Nene Gare, a biographical study: Australian novelist, 1919-1994

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NENE GARE A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY:
AUSTRALIAN NOVELIST 1919 - 1994

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B.A. HONOURS (ENGLISH)
1999
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
NENE GARE A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY:
AUSTRALIAN NOVELIST 1919 – 1994

by

Rosina Squarcini

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of
Bachelor of Arts Honours (English)

School of Language and Literature
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ABSTRACT

This thesis undertakes an introductory biographical study of Australian writer, Nene Gare, and a critical reading of her work with special reference to *The Fringe Dwellers*. The author of this study has sought to establish the basis for that novel's positive literary reception. The research has been directed at correcting, in part, the comparative neglect of this writer. Nene Gare’s life and work has been surveyed in the belief that this study will contribute to the current knowledge of twentieth-century Australian fiction writers as well as showing the critical reception to Nene Gare’s work as a part of Australian writing from the 1940s to the 1980s.

The methodology of the study has been to explore Nene Gare’s work from a biographical point of view, in particular as an example of a woman writer’s experience in Australia during this period from 1940 to 1980. For instance, a biographer cannot ignore the social and historical context such as the woman writer’s problems in the Sixties of balancing the roles of writing with those of wife and mother. However, it has not been possible to ignore larger social and historical issues such as the problem of racism in Australia which began to surface in the public consciousness and which Gare engaged with in *The Fringe Dwellers* and other fiction works. Nene Gare, like the author of this thesis is a product of Western Culture and could not adopt an Indigenous Australian way of looking at human history. This thesis, then, presents a reading of Gare’s life and work which has
endeavoured to demonstrate that she is quite appreciative of Indigenous Australian culture and history. She knew that this does not represent the Western Cultural way of looking at the present or the past in Australia.

This thesis has traced Nene Gare’s life from when she was a girl growing up in her birthplace of Adelaide, through her early adulthood, following her arrival in Western Australia in 1939, and then goes on to document her meeting with Frank Gare, and their subsequent marriage in 1941. The thesis also records Nene Gare’s sojourn in Papua New Guinea, where, in 1946, she joined her husband, who was stationed there as a patrol officer on administrative duties in the Territories. Her later years in Perth, Carnarvon and Geraldton are also shown to have contributed to the background to Nene Gare’s writing.

Included in this work are critical interpretations, from a feminist/ Marxist point of view of The Fringe Dwellers in particular, and details of Gare’s general career as a writer. Certain readers’ views of The Fringe Dwellers are also reported.

The latter part of Nene Gare’s life has been chronicled up to her death in 1994.

The thesis concludes with a confirmation of the significance of this, the first substantial study of the life and work of Nene Gare.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature

R Squarcini

Date 29 October 1999
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The author of this thesis wishes to extend deep gratitude and thanks to Mr Frank Gare, husband of the late Nene Gare, for his interest in the project and assistance in providing information, photographs, and a quantity of miscellaneous papers. I am sure that without Mr Gare’s cooperation it would not have been possible to attempt this thesis on the life and work of Nene Gare.

Thanks are also due to Mrs Peg Brearley, Nene Gare’s surviving sister, for her help in supplying details of the family’s history, responding to interview questions, and for also making photographs available.

The cooperation of Dr Arran Gare, Nene Gare’s son, is gratefully acknowledged, especially his contribution in responding to my questionnaire about his mother.

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- The National Library, Canberra
- Edith Cowan University Library
- Bayswater Public Library
- City of Stirling Public Libraries (Inglewood)

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INTRODUCTION

This work undertakes an introductory biographical study of Nene Gare, and a critical reading of her work with special reference to *The Fringe Dwellers*. The author will seek to establish, in addition to certain other aspects of the novel, reasons for its generally positive literary reception in Australia. Background research has been directed at correcting, in part, the neglect of this writer. This study will, it is hoped, introduce Nene Gare’s life and work more generally to other scholars and critics.

This thesis aims, therefore, to give an account of the life and work of Nene Gare with special reference to *The Fringe Dwellers*. At the outset it should be emphasized that the study is located primarily in the middle years of the twentieth century. However, the time-span will cover roughly the period prior to the beginning of the twentieth century to the date of Nene Gare’s death in 1994. That this study will be confined largely to Nene Gare, her husband Frank, and her immediate family, is intentional but it will not exclude certain of her forebears who increase our understanding of the writer’s origins. It is not part of the task to write about Nene Gare’s siblings, other than, perhaps, where they are briefly mentioned in certain of her stories. On the other hand, her parents must be significant in dealing with Gare’s early life in Adelaide.

The main focus, apart from Nene herself, will be on her husband Frank Gare, not only for the very obvious reason that he as her spouse features prominently in her life but also because he no doubt played something of a
catalyst role in the writing of at least two of her novels, *The Fringe Dwellers*, as reported in Chapter One, came about after Nene Gare went to Geraldton where her husband was stationed as “District Officer for Native Welfare.” She subsequently went on to write about the Aboriginal people to whose needs her husband was attending in an official capacity. Her interest in them, however, was solely as their friend.

*An Island Away* (1981), similarly, was a book conceived from when her husband went to Papua New Guinea as a patrol officer in 1945. She was to join him in 1946, and the book, written some thirty five years later, documents their lives in the Territories.

It is not inappropriate to look at the geographical background of Nene Gare’s life; therefore, Adelaide – Gare’s birthplace – Perth, Carnarvon, Geraldton and Papua New Guinea will be mentioned in this thesis.

Gare’s two major novels, *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961) and *A House with Verandahs* (1980), will be examined in more detail than the other works, not only because they have the potential to be explored in terms of feminist and Marxist theory, but also because it is my objective to undertake to compare these two novels.

However, we do need to review briefly the other major published works of Nene Gare.

