

FROM CAGED BIRD TO EMANCIPATED WOMAN

Sarojini Jayawickrama

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

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

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

The anthology is structured chronologically, listing authors by their date of birth, and organized more broadly in periodized divisions — the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century to the present day. Each section is

prefaced by an historical overview, erudite and insightful, which helps the reader (the anthology is aimed primarily at students in higher education) to familiarize he/r self with the cultural milieu of the period and gain a broader grasp of the social, material, cultural and historical context. A timeline pinpoints significant events of the time, historical and literary.

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

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

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

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

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

In Their Own Words

The anthology represents the articulation in their "own words", in diverse voices, of women's perception of the world in which they live and of their identity in that male dominated world. Their writings express their search for an individual identity and selfhood that was often denied them. Theirs was an identity defined by the men they married or their relationship to men (as wives and daughters). This was particularly so in the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries when they were assigned the stereotypical role as "the angel in the house", which restricted them to the confines of the

home, limiting their scope of activity to the private domain, the only world they could inhabit, and stifling the possibilities of fulfilling the rich creative potential within them. But this did not necessarily mean that every woman let herself be imprisoned within these narrow confines. Need, or often desire, led them into the outer world to work in fields, in the homes of others, in domestic service, and in shops and factories, to support themselves and their families. Their homes were located not only in England and the United States, but in places as far away from these metropolitan centres as Zimbabwe, the Caribbean, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and the islands of the South Pacific.

Transcending the Class Divide

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Different Genres

The anthology includes not only selections from the traditional literary genres of fiction, poetry and drama but, since women's writing often transcends these boundaries, it also has essays on philosophy and feminist theory; for instance, Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Women with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects" (366-82), and the articulation of newer voices like Paula Gunn Allen, whose perspective is Native American, and that of bell hooks (1894-98), whose viewpoint is African American. There are letters and selections from autobiographies that reveal very personal facets of the lives of the writers, the

material conditions of their lives, the laws, the social structure and the norms and conventions that impact on them. The seventeenth century memoir of Lady Anne Halkett, the correspondence of eighteenth century US First Lady, Abigail Adams, the slave narratives of Mary Prince, Harriet Jacobs and Hannah Crafts, and the "Captivity Narrative" of Mary Rowlandson, who was English born but emigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1639 and was then captured and kept hostage by an Indian tribe. Her narrative became a bestseller and the literary model for the many captivity narratives that followed. These are some of the memorable writings in the anthology. Coming closer to the present times, there are the memoirs of Jean Rhys (familiar to many of us through her "Wide Sargasso Sea") on her life in the Caribbean, domestic handbooks featuring recipes and household advice from Isabella Beeton (nineteenth century), hymns, both patriotic and devotional, lyrics by blues artistes and the newest genre of women's writing in print, the graphic memoir; a selection from Alison Bechdel's "Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic", a comic book format which is an unusual approach to women's autobiography, suggests the richness, the diversity and the time span of the selections, many of which are published in their totality.

Women: the Dispossessed in Society

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

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

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

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

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

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

Politics of Location

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

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

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

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

"Women's Worlds", traces the extension of the world of women's writing, the expansion of its horizon as social upheavals changed the configuration of societies through dispersal of people and the shifting of populations through the initiation of the slave trade in 1441, colonization, the movement of people from England and Ireland to North America, armed conflicts like the two world wars of the twentieth century, and the Russian Revolution of 1917, which led to the dwindling of the male population, giving women — though temporarily — a different role to play in society, emerging out of the confines of their homes to work in hospitals and factories. The women's suffragette movement of the nineteenth century, the independence movements in Africa, the Caribbean and Asia and the attendant decolonization, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the civil rights movement and the anti Vietnam war campaigns, are some of the significant movements that had an impact on women's writing, the impetus for women who were moved to write on issues which arose out of these upheavals. By the end of the nineteenth century, English educated Indian born women, such as Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, were writing back to the colonizers, presenting their own perspective on their world (1132).

Breaking Taboos

The anthology traces the trajectory of women's writing through the fourteenth century to the present day where its scope extends to encompass subjects that had been taboo

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

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

The first woman writer in English to write mainly for publication, she reiterates in her writings the power struggle between men and women. The two selections from her writings included in the anthology attest to her feminism. The reader's attention is focused on the fact that she is a woman and she complains about the way her sex influences her writings and their reception. She was considered eccentric, partly for her taste for extravagant and theatrical dress but more for her intellectual taste and she gained a reputation for madness as she did not conform to the current norms of her society. In an age when women were primarily encouraged to spend their time on the pursuit of piety, Margaret's interest was natural philosophy (science). She read widely on the subject and wrote learned essays on it. In 1655 she presented her "Philosophical and Physical Opinions" (101-102) to the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, hoping for recognition. She gained some of the recognition she sought when, after "fierce debate among its membership," The Royal Society of London invited her to visit that prestigious institution to observe two of the most prominent scientists of the seventeenth century, Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke, conduct their experiments. She addresses her epistle "To the Two Universities," beginning "most famously learned", and concluding with the words:

