Penguin Book of Vampire Stories*, ed. A. Ryan (Penguin 1988).

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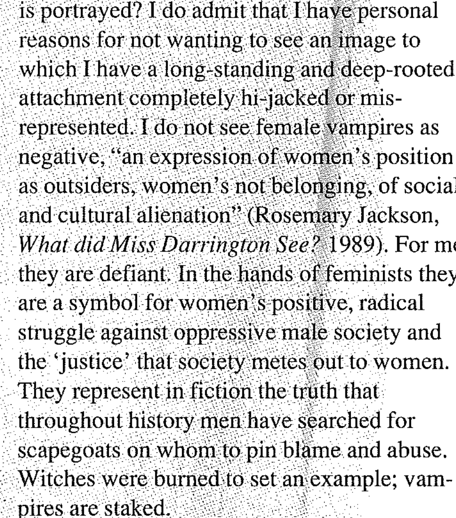
*Mark of the Vampire 1935*



### *Why vampires?*

The female vampire has not simply been thrown out by patriarchal society; she defies it. This must surely underline the particular relevance of the vampire for lesbian-feminists, who remain largely unmoved by the werewolf or Frankenstein myths, for example. The female vampire myth is about women in rebellion – and they are not alone; vampires have a social grouping and create their own interrelated networks, they have no need for heterosexual, procreative, genital sex to perpetuate their species. Theirs are 'pretended families'.

For all her feminist attributes, however, it is impossible to get away from the fact that the vampire is a bloodsucker. Sterling O'Blivion sees her need for "6oz of human arterial blood once a month" as unmysterious, practical. She can't understand the fuss made by "a selfish world fighting to hang onto that few lousy, crummy, measly drops of blood", especially since that world wants nothing less than your life, body and soul.

Yet again, it depends on who is writing the script. Carmilla and Darsen are clearly presented as bloodsucking parasites. Lefanu and Minns see the cure as simple – just cut the growths from the body of society and all will be well. Others, Scott and Goldstein for example, take the line that something is rotten in the state of the patriarchy; that the body itself is diseased and the vampire parasites are not the cause of the problem but one of the symptoms. In the hands of feminists the parasite is transformed into the avenger. There were cheers at the showing of *Because the Dawn* at the 1988 Lesbian and Gay Film Festival when the vampire Marie, menaced by a would-be mugger/rapist, dispatches him with a deft armlock and swift bite on the neck. Women's self-defence classes were never like this . . .

Why does it matter how a mythical, bloodsucking fiction of (originally) male imagination is portrayed? I do admit that I have personal reasons for not wanting to see an image to which I have a long-standing and deep-rooted attachment completely hi-jacked or misrepresented. I do not see female vampires as negative, "an expression of women's position as outsiders, women's not belonging, of social and cultural alienation" (Rosemary Jackson, *What did Miss Darrington See?* 1989). For me they are defiant. In the hands of feminists they are a symbol for women's positive, radical struggle against oppressive male society and the 'justice' that society metes out to women. They represent in fiction the truth that throughout history men have searched for scapegoats on whom to pin blame and abuse. Witches were burned to set an example; vampires are staked.

Obviously, witches have an important historical reality. This is not an attempt to raise vampires from fictional characters to the status of women who really existed and really suffered and died. Nor is this an attempt to reinstate the more cultish aspects of lesbian-vampirism (for example, Califia's *The Vampire* or late-night gloatings over videos of *The Hunger*) by claiming that it has some profound political significance. But I do feel that as a fictional image the female vampire has potential for lesbian-feminists. The key is her defiance; and I read each new story and watch each new movie with hope, searching for echoes of this theme.

Finally, I remember my childhood isolation and the message I received from the family circle that I was an 'outsider', abnormal and therefore potentially dangerous; I remember my fear of losing my sense of self and worth; my fear of the dark.

I needed an invisible friend, an avenging and defending angel; one to give me strength, stroppiness, faith and pride in my own difference. I found a legion, and to me it seems no paradox that when I found the female vampire, I stopped being afraid of the dark. □



# Contradictions at the heart

***Are tendencies in feminism irrelevant in the nineties? Can coalitions be built on glossing over important differences between us? Sara Scott explores these questions in reviewing Alice Echols'* Daring to be Bad: A History of Radical Feminism 1967-1975 *and* Love and Politics *by Carol Ann Douglas.***

Unadorned feminism is back in style. It used to be *de rigueur* to use an identifying prefix: radical, revolutionary, socialist; a prefix which associated you with a particular range of beliefs and enabled people to make assumptions about how you lived and what you might be involved in politically. Now it seems the only commonly used prefixes are identity tags: Black, Jewish, lesbian; they tell you what somebody is, not what they believe or do. Most of us, most of the time, are just plain feminists again. Does this single label suggest a unity of purpose or a loss of clarity? Is it the success of one stream of feminism which has brought so many women under the one large theoretical umbrella? Or is it the demise of an active Women's Liberation Movement which has meant we are no longer so picky about our sisters' private convictions on the origins of patriarchy or the root cause of women's oppression?

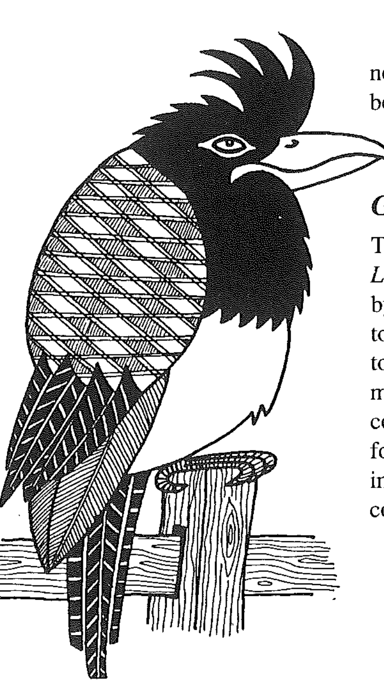
### *Anarcho-feminist or female supremacist?*

When Amanda Sebastyen drew her chart of 'Tendencies in the Movement' in 1978 (Notes from the Tenth Year) it mattered whether you were an anarcho-feminist or a female supremacist. Two new books from the USA argue diametrically opposed cases on whether it still matters today. Alice Echols' *Daring to be Bad* is a history of radical feminism in America between 1967 and 1975; Carol Ann Douglas' *Love and Politics* is a description of radical feminist and lesbian theories.