In *The Fringe Dwellers* Nene Gare examines the lives of Aboriginal people living on the white community’s “fringes.” The novel chronicles the failure of half-cast Aborigines who attempt to realize their white identity and find their way
into white society. In the novel the dominant culture hinders the attempts of the other – as is the case of the Aboriginal and female Trilby – to enter into that culture.

In *A House with Verandahs*, which is mainly autobiographical, Nene Gare has delved into many of her family and childhood experiences to portray life in Australia during the 1930s Depression when she was growing up in Adelaide.

*Green Gold* (1963), although helpful from a biographical point of view, attracted less interest from reviewers than *The Fringe Dwellers*. The novel relates the Gares’ banana growing venture at Carnarvon in 1952.

*An Island Away* (1981), as previously mentioned, documents the Gares’ lives in post-war Papua New Guinea, and therefore from a biographical point of view is very useful.

*Bend to the Wind* (1978) is a series of short stories about the Aboriginal people Gare became acquainted with while she was in Geraldton.

*Kent Town* (1997), posthumously published, is of lesser interest than the major novels, however, because of its autobiographical content, it is both interesting and useful.

In terms of detail and analysis the last four works will receive less attention than the two major novels.

One of the intentions of this thesis is to bring to the notice of other scholars and critics a significant Australian writer who, up until this time, appears to have been largely overlooked. There has been little critical material written about Nene Gare’s work, and yet she has been of interest to both Aboriginal and non-
Aboriginal readers. At the same time, Gare does not seem to have attracted accusations of cultural appropriation in her treatment of Aboriginal culture. With this in mind, it is timely to investigate her own life and the methodological basis of her writing. This may help establish the significance of her role as a white commentator on Aboriginal society, and the part such a work as Gare’s *The Fringe Dwellers* has played in the process of reconciliation and the search for understanding between non-Aborigines and Aborigines in Australian society.

I will now briefly outline the basic components of this thesis, in other words, what I intend to do in each chapter.

Chapter One will trace the early phase of Nene Gare’s life in Adelaide where she was born. The chapter introduces us to Nene’s parents, and features her as the fourth of seven children growing up during the 1930s Depression. The chapter will also provide an outline of Gare’s family history in order to furnish an important link to the writer’s origins. Gare’s first day at school, her first job and, later, her experiences with men will be among the biographical details revealed. The chapter briefly describes all of Gare’s works – their strengths, weaknesses, and which ones, in terms of detail, will be examined. The chapter will also touch on how Gare’s writing career may have got started.

The second chapter opens up to what could be called a new beginning for the young Nene. We see her leave the security of her South Australian home and family to start a new life in Western Australia. This chapter will also include an account of how she met her future husband, Frank Gare, in Perth. It touches on Frank Gare’s early education, his joining the Citizens Military Forces (Citizen’s Military Forces).
1939, his subsequent transfer to the Australian Imperial Forces in 1941, and his marriage to Nene in the same year (13 May 1941). He embarked on the Queen Mary on 4 June 1941 for wartime activities. This chapter goes on to describe the changing face of Perth during those early war years; Gare’s return to her job at McKay Massey Harris; and her writing of short stories for The Western Mail, a Perth weekly newspaper. Gare reflects how she began her career as a writer.

Chapter Three tells something of Nene Gare’s life in Papua New Guinea. It begins by documenting events leading up to her departure from Australia early in 1946 to join her husband, who was stationed there on administrative duties.

In Chapter Four I will undertake to assess The Fringe Dwellers from a feminist/Marxist point of view, and to compare this novel with some of Gare’s other works, particularly A House with Verandahs. From a biographical aspect, the chapter begins with the Gares’ return from Papua New Guinea in 1947, finding a place to live, settling in; Frank returning to his job in the Commonwealth Public Service. Nene caring for their children, though not abandoning her writing career. She continued submitting short stories to The Western Mail. The chapter of course deals with the feminist movement, and how it may have influenced Nene Gare as a writer.

Chapter Five will further explore feminist/Marxist interpretations of The Fringe Dwellers, continuing to detail Gare’s career as a writer, and give an account of certain readers’ views of The Fringe Dwellers.
Chapter Six will be largely taken up with concluding this study, detailing where possible the latter part of Gare’s life, up to her death in 1994, and recounting (as told by Frank Gare), the family’s private farewell at her funeral.

The writing of this thesis has involved a considerable amount of research and put me in contact with a variety of sources. Frank Gare, Nene Gare’s husband, has provided the most important link to the writer’s past. Frank was able to supply dates, places, events, and the many things that occur in a person’s life which allow the biographer to reconstruct that life. Therefore, this has been of inestimable value in the compilation of this study of Nene Gare’s life and her major works.

Peg Brearley, Gare’s surviving sister, has also been very helpful, not only as an interviewee, but also in providing details of family history. Likewise as an interviewee, Dr Arran Gare, Nene Gare’s son, was able to supply relevant information.

A few of Nene Gare’s friends have been interviewed, although it should be pointed out that their comments have not necessarily all been included in this thesis.

Certain readers have been approached on their views of The Fringe Dwellers, and their responses have been documented.

The National Library in Canberra, has made available a quantity of Nene Gare’s papers, and these have been invaluable in structuring together the thoughts of a writer in many situations, from when she was writing to her husband in Papua New Guinea, to when she was on the set in Queensland in 1986, to see the
filming of her novel, The Fringe Dwellers, made into a feature film by the director, Bruce Beresford.

The Battye Library Archives' personnel have also been very helpful in my research by making archival material available for my perusal, as well as organizing photocopies and providing a photo negative when photocopying was not practicable.

On the other hand, Nene Gare's own published works have been a constant source of information, particularly in contributing to the biographical documentation needed in writing this thesis.