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

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

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

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

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

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

(1774). It defined the parameters within which women were supposed to live:

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

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

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

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

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

Narratives of Slavery

From the nineteenth century onwards the English speaking world could no longer be considered ethnically and culturally —homogeneous, but the common link they had was a language—the English language which they used to express their different ways of perceiving the world and what it was to be a woman at the time. The nineteenth century women writers —were a heterogeneous group dispersed all over the world. They were British, American and indigenous women of colonized areas, black women in the United States who did not have the same rights as white women, and white women who moved to the edges of the British Empire. These women came from different class positions and held widely divergent views on the burning issues of the day. The many women working on the sugar plantations in North America and the Caribbean were denied any education so that their lives are largely unchronicled in print, but fortunately we have access to one or two voices; for instance, the narrative of Mary Prince, born a slave in Bermuda and sold three times

by the time she was twelve years old, moving from there to Antigua —and then to England as she was passed from one "master" to another as a commodity of sale. Her "story" was transcribed by the abolitionists, by Susan Strickland to whom she narrated it, and it was published in London and Edinburgh in 1831. This mediated version resulted in a certain amount of dilution of its impact and cast doubt on its authenticity, for it was while she was in the service of Thomas Pringle, the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, that, at his request, Prince narrated her story to Strickland. The suspicion arose that the story was "doctored", that the abolitionists may have influenced her to soft pedal certain aspects, for instance the sexual abuse she was subjected to which is merely hinted at. About the man referred to only as Mr. D she says (as transcribed by Strickland):

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sojourner Truth's narrative in the anthology was dictated by her to a white secretary, Olive Gilbert. Truth gave herself that name to express her dedication to sojourning in the land speaking God's truth. It also presents a speech Truth made at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, which came to be known as the "Ar'n't I a Woman" speech. One version of it published here is the report that was published in the "Anti Slavery Bugle" of 1851. There is greater immediacy in the version of the speech (609-11) as "Recorded in Reminiscences of Frances D. Cage", a feminist activist who was the president of the meeting. Cage's version attempts to capture Truth's own words and the cadences of her voice. The very fact that the convention was held and that Truth, a black woman, succeeded in speaking at it against much opposition from the audience attests to how far women particularly black women, had "sojourned" on the path to real emancipation. Once she was legally free, Truth spent her time speaking against slavery and for universal human rights.

In the United States, the nineteenth century was the time when anti-slavery sentiments and the abolitionist cause gained

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

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

Among these facts are:

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

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

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

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

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

A Wider World of Women's Writing

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

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

A Global Framework

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

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

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

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

Two Sri Lankan Writers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yet another poem by a Sri Lankan writer included in the anthology which I would like to comment on is Yasmine Gooneratne's "Peace Game", not simply because Ranasinghe and Gooneratne share a nationality but, more importantly, share certain concerns as in the two poems included in the anthology. Gooneratne, like Ranasinghe, has lived in different cultural milieus and has written in many genres, poetry, short stories, and novels. Her work expresses the diasporic writer's

experience of migration and the cultural contradictions and tensions implicit in living between East and West. The personal and the political intersect in her writing as in the poem featured in the anthology where Gooneratne comments on the social and political overtones of a game she played with the children down the street where she lived "The Peace Game". The game becomes an allegory for war/peace, where the contending factions do not have "an equality of arms", not battling on a level playing field. She problematizes the concept of peace. Like most -writers of the postmodern period, Gooneratne questions the validity of definitions—the impossibility of nailing down language, restricting a word to a single meaning which closes off all other possibilities, a question Toni Morrison discusses -in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1612-17). Gooneratne's poem is open ended:

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

Many Englishes

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

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

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

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

Looking back as an adult woman, I think often of the effort it must have taken her to transcend her own tiredness (and who knows what assaults or wounds to her spirit she had to put aside so that she could give something to her own)... in many post-slavery black families, it was a gesture parents were often too weary,

too beaten down to make. Those of us who were fortunate enough to receive such care understood its value. Politically our young mother Rosa Bell, did not allow the white supremacist culture of domination to completely shape and control her psyche and her familial relationships. Working to create a homeplace that affirmed our beings, our blackness, our love for one another was necessary resistance.

