

## **Black & writing: fighting a white page**

What it means to be 'black' (in the wider sense of the word) and involved in writing was discussed at the 5th International Feminist Bookfair (held in Amsterdam last June). Writers: DIONNE BRAND, Afro Canadian; DJANET SEARS, Afro-Canadian, parents from Cayenne; NAYANTARA SAHGAL, from India; JEWELLE GOMEZ, Afro-American; KATHARINA OYUNTOYE, Afro-German, and OLIVE SENIOR from Jamaica, discussed the issue of black writing. LUCIA NANKOE who is from Surinam and a literary scientist by profession acted as chairperson.

Is there such a thing as Black Feminist Literature?

This question provided the guiding theme for the discussion. Each woman writes from her own culture and circumstances fighting a white page, says Nankoe.

Djanet Sear's answer to the question makes it clear that the expediency of the term has to do with your political circumstances as a writer: at a certain point in time standing tall as a black female writer can equal claiming specific space as a writer at all. She is not afraid of being categorized when her writing is called 'black writing'.

Sears started as an actor and found that she was limited to what white, male people saw her as. Therefore she started writing to create a reality and a self-image which to her as a black woman was closer to the truth. Her plays Double Trouble and African Solo are deconstructions of the white idea of what it is to be an African.

By subtly but relentlessly exposing the consistent use of stereotypes and white interpretations of black reality Sears is deftly changing some general presuppositions in the public discourse of which literature is a part. 'Black writing' comes to mean: 'literature which is more accurate and true to the lives of a large part of the population'. This kind of literature performs the heroic task of taking away the defining initiative from the hands of the group who has close-fistedly held this initiative for far too long. Claiming a piece of the action in the powercircle of the media is of major importance to black people now.

Still, black writers who specifically focus on 'redefinition literature' should take care not to stick to ideology too much. Redefinition is sorely necessary. However, if it is a writer's sole concern one runs the risk of being left with nothing to say once one's version of the truth is accepted. Literary resistance can get you into a rut like any other routine.

Djanet Sears' performance of a part of African Solo was funny and original. Nevertheless I wonder if the expressed irony on the stupidity of whites will not lose its punch once you get the general idea.

## **"My ancestors live in my guts"**

Dionne Brand was born in Trinidad on what she later realized was a slave plantation. She comes from a family of black labourers and studied sociology.