Bruce Beresford's feature film, The Fringe Dwellers, produced by Sue Milliken and adapted from Nene Gare's novel, provided yet another source of enlightenment, perhaps a sort of 'icing on the cake,' to add more of a dimension to one's understanding of the literary work.

Unlike the novel which opens with Noorah and Trilby's last day at the mission, the film opens with the Comeaways waking up in the morning, and the mother finding she is out of food for breakfast. She asks Trilby to borrow some basics from a neighbour. Essentially, though, the film remains true to the book. There is the milk bar scene, Trilby's pleading with her boy friend, Phyllix, as to what will happen to her if she remains with him and becomes a fringe dweller like her mother. The District Hospital where Noonah works as a nursing aide is depicted, as are the humpies, and the fibro house to which Trilby aspires. Trilby persuades her father to see the Housing Commission, and the family is jubilant. Mrs Henwood's offer of tea and scones to Mrs Comeaway and the serviette scene
are also portrayed. Trilby eventually boards a bus bound for the City. The film ends poignantly with the song, "My brown skinned baby, they take him away."

Seeing the film brought to life all the characters one grew to know and love in Nene Gare's masterpiece. It also reinforced one's feeling that Gare's purpose in writing *The Fringe Dwellers* was to highlight the predicament of those unfortunate people living on the fringes of Western Australian society.
CHAPTER 1
BEGINNINGS - ORIGINS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD

It is not possible for me to adopt an Indigenous Australian way of looking at human history, since, like Nene Gare, I am a product of Western Culture. Hence, in this thesis I can only present a reading of Gare’s life and work which, I intend to argue, does demonstrate that she was significantly appreciative of Aboriginal culture and history. I wish to show that her major works do not have the same degree of limitation in looking at the present or the past as Western Culture normally does. In other words, I will explore the extent to which Gare may have understood that Western concepts of culture and history were not appropriate for the Indigenous Australians. I will seek to establish whether or not she may have glimpsed these other ways of interpreting the history of a culture. Evidence pointing to this capacity seems to emerge in an interview with Nene Gare conducted by Alison Fox and published in an issue of The Daily News in 1976:

Nene Gare speaks with feeling when she speaks of Australia’s indigenous people.
“They don’t always need to be pitied. We have a tendency to think they must have the things we have to be happy” she said, “But this is not recognizing their dignity. They’ve got their own kind of happiness and they can find it without reference to us.” (Fox-Gare, 1976, p.33)

Nene Gare’s 1961 novel, The Fringe Dwellers, opens on the last night that Noonah and Trilby are to spend at the mission which for years has been home to the four Comeaway children.
Gare’s opening chapter poignantly captures Noonah’s desolate feelings as she realizes only too well, that Bartie, aged ten, and Stella, six, will remain behind at the mission, while the two older siblings will leave to join their parents on the ‘native reserve’, as they were known in those days.

All the comfort Noonah had to give had been given, and the boy Bartie was not comforted. Sitting on the step below her he pressed himself against her legs, empty eyes watching the antics of a group of small boys rolling over and over in the red-dusted sand. Tomorrow Noonah would be gone. There was no thought more important than that. And so it was for Noonah. To-morrow she must leave Bartie and Stella behind to get on as well as they could without her. And the more she thought of the little things she had done for them, which nobody but an older-sister-turned-mother would ever think of doing, much less have time to do in this crowded and busy mission, the more desolate grew her thoughts. They would miss her so! And how cruel that she, who loved them, should be forced to withdraw herself from them and leave them alone. (Gare, 1961, p 9)

This is an appropriate example of how Gare’s empathy for others less fortunate than herself is often reflected in her writing. And perhaps never more so than when she writes about the indigenous people who were to become her friends when she lived in the port of Geraldton, where her husband, Frank, was stationed as District Officer for Native Welfare between 1954 and 1962. Indeed, it was Nene Gare’s friendly contact with the Aborigines here that can be shown to have largely inspired her to write The Fringe Dwellers.

In Reading the Country, (1996) Stephen Muecke describes some of the different ways of looking at history:

The ‘truth’ of history loses its singularity in conflicting accounts. Accuracy of time measurement, as in dates, or their linearity, are no guarantees of truth. What also has to be considered is the way the texts communicate and the purposes they serve. While Aboriginal spoken
accounts of history have only recently been taken seriously as leads into Australia's history, that is, historians have begun to consider the possibility of arriving at truth without the support of dates or documents, the tendency is still to go to other mechanisms of truth to validate an historical assertion. The physical sciences can validate history with their instruments of measurement (Muecke 1996, p. 34).

Clearly, Gare had recognized the possibility of difference. Thus it would be perfectly valid for her, in writing about Aborigines, not to adopt a conventional Western version of history.

The chief objective in this chapter is to trace the early phase of Nene Gare's life in Adelaide, not only to relate the biographical facts on record, but to recreate, in a sense, the formative life experience of a young woman who became one of Australia's more successful post-war novelists. It is important that this chapter also provides an outline of Gare's family history - her forebears' occupations and origins, so as to enable the reader to see, if it is possible, where the seeds of Gare's creativity might have originated. It should become clearer why the subject of this biography was no ordinary person, but one of exceptional talent and creative ability. It is intended that the story of Gare's life will reveal how she went on to become an important Western Australian-based writer as well as a recognized visual artist.

It could have been the following fortuitous event which may well have prompted Nene Gare's writing career, as she related it in an interview with Marion Campbell in 1986, published in the Fremantle Arts Review (Campbell-Gare, 1986, p. 5). Gare said that in 1943 she read some stories in The Western...
Mail and thought 'she could do as well'. She sent off six, all of which were accepted.