Carol Ann presents a wide range of theories not in order to argue which ones are correct, but rather to show that a diversity of beliefs need not prevent women working together. It's an eloquent plea for tolerance, variety and getting on with the business: for underneath we're all feminists and many roads may lead to many liberations. Here is a determinedly 'optimistic' outlook and one which reflects the common sense survival strategies of many feminists in the 90s. The confidence or arrogance of the 70s is long gone and few of us today claim to know *the* truth of women's oppression or the correct strategy for our liberation. In fact we barely speak of such things, which is why this book seems so old fashioned at the same time as being so clearly a product of the late 80s.

*Love and Politics* is about theory, and a large collection of radical and lesbian feminist theoretical positions are clearly and concisely described. It's wonderful to read a book which takes seriously the writings of Ti Grace Atkinson, Rita Mae Brown, bell hooks, Toni Cade Bambara et al. The 'old fashioned' thing is the fascination with the grand sweeps of feminist theory about the origins of patriarchy, revolutionary strategy and the ultimate goal of feminist movement. I love this stuff; it matters way beyond the academic confines of women's studies, but sadly it's a minority interest. Which is why when Carol Ann claims that fundamental theoretical differences divide us unnecessarily I think she is setting up something of an Aunt Sally. I believe we need *more*, not less, discussion and debate about these issues. Most active feminists don't think about the origins of male power from one solstice to the

Cath Jackson



next, but we must because good practice cannot be divorced from good theory.

### *Glossing over the differences*

This then is the contradiction at the heart of *Love and Politics*, a book about theory which, by its very production encourages more women to engage with feminist ideas – powerful ideas to be embraced passionately and rejected vehemently; but a book which at the same time discourages us from taking theory too seriously for it no longer defines the feminist practice of individuals. The result is confusing rather than conciliatory:

> Is a woman who believes that women and men ultimately can live together with autonomous organizational power for women, more likely to protest curbs on abortion than a woman who believes that a separate society for women or lesbians would be preferable? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Will the latter woman be more likely to organize a lesbian center than a women's center? Maybe, but either woman could make either choice.

Carol Ann defines lesbian feminism as a sub-category or off-shoot of radical feminism and then explains that there are two types of radical feminist: those 'of the late '60s' who believe 'men' and 'women' are socially constructed to serve male domination and those who believe that men are biologically predisposed to greater violence and aggression than women. Carol Ann claims that these different beliefs can comfortably co-exist under the same umbrella:

> It sounds schizophrenic for a movement to include both those who believe that sex class differences are biologically inherent and those who believe they aren't; but perhaps the split has positive aspects on the level of recruitment. Some women outside the movement may find the approach that women and men are basically the same attractive, while others may find the emphasis on male aggressiveness more compelling.

However, three pages later she points out that these two positions derive from different premises and intellectual traditions: one radical or liberal, the other conservative or reactionary. And one page on from that she argues that the feminist biological determinist argument is, in practice, a fractured logic:

> They may believe that men are more oppressive by nature than women, but if they take steps to prevent the rise of hierarchy among women in their groups they must believe that women are capable of being oppressors.

It's hard to know what to make of this kind of loose thinking. Having followed Carol Ann's writing for *Off Our Backs* for years it's my belief she hasn't a single biological determinist bone in her body. I can only assume therefore that her inclusionism is tactical. At this point the deep uncertainty of Carol Ann's book engulfs her cheerful portrayal of feminism as a many headed Hydra. Not for her the arguments with our feminist sisters; not for her the important discussions of the dangers of believing history to be cyclical or the 'female principle' to be coming soon.

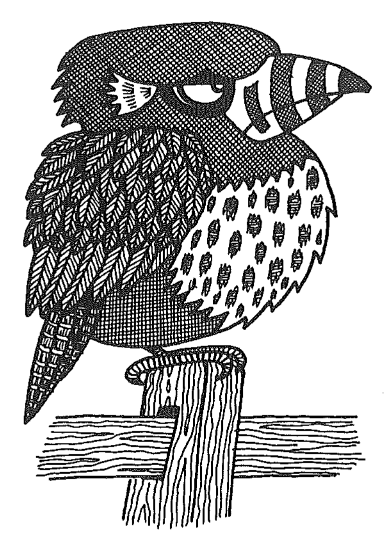
It would appear from *Love and Politics* that Carol Ann Douglas believes 'classic' radical feminism is over – bar the interviews for the archives. Her hope for the future of feminism lies in our accepting each other's solutions to the problem of male domination as equally valid and ultimately compatible: a separate women's society *and* a society in which women and men co-exist equally. This distinction she calls nationalist/integrationist and argues:

> Many of us are both nationalist and integrationist, both separatist and activist. All of our close associates may be women, while we work for a coalitionist strategy. We may attend both women's music festivals and conferences on occupational health . . . Perhaps if we realize what amalgams *all* of our politics are, we can be more tolerant of each other.

And continues:

> I do not see how our very plural feminism could lead to any outcome that was not plural, without ignoring the needs of many women.

What a leap from multiple strategies to achieve liberation to multiple completely different definitions of that liberation: one based on the premise that men are biologically inferior and dangerous and must therefore be rejected and avoided; another starting from the same point but advocating a reversal of current gender power relations as the solution; a third clinging to the possibility (however remote at present) of an equal society and the end of 'power' as we understand it. Yet Carol Ann, ready as ever to take all sides, quotes radical feminist and ex-Redstocking Brooke:



Cath Jackson

> 'Militant plurality' . . . besides echoing a very worn-out part of official US ideology, essentially means *everything* is right, including outright counter revolutionary endeavours . . . while a movement moves through diversity of views and infighting, in order to stay a movement it has to move in one direction. Militant pluralism ends up moving in a circle . . . The real trick to this position is that being anti-party lines and anti-correct lines is a line . . . underneath the 'no-line' is a liberal party line . . .

