

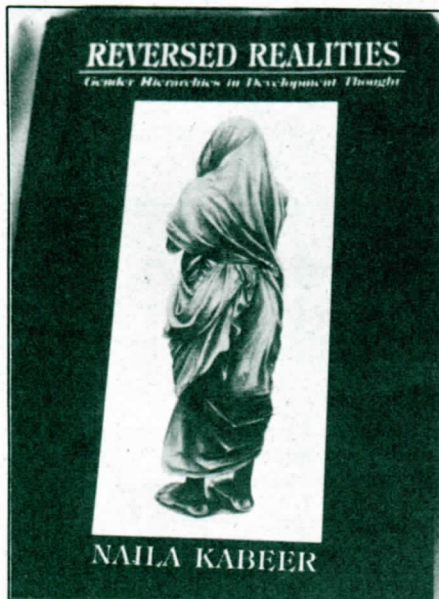
BOOK REVIEWS

status of the Chinese women in Taiwan. "The Candle" by Lin Hai-Yin indicts the feudal Chinese family system through its portrayal of the wasted years of the mistress of a Mandarin family who retreats from life after her husband takes a concubine. P'an Jen-mu's "A Pair of Socks With Love" is about an upper class Chinese family living through the revolutions of China affirms the shared humanity of oppressed and privileged.

The writers of the mid 1960s use wide-ranging themes which reflect their generation's quest for challenging boundaries. "A Woman Like Me" by Hsi Hsi, is a story of a woman cosmetician caught-up between her romantic passion and profession. This piece comes out strongly in an unusually skillful piece.

Set in the time of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, "Chairman Mao is a Rotten Egg" by Ch'en Jo-hsi, revolves around a child who's playful remark about the "great Helmsman" gets her and her family into trouble. Oppression remains in revolutionary China, and this is the unequivocal statement of this story published a year after Mao's death.

Stories by the younger generation attempted to raise gender issues and concerns, although the topics--women-bonding, singlehood, old age, and teen-age suicide--are still limited. In "The Mulberry Sea" by Yuan Ch'ung-ch'ung, two very different women--the willful Yang Ch'iang and the traditional Mrs. Lu--with very different lives are shown to share the same fate: the harsh double standard of society. In "Journey to Mount Bliss" by Chiang Hsiao-yun, the lively Sister Chang encounters the cantankerous Mr. Fu, and they each struggle to cope with their twilight years. For Mr. Fu, growing old meant losing a male's central role both in and outside the family. It is the independent and lively Sister Chang who pushes Mr. Fu's character to redefine his life based on his new situation. Significantly, the collection ends with this comic and optimistic look at aging, and at life in modern China.▲



Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought

reviewed by Emma P. Valencia

by Naila Kabeer.
1994. Kali for Women. New Delhi. 346pp.

The book by Kabeer argues that mainstream development thought, largely informed by neoclassical economics with its emphasis on market forces, is inadequate to address the problem of power relations and gender inequality which are the roots of the marginal status of women in development policy and practice. Most development models informing development policy are couched in abstract and apparently gender-neutral concepts (the economy, the GNP, the market, the formal sector, the informal sector, poverty line and so on). On closer analysis it becomes apparent, according to the author, that these supposedly neutral terms are in fact imbued with male bias, presenting a view of the world which obscures and legitimates ill-founded gender asymmetry. These forms of analysis help to disguise and legitimate the gender asymmetries which are embedded within the central concepts of development.

The book advocates the reversal of several aspects of development thought.

First, a reversal in the hierarchy of knowledge that informs development thought. The new development paradigm would start from the vantage point of the most oppressed -- women who are disenfranchised by class, race and nationality -- so that the complexities of subordination can best be grasped and strategies devised for more equitable development. This viewpoint from below can help to realign development paradigms more closely to the real order of things. This is not to signify that only the dispossessed women of the Third World matter, but rather that without a structural transformation of the lives of the poorest and most oppressed sections of all societies, there can be neither development nor equity.

A reversal of allocational priorities is also advocated. If the satisfaction of human need rather than the exercise of market rationality is taken as the criterion of production, then clearly a much more holistic

view of development becomes necessary. Human well-being would be the measuring stick for development rather than the volume of marketed goods and services alone. Activities which contribute to the health and well-being of people would be recognized as productive, regardless of whether they are carried out within the personalized relations of family production, the commercialised relations of market production or the bureaucratized relations of state production. Markets would take their place as simply one of a variety of institutional mechanisms through which human needs could be met, rather than as the sole arbiter of 'value'. Such an approach would promote both class and gender equity and women, particularly poor women long disenfranchised by growth-dominated development strategies, would be key actors in the development process.

Within this reversed hierarchy of development priorities, a different notion of gender equity from that promoted through early WID advocacy becomes possible. Current development policy defines women's economic agency as equivalent to that of men, ignoring their greater embeddedness in familial and domestic responsibilities. If the care of human life and well-being were to be given the same value in development priorities as the production of material resources, then the provision of welfare services (which decreases efficiency of the market) would be seen as complementary to development goals rather than antithetical to them. It would free women to pursue economic livelihoods if they choose to, or were compelled to by their circumstances, rather than imposing a predetermined set of life choices on them. Planning for gender equity on the basis of social justice, rather than of formal equality requires recognition of the full weight and implications of the gender division of labor in the lives of women and men, and of the different needs, priorities and possibilities that it gives rise to. Gender equity requires that welfare is seen as complementary, rather than in opposition to efficiency.

The earlier stress by WID advocates on equality of opportunity for women was premised on the belief that the problem lay in discriminatory barriers to women's employment and education which would enable them to compete with men. But the author emphasizes that public institutions have not evolved neutrally but in deeply gendered ways. They reward certain kinds of skills and abilities over others and certain kinds of economic agents such as those unencumbered by bodies, families or sexual identities. Consequently, problems of sexual harassment, the need for separate toilets or breastfeeding facilities, provision of paid leave to have children, absenteeism due to illness in the family, only emerge as problems when women join the workplace. Thus, the author concludes that training women in marketable skills and abilities will not put them on an equal footing with men in the public domain as long as public institutions do not accommodate the different bodies, needs and values that they bring to the workplace. Gender equity thus goes beyond equal opportunity; it requires the transformation of the basic rules and practices of public institutions.

The book is a rich source of fresh ideas and critical viewpoints. It dissects household economics and critiques the assumptions neoclassical economics holds about the household which have informed and shaped a range of different policies that have so often overlooked women's needs and interests. Population policies espoused both at the national and international levels are analyzed for their failure to address women's rights and needs. Moreover, the different viewpoints regarding fertility control among feminists are given space and analyzed.

The book is replete with examples of development projects that have failed because they failed to consider the specific needs of women and the existing relations which define these needs. It is a convincing argument for continuing critical analysis of mainstream development policies and practices which seemingly promote women's interests but in truth impede or derail the progress towards women's full enfranchisement that women's groups have painstakingly achieved.▲



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