However, Gare had always been good at English expression and had won a prize for this subject at business college. This she documents in her posthumously published book, *Kent Town*:

I was good at English I got through my first year at college with two prizes at the end-of-year breakup. One for English and one for History. Miss Hocking asked me to write our class notes (Gare 1997, pp 97,99)

Between 1943 and 1981 Gare completed a number of short stories and five novels including *The Fringe Dwellers*. The latter was to gain wide acclaim from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers, and was later to be made into a feature film. Doris Violet May Wadham, the fourth of seven children, was born to John Henry and Mary Wadham (see Appendix I) on 9 May 1919. Doris, according to Frank Gare, changed her name to Nene when she left Adelaide in 1939 on the *Wesralha*, bound for Perth, maintaining that she did not like the name of Doris. According to a comment she made later, the servant girl in *Peg’s Paper*, a periodical, (which when Gare was a girl, catered for teenagers) was always named Doris! Gare has not given a reason for her choice of Nene but she may have got it from some popular figure at the time. One might have supposed that she named herself after someone she admired. It could not have been Nene King, who became the Editorial Director of *Women’s Weekly* as she was born at a later time than Nene Gare. Both perhaps owed their names to unknown
contemporaries. What seems certain, is that the young Doris was determined to start a new life with a new name.

John Wadham was a saddler who learned his trade during service in the Boer War and with the Light Horse at Gallipoli. These facts are confirmed by Frank Gare in an interview on 29 June 1997. Initially, when he returned from the War, John Wadham, the saddler and harness maker, seemed destined to cater merely for the draught horse and dray trade which represented the commercial transport era into which the young Doris was born. However, when mechanization made these animals redundant, Wadham turned his skills to producing harness and equipment for race horses and trotters.

According to Peg Brearley (Gare’s surviving sister), the family lived in a double-fronted sandstone house at 109 King William Street Kent Town. (see Appendix 2), while the saddlery was operated from 253 Rundle Street Adelaide. However, after Wadham retired he continued to conduct his trade in a shed in a back yard of King William Street.

Not surprisingly, Nene Gare’s experiences of poverty during the Great Depression (substantiated in The Daily News interview conducted by Alison Fox), led her to say, when discussing The Fringe Dwellers: “I found I could see things from their point of view …. We were a big family – and poor – when I was a child” (Fox, 1976, p.33). However, the family started from anything but humble beginnings.

According to Thelma Harrington, nee Wadham, another sister of Nene Gare, now deceased, who compiled an unpublished family history, the families of
both parents arrived in Australia from England in the 1850s. This information has been made available through Peg Brearley, already identified above as the other of Nene Gare’s sisters.

Thelma Harrington says that the name Wadham is probably derived from an old Anglo-Saxon place name, meaning ‘hamlet in the woods’. She goes on to say:

Research shows that the name Wadham first appears in the list of land owners in Somerset somewhere around the thirteenth century. They had become well established in an area near the little village of Ilion 3½ miles north from Ilminster. There they lived in a large home surrounded by a rectangular moat, this remained their family home for more than 500 years, it was called Merifield. Merifield was the home of a procession of Knights, such as Sir John, Sir William, and Sir Nicholas and others. Unfortunately today Merifield is but a ruin (Harrington, nee Wadham, 1977)

Harrington states there is little doubt that the Wadhams are descendants from the Anglo-Saxons. Their crest is a Tudor Rose between a Buck’s head or scalp.

Harrington asks us to look at England in the 1850s around about the time that William Wadham decided to migrate to Australia. Since the Wadhams were landowners of many years standing, in the centre of the rural area of Somerset. Harrington says we can rightly assume that they were connected in some way or another with farm primary production. Up until about this time, of course. England had been mainly an agricultural country.

Harrington’s research confirms that in 1846 the new industrial lords succeeded in persuading Parliament to abolish the Corn Law, which had been established to protect the farmer in the marketing of his grain. Without tariff protection, British farmers found it difficult to compete against the flood of
foreign and colonial wheat that began to pour into England. In *The Industrial Revolution*, Nigel Smith explains the history of the Corn Laws:

In 1839 a group of industrialists founded the Anti-Corn Law League in Manchester. The issue of the Corn Laws finally came to a head in 1845-6, when a virus destroyed much of the potato crop in Ireland. The Conservative government under Sir Robert Peel was committed to retaining the Corn Laws. However, Peel himself was becoming increasingly sympathetic to the ACLL [Anti-Corn Law League]. When he learned of the Irish potato crop failure, Peel urged his colleagues to support repeal so that cheap food could be imported to Ireland. Many of the landowners in the Tory party were horrified and convinced that British agriculture would be ruined overnight. The Duke of Wellington strongly disagreed with Peel. At last, after much argument, the Corn Laws were repealed in June 1846 (Smith, 1990, pp. 46-47)

On the other hand, industrial trade was booming in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The leaders of the Industrial Movement cared nothing for agriculture. They were concerned with the rapid expansion of industry and with the extension of foreign markets for English manufactured goods (Harrington, 1977)

In *The Victorian Temper*, Jerome Hamilton Buckley puts it succinctly as he writes about this period:

> Between 1851 and 1873, the period of greatest economic prosperity, Britain became the "workshop of the world," a thriving industrial community willing to abandon its ancient agrarian heritage (Buckley 1969, p 112)

Faced with competition and heavy land taxes, William Wadhams being a surveyor, and, as a man of the land, decided to migrate to Australia. Early in 1850 he left his home in Somerset, and sailed for Adelaide, South Australia on
the barque *Rajah*, arriving in Holdfast Bay on 12 April 1850. It is of historic interest that William Wadham later surveyed and laid out the town of Medindie, north of Adelaide. It was divided up for sale in 1880. Later he became Sir William, after serving as an active member of Parliament. (Harrington, 1977)

In *Adelaide 1836-1976*, Derek Whitelock tells us something about the history of Holdfast Bay:

> Holdfast Bay, which had no wharf until 1839, was a bad enough landfall. The immigrants were often soaked upon landing, or had the mortification of seeing their packing cases floating in the waves (Whitelock, 1977, p.49)

Three years later, James, William’s nineteen-year-old brother followed him. Together with other members of the family, they sailed from Southampton on the barque *Ramillies* arriving in Holdfast Bay, South Australia on 19 May 1853.