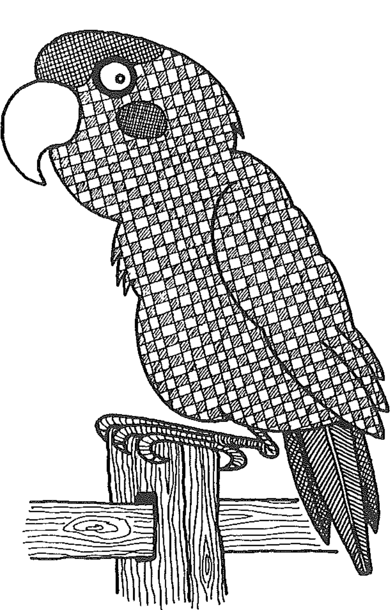
Hear, hear . . . but Brooke is talking about a movement that no longer exists, while Carol Ann is advocating a new realism of a woolly, all-embracing, undivided feminism where we can admire the old cantankerous schism-mongering theorists so long as we do not take their divisions for our own.

### *A handful of women*

On the other hand, Alice Echols defines radical feminism so narrowly that only five women who ever went into print can lay claim to the name. Her rigid ideas about what constitutes a political movement and revolutionary activity spring directly from the male left. I share many of her preferences and prejudices but to adopt her position would be political suicide. This handful of women active in the period on which she focuses, 1967-75, alone held the key to 'true' liberation. All others led only to what she sees as today's débâcle.

*Daring to Be Bad* is a history which claims to be based on around 40 interviews with feminist activists of the years 1967-75. Indeed the extracts from interviews are riveting for anyone into political gossip. The problem is that the story-line was written in advance; and the voices are no more than an 'authentic' dressing to give an 'Olde Hippye' flavour to the dish. Echols has a 'line' to prove: that radical feminism died in 1975.

Echols hates 'cultural feminism': the re-examination of women's history for resistance and role models as well as oppression, the emphasis on lesbianism, the celebration of women's 'culture' and 'values'. These she believes are the construction of a 'slave morality', a reversal in ideology of what is good and bad, valuable and despised, likely to encourage retreat not revolution. I too am far more excited by feminist activism than by lesbian ethics, but at the same time I know that 'cultural feminism' – what Mary Daly calls 'learning to live *now* the future we are fighting for' – increases the chances of my remaining sane, politically active and alive for some years yet. Echols claims that the re-evaluation of 'female values' by cultural feminists has led to what she calls the 'sexual puritanism' of the anti-pornography/anti s/m movement, through their analysis of men and women's different attitudes to sex and sexuality. 'Cultural feminism' portrays women as being more interested in relationships, affection and sensuality and men in domination and sex for sex' sake, Echols says. She claims that her favourite early radical feminists wanted an end to the double standard of sexual liberation where men used the theory to get easier access to women, and demanded equal access to the 'goodies' of the sexual revolution. Later feminists retreated into traditionally feminine 'romantic' notions which took the 'sex' out of sexuality.



### *Sex or sexual politics*

This central theme of *Daring to Be Bad* is introduced in Ellen Willis' introduction and clearly linked to current feminist debates about sex:

> On the surface, the impact of radical feminism on sexuality has been ambiguous. Radical feminists attacked both traditional morality and the sexism that had distorted a so-called sexual revolution . . . Most of us wanted the sexual revolution extended to women . . . But as Echols shows the movement also gave voice to a strong strain of sexual conservatism that viewed sexual freedom – or even sex itself – entirely in terms of male irresponsibility, misogyny and violence.

Echols assumes that if the particular radical feminists of which she is a fan, were around today then they would share her positions on current issues. But this is an abuse of history, for the politics of Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett and Kathie Sarachild cannot be lifted from 1969 and grafted onto the present. There is much that is brilliant, radical and insightful in the writings of these founding sisters – but there is also much that they did not know, could not have known, because it was 'their' feminist analysis that opened up the possibility for other women to speak and for us to discover

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so much more by 1990 about how men oppress women and how women resist. This knowledge has changed the course of our politics inevitably and irrevocably and that is what we have to work with today.

Echols has no time for ideas about the development of feminist thinking – hers is a portrait of decline – and to support her argument she truncates the feminist movement in the mid-seventies. This allows her to obliterate feminists such as Robin Morgan who did indeed head up a 'cultural feminist' dead end but re-emerged in the '80s with a broader focus, challenged and changed in particular by an understanding of race and class which she had at one time marginalised as a male left distraction from the central issue of women's shared oppression as women.

It is on the subject of sex that I shift smartly back to side with Carol Ann Douglas; for it is on the subject of sex that her own politics shine through and she is at her radical feminist best. Carol Ann refutes the idea that the celebration of female values – what Gayle Rubin calls 'feminism' – is the only source of a critique of dominance-based sex. She points out that the 'classic' radical feminists were committed to both ending gender distinctions and opposing dominance relations in sex.

Carol Ann claims:

> Many of those who are sexual libertarians have a socialist feminist rather than a radical feminist analysis of women's situation . . . This is not to say that all socialist feminists are sexual libertarians.

Echols is sympathetic to early radical feminism, but she believes that by cutting radical feminism adrift from other radical forces of the left, we allowed the women's movement to drift towards cultural feminism. 'The Five' whom she admires all served their political apprenticeships in the New Left; Echols partly blames the numbers of women without any history of political involvement joining the WLM for its deradicalisation. She likes formal, left-style organisation and activism; the quieter revolutions of kitchens and bedrooms have less appeal. She retains a notion of a private sphere, one inhabited particularly by sex where feminist political analysis is confounded:

> . . . by the late '70s quite a few feminists had discovered that sexuality was neither that malleable nor so easily aligned with one's politics.

### Calls to action

She believes that feminism's attempt to carry politics into the sexual encounter, by either cultural feminism's concentration on alternative lifestyles or liberal feminism's emphasis on individual equality, has opened the movement to co-option and liberalisation. Like Carol Anne, Echols' calls for activism, the acknowledgement of women's differences from one another and the possibility of coalition politics, as the ways ahead. But first we have to make up our minds about the root cause of male power and women's oppression:

> First [there has to be a] . . . reconsideration of whether women's interests are best served by deploying an ideology which affirms gender-differences and presents them as natural and immutable.