Conclusion

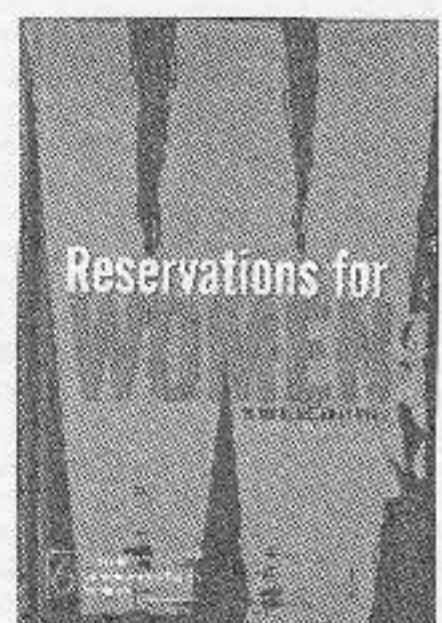
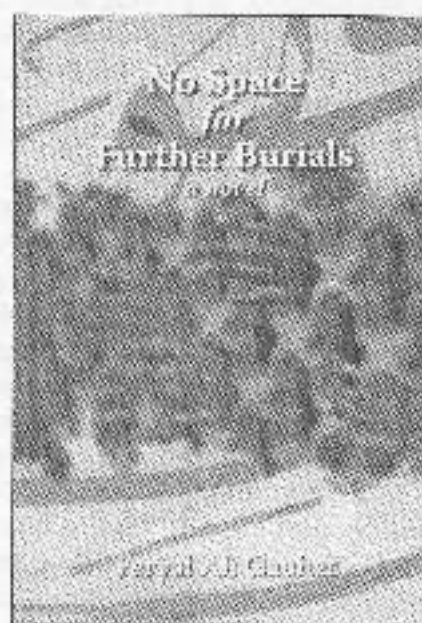
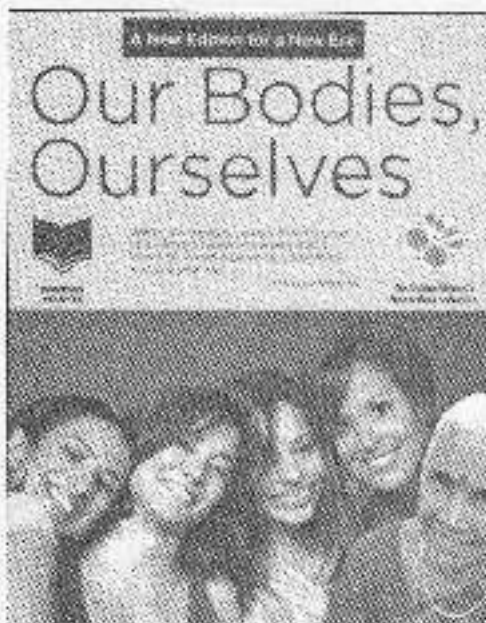
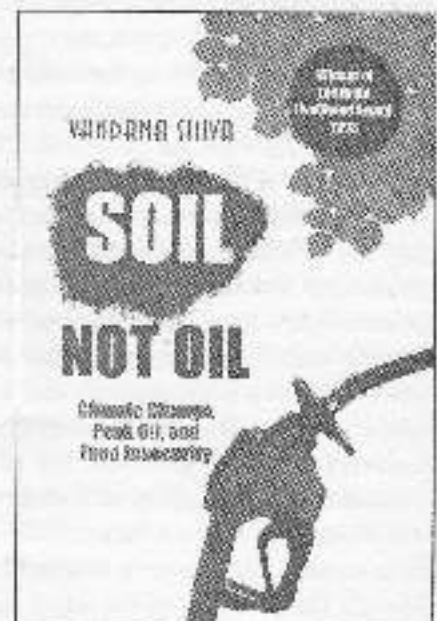
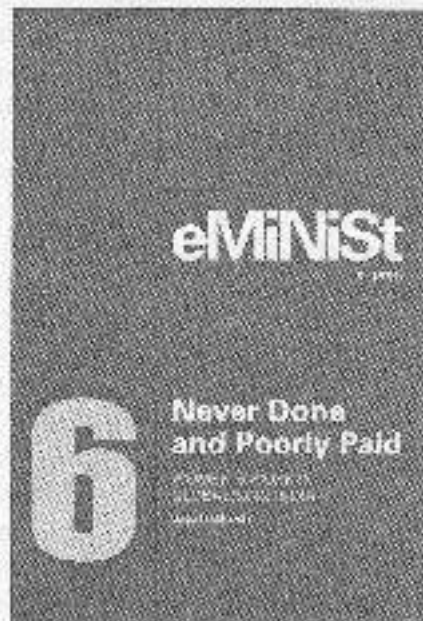
Through women's writing the anthology traces the evolution of women's place in society and her growing empowerment from the fourteenth century to the present day, from the time when a woman was permitted to write only to express piety or when she was literally at death's door as when Elizabeth Joceline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

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

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

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

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