James, according to Harrington, went straight into his brother’s business as a junior surveyor, and remained with the firm in this capacity until 1864, when the Government decided to send a survey party to the Northern Territory to plan out new townships in preparation for colonization. James, as a surveyor, became a member of this expedition. It was not until his return in 1867 that he branched out on his own as a practising surveyor and extended his interests to include the building industry. On 2 January 1869 he married Mary Ann Dawes, who had arrived earlier from the United Kingdom with her parents. Together the couple raised five children, amongst them John Henry, who was to marry Mary Hounslow. Mary and John Wadham became the parents of seven children, one of whom is now the subject of this biography, Doris Wadham – Nene Gare.
According to Harrington, who, as has already been established, compiled the Wadham-Hounslow family history, James practised his profession in Flinders Street, Adelaide, until his untimely death on 14 May 1880, at the age of forty six. His Death Certificate shows that he died of acute pneumonia. This was a tragedy for the family to lose their husband and father so early in life. Mary Ann took up nursing in order to support her family. She died on 25 January 1924, aged eighty two. James was buried at West Terrace Cemetery. Mary Ann, at the Payneham Cemetery (Harrington, 1977).

On 2 January 1857, according to the same source, James and Richard Hounslow left their home town in Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom, embarking a s Plymouth on the barque Carnatic, for South Australia. They arrived at Holdfast Bay on 28 April 1857. They were aged twenty and twenty two, respectively. Their occupations were listed as farm labourers. Whatever reason had influenced the Hounslows in their decision to emigrate, they had demonstrated that they were prepared to come out to Australia to face the hardships and privations that awaited them in this new land.

At the time the Hounslow boys arrived in the State (according to Harrington), Dr Christian [sic] Rawson Penfold, who had established a vineyard in Magill, South Australia in 1844, found it had the potential to develop into such a flourishing business that he began marketing his wines.

In Adelaide 1836-1976, Whitelock expands a little on Penfold's Magill vineyard:
Dr Christopher Rawson Penfold, one of the pioneer vigneron, built his "Grange" homestead in the Magill vineyard, and it still stands. Some of the vines planted by Richard Hamilton and John Reynell in the late 1830s are still growing (Whitelock, 1977, p. 298).

Further research has verified that Whitelock was correct in the above documentation of Dr Penfold's name. This knowledge was uncovered in *The Pen Story* (Ziegler, 1975, p. 19).

James, who was an experienced farm worker, found employment at the Magill vineyard. He later met and married Jane Kempster, who also had emigrated from England. They built their home on land adjoining the vineyards where they produced thirteen children, although three did not survive infancy.

Mary, their seventh child, was to marry John Henry Wadham. This couple in turn became the parents of seven children, one of whom, Doris, was to become the writer, Nene Gare.

James Hounslow, Gare's maternal grandfather, continued as a viticulturist at Penfolds until his death in 1901, aged sixty-four. He was buried in the Magill Cemetery, South Australia (Harrington, 1977).

According to Harrington, Jane stayed on at Magill until, in her old age, she came to live with Mary, Gare's mother, and was dearly loved by her grandchildren. She remained with them until she died at the age of eighty-five, from the effects of a fall in which she broke her hip, and was buried in her husband's grave at the Magill Cemetery.
There was obviously a lot of love to be shared among the Wadham family, despite the scarcity of money. Gare, in her novel, *A House with Verandahs*, which is clearly autobiographical, recalls:

Mother believed in love and showing it and so did my father. Dad never passed Mother in the house without stopping to give her a hug or to ask her, 'All right, old girl?' Mother always said 'Yes'. (Gare 1980, p.83)

Peg Brearley, Nene Gare’s sister, in correspondence with the writer of this study said that her family had been very close and that the children “enjoyed a happy upbringing although there was not a lot of money.” When asked if there was anything in particular that stood out in her memory as a child, the answer was, “Security and love” (Brearley, 1997). (See Appendix 3, Nene Gare with some of her siblings).

According to Gare’s documentation in both *A House with Verandahs* and *Kent Town*, Gare’s education commenced at the East Adelaide Primary School. In *Kent Town*, posthumously published in 1997, she reveals her feelings on her first day at school:

I hated my first day at school because of all the kids everywhere who pushed past you if you didn’t get out of the way and yelled and only played with the ones they knew. Everywhere I looked, I couldn’t see anyone I knew and I felt sick. When the teacher asked me if I was all right to go home or should she get my big sister, I said I knew the way and went. I found out another way to feel lonely. It’s when there are lots of people about, but after a while I got used to so many kids. You have to. School is somewhere you have to go. I didn’t mind cutting up little bits of coloured paper and making patterns, but I got sick of always reading the Cat sat on the Mat. We had to stay on that page until everyone in the class knew it properly and that meant Iris Fairclough too. (Gare 1997, pp.20-21)
If Gare, as a child, got sick of the monotony of repeating the “cat sat on the mat” lesson, her creative juices must have been beginning to flow unmistakably, as she recalls in the above passage that she enjoyed creating patterns from little bits of coloured paper. Gare’s memories of her first day at school, where she obviously felt alienated and shunned by the unfriendly faces that pushed past her, could well have had a profound effect on a sensitive child. Is it any wonder that she suddenly discovered another way to feel lonely?