*Daring to Be Bad* lets its sexual liberalism get in the way of radicalism in many areas, but Echols does hold onto this crucial fact – the need for ideological clarity – which Carol Ann prefers to fudge. Both writers think we are facing a revival of activism. I believe we can only expect such a revival if theoretical debate and a taking of sides to accompany it. Both books could be important for such debate. □

# Issues of Blood

***Why did a feminist researcher choose to talk to men? What did they say about menstruation? Sophie Laws, in an edited chapter from her 'Issues of Blood', argues that research on men can reveal aspects of male power which otherwise remain hidden.***

I began my research with a sense that I did not have all the information I needed to make sense of my feelings about menstruation. The accounts in this article not only throw light upon men's experiences in relation to menstruation but also upon women's. Women are interested in what men feel about menstruation, understanding at some level that their experience is conditioned by men's – much of the writing on the subject, however, implies that what we do not know about men's consciousness is beyond reach, existing at a deep, perhaps unconscious, level. What my interviews showed is that there is much that is perfectly obvious to many men, but which male groups ensure is kept from women. Its absence from the 'literature' is part of this same process.

The interviews took a life-history approach, asking the men to recall how menstruation had entered their consciousness as children and how their knowledge of it had changed subsequently.

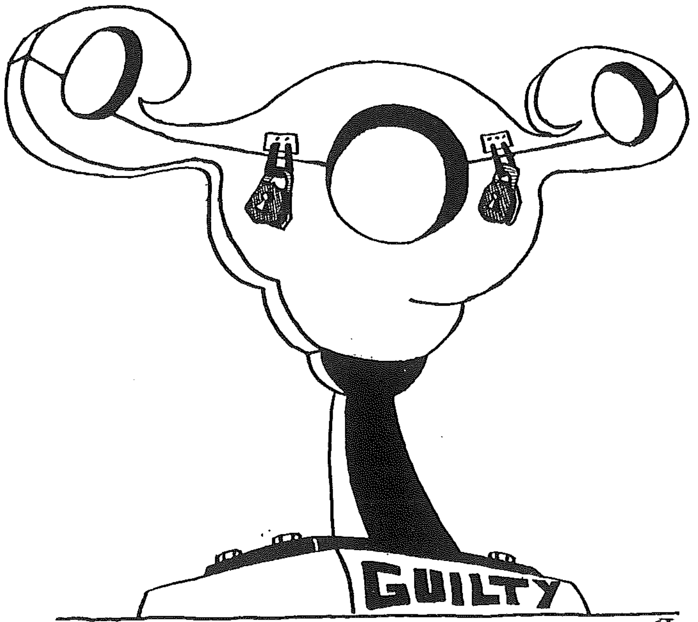
### Boyhood

About half the men in my sample reported boys at school joking about menstruation, the most common phrase mentioned being 'jam-rag' (or its variants 'jam sandwich', 'jam roll'): terms for sanitary towels.

> For years and years, I'm not the only person I'm sure, we used to . . . kids used to call, used to taunt girls, we used to say 'well, where's your jammy rags?' and things like that . . . people never knew what it was until I was older, but it's one of the things you just say; a way of getting at girls was to do that.

In some schools, the boys would make this an issue as a tactic in a dispute with the authorities.

> then I suppose the only other instances is from recognising this is what happens to girls when they don't come to school, and that kind of thing . . . And why girls are let off doing certain things like PE and that, or, you know, certain allowances were made, and I think . . . Boys at school used to think it was unfair . . .
>
> A lot of it is connected with girls crying, I think, premenstrual tension I suppose, but a lot of it was to do with . . . if girls cry they get let off, get allowed to do certain things and . . . like



we used to have to read out of books, in the English lesson, and girls used to be let off reading out a passage, taking a part, if they didn't want to, if they weren't in the mood for that kind of thing, but the boys were always pushed to do it. I suppose that's connected with other things as well, but . . .

Another theme relating to menstruation is of a general 'put down' that 'she's on', referring to ideas about hormones altering women's behaviour. One man said that he thought the girls at his school used this about each other: certainly the boys said it about girls.

More men only remembered it being talked about among boys, not used against girls directly (several had gone to boys-only schools). In that context it would be referred to 'in the kind of dirty joke manner'. One man referred to 'jam rag' being used as a term of abuse to another boy, which he explained conveyed the same as calling someone 'you prat'.

But I can't really remember men's jokes being geared to persecuting one girl in particular, it was more sort of 'it's us and them, and they have periods, so we've got a few jokes about that sort of thing'. Bit like Irish, Pakistanis . . .

Girls also use slang and make jokes about periods – but I would argue that even the same words have a rather different meaning in female mouths. I certainly do not want to imply that taking an entirely solemn attitude to periods would do girls any good. Laughing at one's own bodily functions and the inconveniences they bring with them is a healthy sign and is quite different from the 'them and us' joking of boys. That the man quoted above did not even know what was referred to by 'jammy rags', but knew that it was something he could say to 'get at girls', demonstrates my point. He understood the sexual politics without understanding the subject matter.

–I vaguely remember jokes about jamrags that I didn't understand but . . .

–they were very few, I mean it was pretty bad taste joking actually . . . a boys' school . . . a couple of allusions, not much. I think on the whole the taboo was pretty solid. And a joke about jamrags was breaking the taboo if anything, and that was in bad taste on the whole, most people didn't do it.

This idea of bad taste recurs in the data about adult men. But menstruation as such is not central to 'dirty joking' – sexuality is the main theme, for adults and for older boys.

The following conversation in the men's group shows how adult male culture may be transmitted to younger males:

the first memory I've got, the first thing . . . about actually talking about menstruating was being aware of these rituals that Hells Angels went through. The thing was that they were, all these Hells Angels got their wings by various things like you know pissing on their jeans until they stood up, and they're so dirty . . . and one of them was having sex with a woman who was menstruating. Do you remember that?

