

LETTERS

HEMA, ONDERDENWIJNGAARD AND THE 'MEANING OF MEANING'

As someone who has been engaged as a citizen in Human Rights issues over the years, it was with great interest that I read Therese Onderdenwijngaard's "Hema's Story" and her attempt to extract from it the meaning of violence, to explore the limits of documentation and interpretative intervention (*Pravada* March/April 1985).

At one level of discourse it was a vivid internal presentation of a specific experience during the insurgency and counter-insurgency of 1987-89. It 'lent a voice to the victim', was a 'unique testimony' of the horrible psycho-logical fractures in individual lives that took place during that time. At another level, I kept wondering while reading it, that however eloquent the attempt to convey the particularities of Hema's predicament, to elucidate its difficult meaning, what use or meaning would that exercise itself have to Hema herself, the other. Was it one more wound, one more burning of the body of the other victim, Hema. Is she the subject or the object of a process.

If we were to contextualize "Hema's Story", rather than Hema, we cannot help wondering whether it is more a discourse within the context of Onderdenwijngaard's doctoral

research and part of an international project on the meaning of violence than an intervention in Hema's predicament. Hema and her husband's burning body, her husband's mali, who was the only person to identify the body, and Onderdenwijngaard's translator, Mr. Bandara, are all anonymous and liminal identities within a reconstruction that has little bearing in the life of the family or community of the other, while its richest potential lies in the meaning and development of the writer's own discourse, her academic career and the Centre for Asian Studies project in Amsterdam.

In an entirely different context, but in the same issue of *Pravada*, Yolanda Froster observes critically that " 'particularities' are not [treated as] conditions to be resolved but seen instead as conditions of freedom". We may re-phrase this to ask, does not Onderdenwijngaard's story reconstruct Hema's predicament purely as a condition of discourse. Is this also not a silencing, a reduction to a narrativised 'abstraction', an expropriation even, of "the disorienting and unique message of each testimony", to use Onderdenwijngaard's own scale of judgement?

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