From East Adelaide Primary, Gare went to Muirden Business College in Adelaide to learn shorthand and typing. Of Muirden, she writes in Kent Town:

I loved being at Muirden. It was called Muirden Business College and ‘College’ was the bit I liked. No longer would I be the outsider going off to a common public school in just any old dress. (Gare 1997, p.96)

She goes on to reveal that now she knew she would be a real college girl in uniform:

And it didn’t matter too much that my uniform wasn’t the classic kind with three box pleats but a sort of imitation one. My mother had bought it from Foy and Gibson’s and it was wool with the pleats, lots of them, kind of knitted into it. I had rebelled, of course, but I knew when I was beaten. At the moment it was enough that I was going to be a college girl. (ibid.)

Gare later attended the Adelaide School of Arts. Early in life she had developed a talent for drawing as she was to recall in A House with Verandahs:

I could draw a bit and Marnie [Marnie was Nene’s cousin] had been keeping me in paper and pencils for years…. Now I was off to the Fine Arts School. I was passionately eager to go and nervous as hell…. The
Drawing mistress liked not only me, but my drawings. (Gare, 1980, pp.102,103)

However, she went on to say that she was too quick, and rebelled when it came to drapes:

The kind of drawings I wanted to do would not need beautifully drawn drapes. I yearned to be out and about, sketching people the way they were, not spending hours on men and women with blank eyes. (ibid.)

Ultimately, through her writing Gare was able to do just that – to portray people the way they were, the way she might have depicted them in her drawings.

Interviewed on 29 June 1997, Frank Gare, in telling the author of this study that his wife was a very clever person who possessed “all sorts of talents,” said of her artistic ability that “she could get a recognizable likeness of a face first sketch” (Frank Gare, 1997).

During her lifetime Gare held several exhibitions of her paintings which included works in watercolours and oils of Rottnest, the Swan River foreshore, and various self-portraits (see Appendix 14) and still-life studies. She won a number of prizes, including the Canning Art Prize in 1976 for her painting Garden. (Courtesy Riverton Library)

Gare’s first job after college was at Martins, a department store in Adelaide where, according to Frank Gare, she designed curtains. Her family was poor, and one must remember this was the early 1930s, at the time of the Depression, and
so, like many of her contemporaries, she was obliged to leave school at fourteen in order to pay board to her parents.

Barbara Hanrahan, in *Kewpie Doll*, which documents a girl’s childhood and adolescence in South Australia during the 1950s, records the impact that the Depression had on her own mother:

> My mother went to work at fourteen in the Depression. First it was the egg factory where the girls used shocking language.... Then Aunty Mill got her the job in the hairdresser’s.... Then the head of the women’s police, who’d known her father, got her the job in the Advertising Department of the big store. She was petrified that first morning in 1931, going in with her pencils and brushes. (Hanrahan 1984, p.37)

The above quotation from Hanrahan’s book illustrates the parallel of Gare’s experience of leaving school at fourteen and going to work, and the documentation of the impact of the 1931 Depression on Hanrahan’s mother, who also went to work at fourteen. Both situations demonstrate the effect that the economy had on families during this period.

In *Kent Town*, Gare relates that she was almost fifteen when she got her job at Myers:

> Another girl and I went straight into the Tube Room, which was a long room with a passage running through the middle. On my side it was divided in two along the length so cashiers could sit both sides. You should have heard the noise. Crash, bang, clatter, wheeeeee! I thought I’d never get used to it but I did. (Gare 1997, p.118)

Anyone who can recall the system of sending cash around a shop by overhead wires in the Thirties and even later, as I do, will remember the noise
that this system generated, no doubt due to the metal containers crashing along the wire and often colliding against each other in the process.

Growing up in the Thirties must have been a trying time for the young Doris. In the days when the mention of sex was taboo, and educating children on the subject was equally taboo, young people were necessarily left to their own resources to learn about the facts of life.

In *A House with Verandahs*, Gare touches on the children's sex education with disarming frankness:

Our sex education began in the bathroom where it was plainer to see that the boys had appendages and the girls did not.... Three or four of us at a time climbed into the tin bath and argued bossily whose turn it was to slip down the soaped and sloping end and crash to the bottom of the tub.... There was no time to be examining each other's differences, not if you wanted to take your turn at the slide. There was more time to examine my father's difference. Depending when you entered his bedroom you might get a good look as he modestly used his pot with his back to you and his front to the looking-glass on the dressing-table. A less suspicious man than my father has not been born. (Gare, 1980, pp.18-19)

It could be said that the novel raises Freudian resonances in the evocation of penis envy suggested in the above passage. However, because this will be explored later in this chapter, it would be repetitious to 'labour the point' at this stage.

Gare also examines the girls' relations with men outside of the family:

Once we reached the romantic age we girls were watched as fearfully as if we were about to boil over. We were not trusted to do the right thing and were given small opportunity to do anything else. (Gare 1980, p.81)
Gare’s second statement appears to contradict the first in which she says: ‘A less suspicious man than my father has not been born’. While the latter one says: ‘We were not trusted to do the right thing’. However, contradictory as it may appear, one presumes that the daughter’s depiction of the father is as she perceived him at the time. It was he who is inconsistent in his attitude to moral values, displaying naivety on the one hand, and mistrust on the other. Perhaps it fell to the mother to issue the warnings.