—yes . . .

—I definitely remember that as being one of the first times I was really aware. And it was in that sense, one of my very earliest memories, very much linked up with, it was some strange, er, almost perverse ritual. You know, sex and menstruation were really a bad thing, that bad people did, [laughs] in order to get accepted in a really heavy group of people . . .

—I can remember at school, reading those books, and remembering, and presumably what you were supposed to do was to share the horror of the author in writing about this, and I can remember thinking, gosh, ugh, no, you know . . .

—my god, yeah,

—no way . . .

—Mm. The first time I had sex with a woman when she was menstruating I definitely remember feeling, thinking back to these articles about the Hells Angels. Absolutely definitely. I mean not, I hope not in any sort of conquering . . . It was almost as if I'd sort of knocked down one more taboo. I felt a bit cocksure of myself . . . (Group)

### *Adult men: sexual access*

Rather more than half of the men I interviewed had heard adult men joking about menstruation. This had occurred in a variety of settings, from workplaces (in heavy industry but also among scientific workers) to male leisure situations such as football changing rooms.

*H*: I'm thinking of the expression 'rags', you know, 'having the rags up her' is a very common phrase. And so, you know, you'll get nowhere with her she's got the rags up her. It's all to do with sort of having sex with them . . .

*SL*: Not being able to have sex with them . . .

*H*: Which is not, in their thoughts, in our thoughts, it's about not being able to have sex with them when they're menstruating, therefore there's no point in having any relationships with them [laughs] . . . and at that time of the month they can't have sex so therefore . . . you look elsewhere.

The last sort of job where I can remember it happening was probably ten years ago where the boss was, he had a particular sort of hangup about it. He really was a bit weird. He still is . . .

*SL*: So what does he say?



*H*: . . . he's a married man but in a hospital situation where there are a lot of young girls around, young nurses, young women, who are eligible, if you like, and it's funny, but in the hospital where we worked, and he still works, there was a female toilet just outside the lab so we could always see the women going to the toilet and he actually used to time them and if they were taking a long time he used to say 'Oh well, they've got the rags up, there's no point in chatting her up' . . . It's like trying to impress people by being that weird, I don't know . . . There are a lot of jokes that go around about women who are menstruating. Not jokes but . . . sort of perversions, if you like. I remember, er, this particular guy, and the group of us at the time were very, almost turned on by the fact of suddenly being . . . menstruating. And the fact that it's a bit messy, you know if you have sex then there's blood everywhere, you know that sort of thing, it almost became . . . sensual. And there was this thing about grabbing hold of the tampon string with your teeth and dragging it out . . . [laughs] . . . the sort of, er, almost nauseous feeling about making love and having oral sex when someone's menstruating . . . And it was really sort of getting high on . . . on the perverted, well, trying to make sex during menstruation look perverted and therefore get high on it . . .

*SL*: would he talk about his wife like this? . . .
*H*: O yeah. If the wife's menstruating then he's obliged to, er, well, there are two things . . . One he's obliged to, I mean I'm particularly thinking about this guy but it is because he's a very typical example I think. A man whose wife is menstruating is either obliged to go into this . . . er sort of nauseous act of making love and having sex in that taboo situation, or he's got to look somewhere else for sex, er, yes.

This sort of joking seems to be the most common type. One man said he thought he was not representative of men generally because:

I think a lot of men will use it as a derogatory term . . . from previous experience, they'll say 'well she was fucking having her period, wasn't she?' meaning they didn't have sex. 'She wasn't feeling very well', as though she did it on purpose to spite him or something. A lot of men think in those terms . . .

Another echoes the point made by *H*:

When I was younger, you know, you used to say 'oh, hard luck', kind of thing [laughs] 'picked the wrong one', that kind of thing [laughs]

Women are useful only for sex, and therefore are interchangeable, disposable. Cristabel Pankhurst called this the doctrine of sex slavery: 'That woman is sex and beyond that nothing' (1913).

It is spelt out in the following account, from a man who had worked on an all-male shop floor in an engineering firm.

it was all men there, it was a much more divorced reality . . . the women were at home doing the cooking, and they were there, so they'd talk about sexual conquests if they had any, or they'd talk about how inadequate their wives were if they didn't. And that's where I first got sort of experience of pornography, and the way men make sex out to be dirty, and associate sex with violence, and domination, that to have sex, there was some sort of suffering involved and it was mainly the woman that did all the suffering and the man that did all the raping. I can remember a lot of rape fantasy going on in the pornography and in men's conversations when I was working there . . .

*SL*: in the pornography, were there any references to menstruation?

*E*: No, that's totally unerotic in male conceptions. Yeah, I mean the idea of that . . . you know? It's just a turn off, for men. The jokes you'd make, about Thalidomide dogs being taken for a drag, or something, the same sort of inference that it's a sick joke, you know, menstruation is a sick business, you know . . .

*SL*: It isn't exactly that the women are sick, is it?

*E*: No, it's more like women, in a group of human beings, are redundant, when they're thought about in association with menstruation. That women and menstruation aren't erotic, you know, you don't sort of talk about them to stimulate a conversation.

Julian Wood studied 'boys' sex talk', among some 'disruptive' London boys and found that 'the reproductive and excremental aspects of the female body were constantly referred to by the boys in that fixated-disgusted tone edged with nervousness and surrounded by giggling' (p. 22). In analysing the sexism of this kind of talk, one aspect he describes is that 'Women are presumed to exist primarily in and through their bodies as opposed to their whole selves. These bodies are there to provide pleasure for men but, at the same time, these bodies are alien (to men) and therefore weird, dirty, and even sinister' (1983: 9).

The ambiguity about whether or not sex during periods is desirable for men should not be allowed to obscure the central message of all these 'jokes', which is about control. In this world view, if sex is to take place, the *man* pulls the tampon out, he relates only to the woman's vagina, not to her as a person with her own feelings.

There is an accusation within much of this talk that women 'use' menstruation – one man told me about this in relation to menstrual pain:

I can remember feeling irritated, feeling annoyed, feeling there was nothing . . . that I didn't have any control over the situation, and that it was something that women used to exert control.