With sex education today being propagated in both schools and homes, to say nothing of its prominence in public life, parents no longer have the need to be anxious about their children’s sexuality. Of course the sexual revolution has also been instrumental in putting to rest so much unwarranted parental supervision, such as that experienced by these girls, and others of their generation:

Under the quince tree on a hot summer night Fay and her first real male friend lay on an old rug and worked out how much money they would need to get married, and my father went down to see if that were all. *(ibid)*

Gare relates what may have been (accepting that the novel is autobiographical) her first romantic and sexual encounter with a man who owned a navy-blue shining coupe with a ‘dicky seat’. She must have been no more than seventeen, and for weeks he had been pursuing her with flattery and promises of a new and better job:

I settled as near the car door as possible with my trusty overcoat between me and Mr Dowie, and Mr Dowie reached into the glove box and threw a great bag of mixed chocolates into my lap... Then Mr Dowie suggested pulling into a beauty spot... and eating our chocolate bars. I should rather have continued driving because that
meant Mr Dowie’s hands were fully occupied. He parked, and I was about to reach into my brown paper bag for a chocolate bar when my hand was gently seized and pulled towards Mr Dowie’s lap. There were no zips in those days and even now I do not understand how Mr Dowie could have been so quick with all those buttons, but when I looked down at my hand I saw there was no doubt at all about what it had been resting upon. Soft and warm and naked—Mr Dowie’s limp pale-pink penis. I held Mr Dowie at bay with my great round shocked eyes and he casually hid himself from view, buttoned himself up and told me everything was all right love and there was no need to panic. (Gare, 1980, pp 127-128)

Gare then goes on to write how the young woman went back to town by train and it was still light when she reached home. Later on at the dinner table she says:

I felt like a stone statue at the bottom of the sea. Talk washed over me in waves and nobody noticed I was not taking part. I had a boiling hot bath after tea with a spoonful of phenyle dropped in for luck then I went hopefully to bed with a book. (ibid.)

Up until this fateful episode, her interactions with boys were light-hearted and friendly, embracing the usual young girl’s preoccupation with attending balls, parties and the beach, ostensibly with an eye for husband material:

At the rate I was going, I thought, I should never be married with children, and girls who did not marry were failures and might just as well shoot themselves. (op. cit. p. 126)

Gare displayed the typical young woman’s attitude of her generation, where it was expected that a girl’s main ambition is to marry and bear children. However, it might appear that initially she was looking for a father figure in Mr Dowie, who was obviously an older man. She calls her other male friends simply
by their first names such as, ‘I tried hard to get Buck to notice I was a woman and willing’ (*ibid*). And goes on to relate:

After a few weeks when I had progressed to the stage of allowing myself to be kissed and had found Flanders to be a dry kisser, a friend of mine saw me out with him. I had not seen her for ages and while Flanders walked on a little I stopped for a hurried chat (*op. cit.* 129)

However, the man who owned the navy-blue coupe with the ‘dicky-seat’ is always referred to as Mr Dowie.

The outing must have had a profound impression on the young woman’s mind because she goes on to write:

I wished that just shutting one’s eyes could erase thoughts of my disastrous outing. I was beginning to feel more than a mite uneasy about marriage – about all marriages ... The only penises I had sighted so far belonged to my father and my brothers. The memory returned to me suddenly of Dad’s penis glimpsed years before in his dressing-table mirror. Gold-brown like his skin, useful-looking, healthy, not limp and lily-pale like Mr Dowie’s. How could I ensure that I got the right kind of penis? I could not ask boys to strip so I could see what colour

Another obstacle! (*op. cit.* p.128)

This passage might provoke in the reader a quasi Freudian reading, inviting images of a girl’s oedipal attachment to the father, and penis envy. In Nene Gare’s childhood (as she retells it in her works), we can see she was very interested in the male physiology. But then isn’t every young girl on the threshold of adolescence likely to experience this sexual awakening? Therefore, if we want to understand what was happening in Gare’s life, perhaps we should take a look at a passage from Terry Eagleton:
The little girl, perceiving that she is inferior because 'castrated,' turns in disillusionment from her similarly 'castrated' mother to the project of seducing her father; but since this project is doomed, she must finally turn back reluctantly to the mother, effect an identification with her, assume her feminine gender role, and unconsciously substitute for the penis which she envies but can never possess a baby, which she desires to receive from the father. (Eagleton, 1983, pp.155-156)

According to Raman Selden, “Ernest Jones was the first to dub Freud’s theory ‘phallocentric,’ a term widely adopted by feminists when discussing male domination in general” (Selden, 1989, p.146). Selden goes on to say:

Inevitably feminists have reacted bitterly to a view of woman as ‘passive, narcissistic, masochistic and penis-envying’ (Eagleton), as nothing in her self but only measurable in relation to a male norm. However, some French feminists have emphasised that Freud’s ‘penis’ or ‘phallus’ is a ‘symbolic’ concept and not a biological actuality. Lacan’s use of the term draws upon the ancient connotations of the phallus in fertility cults. The word is also used in theological and anthropological literature with reference to the organ’s symbolic meaning as power. (ibid.)

In Gare’s writing, we need only look at the novels, The Fringe Dwellers (1961) and A House with Verandahs (1980), to recognize that they, to some extent, reflect an aspect of our society which highlights the dominance of the white male Anglo-Saxon. The Fringe Dwellers, in particular, emphasizes the disadvantages of being Aboriginal and female.

Leaving behind the early part of Gare’s life and looking at the rest of it, it might be timely at this point to look at her novels to see how they relate to various periods of her life.

Gare’s works, as previously stated, are mostly autobiographical in inspiration or form and include, The Fringe Dwellers (1961), Green Gold (1963).
Bend to the Wind (1978), A House with Verandahs (1980), An Island Away (1981) and Kent Town (posthumously published in 1997). The novels provide a key to different aspects and stages of her life.