Women are, I think, felt to be likely to want to avoid work as well as sex. Interestingly, women are in one sense held to be using menstruation to control men, indeed almost to be in control of menstruation itself, while at the same time they are seen as controlled *by* it.

The other major theme of male talk in addition to the preoccupation with sanitary towels and sexual access, is that women are unreliable, out of control, at 'that time of the month'. It seems to be so, though, that male groups may support a particular set of ideas on this. One account is explicit about this, that 'it was not discussed with the women'.

## *Language: euphemisms and terms of abuse*

Although there has been very little research of any sort done on men's talk about menstruation, there is some evidence that my material is likely to be fairly typical of western cultures.

It was a study of menstrual euphemisms which first drew my attention to the possibility that men and women actually have two quite separate vocabularies and hence ranges of discourse about menstruation. The first studies of language about menstruation merely collected terms from informants of both sexes and recorded them as 'of' the culture. But in her article 'American Menstrual Euphemisms' (1975) Virginia L. Ernster sorted contributions to a folklore archive into those coming from women and those from men, and further enquired into where her informants had learnt the terms they contributed. She found two different sets of terms – the ones men used having 'sexual and derogatory connotations'. A wider range of terms was contributed by women, these being used partly so that women could tell other women that they were menstruating without any men present realising their meaning, and partly to communicate to male partners with less embarrassment.

When I asked men in my sample what words they had heard used for menstruation, they generally volunteered terms they had heard from women. Most of them felt that 'period' was the most commonly used term, followed by 'that time of the month'. Variations on this, adding a negative tinge, are 'wrong time of the month', 'her funny time of the month', 'bad time of the month'.

Only two men had heard 'the curse' used – this was a term I suggested to several men, thinking it fairly common, and some were quite startled by it. 'Menstruate' was mentioned as never being used in ordinary speech.

The variety of terms which the men in my sample had learnt from women is not very great. The contrast with women's language is striking. Jane Black has informally collected terms from women who attend her women's health classes in Manchester. Her list goes as follows:

Has it come?; That time of the month; The friend; Lady in the red dress; I've got a visitor; Monthlies; Are you on?; Unwell/ill; Issue; Jam and Bread; Grandma's here; Aunt Susie; The reds are in; Are you seeing red?; Poorly; Curse; Redlight; The red flag's flying; The captain's aboard; Star period; United playing at home today (a Manchester football reference!).

Women explained to Ernster that one purpose of women's terms is to avoid male attention, so it makes sense that many men would not necessarily recognise them.

Terms learnt from men were usually not mentioned when I asked about euphemisms, but came up when I asked directly about talk about menstruation in male groups. The majority of terms refer to sanitary towels: 'jam rags', 'jammy rags', 'jam sandwich', 'jam roll', 'having the rags up'.

The only other terms mentioned as used by men were that one man's father called it 'women's troubles' if he mentioned it at all, and that another recalled a dispute with a female supervisor at work where afterwards another man had consoled him by putting her behaviour down to 'the monthlies'.

The emphasis on sanitary wear in US men's talk is striking. There is, further, a common term of abuse in Afro-Caribbean slang, 'ras claat' or 'tor ass clot', from 'your arse cloth' – yet another reference to sanitary towels. This language draws attention to the very thing which women put such energy into hiding. Other shared themes are the preoccupation with sexual access and the accusations of emotional instability in women.

Some menstrual 'jokes' are recounted in G. Legman's unspeakably nasty book *The Rationale of the Dirty Joke* (1969). Legman fails to distance himself from the joke-tellers he discusses, and we may take his work as more 'of' than 'about' male culture. He categorises these jokes within a section entitled 'Sex Hate' as dealing with 'Menstruation and other Rejections' and under 'Displaced Aggressions'.

It is Legman's own comment which reinforces my analysis – that he himself perceives references to menstruation as 'sick'. Jokes on the same sort of theme place menstruation within the context of the rapist mentality – it is seen as provocation to violence:

A man takes his girl out for a buggy ride. He drops the reins and begins to hug and kiss her, but she refuses, saying that she is menstruating. 'You know, there's another way you can satisfy me', he says, but she explains that she has piles. He drives a little further, stops the horse, gets out, picks up a rock, gets back in and says, – Now just you tell me that you got lockjaw, and I'll crush your skull!' (p. 279)

## *Pornography*

There are levels of male culture where menstruation is not even mentioned. Andrea Dworkin wrote to me (1982: personal communication) that 'There is no doubt that there is a general refusal to show menstruation – I don't know why' and further:

The only specific reference (that I can remember) that I found in the pornography I read to menstruation was in Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*. As I remember, somewhere towards the end (after a thousand or so pages of unmitigated atrocity), Sade's imagination for horror spent, he mentions menstruating women and blacks. There is in pornography a lot of slicing of female genitals – obvious references to menstruation, I think, though in the peculiar code of the woman hater; there is also one special kind of lesbian photo-layout that recurs constantly, which is two women smearing paint all over each other – at first I couldn't figure out how this was a sexual act in any sense (let alone one so common that porn mag after porn mag has it represented) but then came upon a comment from Freud to Jung that menstrual blood represented excrement, after which the endless smearing of paint seemed obvious – paint representing menstrual blood (woman with woman equals essence of woman) representing filth. The other imagery related to menstruation in pornography is simply the enormous overload of instruments near, around, or in the vagina that are knife-like (vagina means sheath).

Elaine and English Showalter also mention Sade's reference to menstruation as notable for its restraint and as unusual among Victorian pornographers (1972). Note that Sade mentions menstruation and Black people at the same time. In my own memory of hearing, as a young girl, the story about the Hells Angels' initiation rituals which the men's group mentions, there was this same connection made. The men won 'red wings' by having sex with a menstruating woman, and 'black wings' for having sex with a Black woman. When I write 'having sex' I am aware that rape is quite likely what is actually meant. This kind of male discourse makes no distinction between the two, for the woman's point of view is irrelevant. The element of pollution-belief, of disgust, which forms part of white racism, appears to be sexualised into a form which has something in common within the male view of menstruating 'women', seen presumably as menstruating white women.

To summarise the messages male culture conveys about menstruation: women's inferiority to men lies at the back of it all, so much taken for granted that it need not be spelt out. Two specific aspects of this are (a) that women's genitals are disgusting/produce disgusting substances (this is expressed in the attention to sanitary towels), and (b) that women are ruled by their hormones. Menstruation is also sexualised – it is most often joked about as if it related to men, to heterosexuality. Male culture sees women's bodies as existing to serve male sexual desires – menstruation is dealt with as female resistance, justifying either violation or the man going elsewhere for sex. Menstruation is thus used to express the idea that women are interchangeable – if they are sexually useless to a man, they may as well not exist. There

is nothing erotic (as in sensual) about this joking – in so far as it is sexual, the sexuality is entirely about power and control.

The male culture portrays men as absolutely in control of sex with women. When it is confronted with menstruation, which has nothing essentially to do with men or sex, it perceives this internal female phenomenon as somehow threatening to male power. Therefore male joking attempts to bring menstruation within the arena of sexuality – under male-centred heterosexual control.

### *Must we listen?*

But why should we concern ourselves with this? Why is joking among men important to women? Conspiracy theory tends to be used only as a term of abuse in sociology, but the fact remains that there exists in our society a whole spectrum of men-only groupings which exclude women and within which male supremacist ideology is unchallenged. This must affect relations between the sexes, and if we are to understand the gender order we must look at every part of the society, not just those which are easily made available to our eyes.

Mary Daly calls this male talk 'spooking from the locker room'. She writes that:

> most of the time this language is used in all-male environments. Yet it is the common male view of all women and, although most women do not hear it directly, we receive the message in a muted way. It is conveyed through silences, sneers, jeers, excessive politeness, paternalistic praise and disapproval, aggressive physical contact (an arm around the shoulder, a pat on the behind), invasive stares. Since women often do not *hear* the messages of obscenity directly, we are spooked. For the invasive presence and the intent are both audible and inaudible, visible and invisible.
>
> Moreover, women are conditioned to pretend not to hear/see the constant and violent bombardments of obscenity, for we have been taught the lesson that since verbal violence is a 'substitute' for physical assault, we should be grateful for such seemingly mild manifestations of misogynism. Thus, spooking from the locker room, the unacknowledged noise of omnipresent male obscenities, constitutes the 'background music' which continually confuses and fragments consciousness. Exorcising this invasive presence requires acknowledging its existence and refusing to shuffle. This has the effect of bringing the spookers out into the open. (1978: 323)

Paradoxically, Legman comes up with the same sort of analysis. He sees dirty jokes as a sort of 'verbal rape' – 'a vocal and inescapable sexual relationship with other persons of the desired sex'. He suggests that such joking also has a secondary function 'to absorb and control anxiety' (pp. 13, 14).

Women anthropologists who have studied life in English villages have found this sort of behaviour important in maintaining male domination at the local level. Imray and Middleton (1983) write about Audrey Middleton's experience when she violated the rules about a woman's place in the village cricket club and challenged the men's authority. She was at once subject to obscene joking, placing her as 'an object to be screwed'. Anne Whitehead (1976) witnessed pub life in a Herefordshire village which hinged around men vying for superiority in constant joking and teasing. She observed that women were used as 'counters in joking currency' (p. 192), having no existence in that culture as human individuals. She reports that women appear in the joking in at least three ways: firstly, there is obscene, vulgar language; secondly, there are contemptuous and degrading stereotypes of women, part of the ideology of sex differences; thirdly, jokes are sometimes concerned with control over specific wives. We can see that each of these three types of reference appear in the range of male talk about menstruation – there are obscenities: 'jam rag', 'having the rags up her'; there are stereotypes of female unreliability and emotionality; and there is concern over control of individual women, in this case focusing on the issue of sexual service from menstruating women.

Whitehead writes that 'It is difficult for men to treat their relationships with wives as relationships with people when wives are used as objects in another arena' (p. 195). We may then consider what effect male joking about menstruation has upon men's individual relationships with women, especially given how difficult it is for women to initiate discussion with men on this subject.

So what is the nature of these male groups, this male culture? Where and when do they tend to occur, how can we characterise them? As a woman, I cannot answer these questions properly, for my access to the answers is too limited. I feel some embarrassment in presenting the data in this chapter for I know it to be incomplete, but am unable (or perhaps unwilling) to complete it. No man I have spoken to about this has denied knowledge of it – none has volunteered to tell me anything more. One or two have suggested that there is 'worse than that' – in such a tone that I have not pressed them for details. There is some absurdity in my situation – one of a minority of women in a social science profession dominated by men striving by roundabout means to discover aspects of 'our' culture which are common knowledge among men.

During my work I was often made aware that I was asking to be told things women are not meant to hear. Two men themselves became aware of this. One said at one point 'Sorry I'm being so upfront about it. Do you find that offensive?', and the other also almost apologised for what he told me: 'I have to be frank'. These were the two men quoted above who gave the fullest accounts of male culture. I noticed that several of the other men said that while they had heard such talk, they could not remember jokes or words they'd heard used. This further reinforced my impression that these are sexual insults which are meant to be kept among men. The telling of these created unease within the interviews. Several of the men told me quite personal details about their sexual experiences, and, for instance, their feelings about blood – but this did not create the same kind of awkwardness. One responded to my prompting him to tell me about men's talk in more detail like this: 'Yes. Not sure if we can talk further about that. I don't know what sort of area you're interested . . . '

When I was asking about joking among men, several of them would refer to 'the sort of things boys say', 'in the schoolboy sense', or just 'you know', appealing to a commonsense knowledge that I did not have, and one man flatly refused to spell it out for me. I came away with the general impression that what they were ashamed of (if shame is the right word) was not their personal feelings, but their participation in male groups which talk about women in this way.

Not all male groups discuss menstruation or for that matter anything to do with women. For instance boys in single-sex schools seemed to joke about such things far less than groups of boys in mixed schools. And in adult life too it would seem that male groups which co-exist closely with mixed-sex situations are the most actively unpleasant about women.

The essential point seems to be that the men are moving individually between the family where they have contact with women, and the male group, whether it is a work group or a leisure one.

Many of the men who told me about jokes about menstruation emphasised that menstruation was not a central topic of such joking. What is central is 'sex' – meaning the sexual degradation of women.

However this kind of male talk must certainly be partly responsible for men's attitudes to menstrual etiquette between women and men. If the male culture regards menstruation as purely discrediting, entirely disgusting, then it is only to be expected that well-intentioned men will tend to avoid talk with women about it, assuming that they might easily give offence. Young girls can grow up hearing no mention of menstruation, discovering the 'taboo' when they discover menstruation itself. Young boys may have the same experience, but they are just as likely to grow up hearing talk about it which conveys men's belief in the inferiority of women, rather than any 'information' on the physical facts of menstruation. The silences and the obscenities are intimately connected.

Although I have referred to 'male culture' in a general way, my evidence relates to white English culture of the 1980s specifically. One would need much more data to work out what would be the limits of this kind of ideology in terms of social structures which would support it. It is clear from the contents of the men's talk that how men speak about menstruation is strongly connected to surrounding sets of beliefs held in society.

My hope is that the anger induced by listening to men on the subject of menstruation will transform itself into an increased confidence that women can and must change these attitudes. The search for the individual 'healthy attitude' comes to seem absurd when we grasp the scale of the problem in the social attitudes surrounding us. Women need to talk about menstruation as friends, lovers, sisters, mothers and daughters, but *on our terms* this time. The question is not what is wrong with us. If we refuse to let patriarchal ideas set us against one another, we could come up with entirely new ways of seeing our bodies, and a new set of problems worth discussing. □

Sophie Laws, *Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation* (Macmillan 1990)




Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (Women's Press, 1979)

Virginia L. Ernster, 'American menstrual expressions', *Sex Roles* (1:1, 1975).

Linda Imray and Audrey Middleton, 'Public and private: making the boundaries', in *The Public and Private: Social Patterns of Gender Relations* (Heinemann, 1983).

G. Legman, *The Rationale of the Dirty Joke* (Jonathan Cape, 1969).

Christabel Pankhurst, *Plain Facts about a Great Evil* (Women's Social and Political Union, 1913).

Elaine and English Showalter, 'Victorian women and menstruation', in *Suffer and be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Methuen, 1980).

Julian Wood, 'Boys' sex talk – groping towards sexism', in *Gender and Generation.*

### *Interviewing men*

It took me a very long time to get around to the idea of interviewing men as a way of learning about social attitudes towards this 'women's subject'. It was actually a seminar on patriarchal relations and the research process given by Sue Scott which made me consider it as a real possibility. She reflected there on the ways in which the social relations involved in the actual doing of research affect what research gets done, particularly the way that qualitative methods 'fit' with femininity, and raised questions about the assumption that such methods also unproblematically fit with feminism. She pointed out how little feminist research is done involving interviewing men.

So I had to think about how this idea had come to my mind before and been dismissed as absurd, unthinkable. I realised that I had not taken the idea seriously, not because it was an uninteresting research idea, but because of my assumptions about the social situation I would be creating for myself. I wrote at the time that:

'I would actually feel quite threatened, afraid, sitting in a room with a man, asking questions about his views on my body. There's also an element of not wanting the truth spelt out to me . . . but it is surely illuminating that I myself am so willing to speak with women about it but can barely contemplate speaking to men.' Journal 16.2.82)

I found in analysing the interview material that there was a problem about my ability to understand what the men were saying. There are two kinds of understanding involved here, an understanding as a woman, what you might call 'getting the message' which often led me into a reaction of anger or despair, and also an understanding *with* the men, of what their words meant to them. The difficulty was that I had in a sense to overcome my hearing of 'the message' in order to understand in any other way – to 'make sense' of what they said. Certainly I found that I understood and indeed heard very little of what was said in the interviews and the group discussion the first time I heard it. It was absolutely essential to have them on tape so that I could read and reread the transcripts, and so that I could benefit from other people's comments on them.

Interpretation was often difficult. One of my problems was I think that having interviewed men, I was perversely reluctant to let them set the agenda. I found it difficult, in any case, to free myself sufficiently from my own preconceptions to produce a coherent description of the men's point of view.

This experience has made me very aware of how much sociologists generally depend upon empathy with their research subjects in making their interpretations. A great many studies are done on groups of people the researcher initially feels some empathy with, and in other cases researchers describe the speedy development of such empathy. 'Going native' is a recognised research problem, but what is rarely noted is the utter dependency of all research upon some kind of fellow-feeling. If social reality is indeed a matter of shared meaning, what happens when the researcher does not and cannot afford to share meaning with the researched? I am not here talking about the interview situation: it is relatively easy for a person with average social skills to simulate rapport with a wide range of other people for the duration of an interview. The problem is one of interpreting the words of someone whose social location is in some way alien to one's own.

The effect was that I was aware of the interviewing and the research process generally as a power struggle in a way that most researchers seem not to be. Perhaps I mean more exactly that I was aware of the need in myself to exert what power I could over my 'subjects'. After spending days transcribing the men's group discussion I wrote that I felt upset and angry, 'ground down' by the process: 'I have somehow to reduce them to "data", use them for my own ends' (Journal 8.4.83).

It remains an open question in my mind what ethics a feminist researcher can follow in dealing with men. I have stuck closely to the contract I made with each of my interviewees and with the group. They voluntarily agreed to be interviewed, and I agreed to protect their identities. I do not feel that I owe them anything more, and have not given them privileged access to my research results.

Basically my ethics in the research situation derive from my political principles and not from any abstract or general ideas about research ethics. I cannot treat all people indifferently, 'without prejudice', when what I am dealing in is sexual politics. I make no apology for this as I believe that what I have done is precisely what all researchers do.

The very notion of the need for special professional ethics enshrines the idea that the particular social status of the professional creates specific ethical problems. It is all about power, and my view is that the only way to guard against the abuse of power is to be as fully conscious as possible of all the relevant power dynamics in any given situation.

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