The Fringe Dwellers and A House with Verandahs, though chronologically years apart, will be covered in more detail than the other novels, since they lend themselves, it will be argued, to the application of both feminist and Marxist theories. Furthermore, A House with Verandahs is extremely helpful in piecing together the biography of Nene Gare, because it is essentially about her own life and family when she was growing up. It is a useful and essential novel to compare the upbringing of white children with that of the Indigenous children in The Fringe Dwellers. After all, Gare herself has said, when discussing The Fringe Dwellers (in the interview with Marion Campbell, published in the Fremantle Arts Review in 1986):

I couldn’t have done it if I’d been brought up in a very wealthy household, I couldn’t have understood. I did understand because I was brought up in more or less the same way. (p. 5)

The Fringe Dwellers is undoubtedly Gare’s major work. It certainly gained wide critical acclaim from both the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal communities. Bruce Beresford, recognized by the Australian film industry as one of its greatest directors, considered The Fringe Dwellers important enough to be made into a feature film, and negotiated the film rights with Gare. Subsequently, the film was shot in Queensland in 1986. A report by John Hyde in The West Australian of 26 April, 1986, entitled “A WA Story for Cannes,” reads:
The Fringe Dwellers is a finalist at the Cannes Festival, and this sensitive portrayal of Aboriginal life is being tipped to make a big impression in a number of categories at Cannes. Nene Gare's novel written in 1961, is set in Geraldton and looks at the life of Aborigines in the West Australian town (p 36).

The Fringe Dwellers draws on knowledge gained of the Aboriginal community when Gare lived in Geraldton (as previously stated) between 1954 and 1962, after her husband was stationed there as District Officer for Native Welfare. As she was to say in the interview with Alison Fox, reported in The Daily News, "I didn't work with the Aborigines. I was just their friend" (Gare-Fox, 1976, p.33).

A House with Verandahs (1980), which is dedicated to Gare's parents, uses many of her childhood and family experiences as the basis for this novel set in her birthplace, Adelaide. The novel documents the everyday lives of a working-class family during the 1930s Depression. Its form has been compared, by reviewer, Margaret Smith, writing for The West Australian in November 1980, to the autobiographical fiction of the Canadian writer, Alice Munro, and said to have similarities to Glen Tomasetti's Thoroughly Decent People, and to a much earlier Australian classic, Ethel Turner's Seven Little Australians. (Smith, 1980, p.29)

When asked by Giulia Giuffré in an interview (later published in A Writing Life: Interviews with Australian Women Writers in 1990) whether she saw a difference between the stories about the Aborigines and the other books which were about herself and her family, Gare replied:
I think I'm not so honest about my own family as I was about the Aborigines. For instance, my eldest sister, when she knew I was writing this book about Peace, *A House with Verandahs*, was terribly worried that I might embarrass her in front of her friends. I had to consider it, so there were lots of things I left out, which I wish I had put in. [Asked if the book would have been better, Gare replied], "I think it wouldn't have been so light, it would have meant more, it would have meant more to me. I allow myself to be persuaded, especially if I think I'm hurting someone's feelings. That's something I despise in myself." (Giuffre-Gare, 1990, p 18)

Gare's criticism of herself invites comment, or perhaps more appropriately a question. Why should she allow herself to be manipulated by others, and then end up despising herself for doing so? However, evidence of her altruistic and unselfish nature may be detected in the fact of her allowing herself to dismiss her own needs in order to spare the feelings of others.

*Green Gold* (1963), though useful from a biographical aspect, is of lesser significance from a literary point of view. This is confirmed by the lack of attention it received from reviewers since it certainly generated far less interest than *The Fringe Dwellers*. *Green Gold* is about an episode in the Gares' lives when they embarked on a banana-growing venture in Carnarvon in 1952. The novel traces the family's journey after they left Perth to take over an old mining camp in Carnarvon to plant bananas. It chronicles the lives of the Gares as they made friends with neighbouring growers and the joys and disappointments that they initially were to encounter. Unfortunately a cyclone came along and demolished their whole crop. The local magistrate advised Frank Gare that there was a vacancy in the area in Native Welfare. He was able to fill this position and
remained in it until 1954, when they sold the plantation and transferred to
Geraldton. (Frank Gare, 29 June 1997)

*Bend to the Wind* (1978) is a collection of short stories drawn from Gare’s
observations of, and interaction with, her Aboriginal friends in the north-west of
Western Australia. Often humorous, sometimes sad, but never condescending,
Gare’s stories simply and lovingly evoke the Aboriginal psyche, allowing all its
warmth, naivety and charm to come through. Gare was to say much later in the
1985 interview with Giulia Giuffrè, (subsequently published in *A Writing Life* in
1990), that she saw the writing of the stories in *Bend to the Wind* as her greatest
achievement: “Anything that furthers understanding must be good.” she asserted.
(Gare, 1990, p.16)

A quotation from “Welfare Worker.” will allow the reader to see for
themselves the type of stories contained in Gare’s *Bend to the Wind:*

‘Well, let’s have a look at the kitchen. I mean your living room
Why, what a good girl you are Mrs Gonigal. This looks lovely and
tidy.’
Mrs Gonigal was surprised. She looked about her living room as if she
were inspecting the house with a view to purchase. ‘Nice room,’ she
approved. ‘This house nice place. I like here’
‘You had a late breakfast, did you Mrs Gonigal?’
‘What late?’ Mrs Gonigal asked cautiously.
‘I only meant – you haven’t done the washing-up yet. And it’s
almost twelve.’ (Gare 1978, p.96)

*An Island Away* (1981) is also useful from a biographical point of view
since it documents Nene Gare’s life in Papua New Guinea where she joined her
husband in 1946. He had been sent there earlier as a patrol officer. Full of
excitement at the prospect of Papua New Guinea and rejoining her husband.
Nene Gare was yet to appreciate her first major encounter with people of a different race and colour. She was soon to learn she must allow the 'house boys' and Sangu, her servant girl – whom she treated more like a friend than a maid – to do the necessary everyday chores which Nene herself would have been more than happy to perform. *An Island Away* delves into the lives of these seemingly happy people who shared their world with a young Perth woman living the life of a patrol officer's wife in post-war Papua New Guinea.

As Gare was to write in *An Island Away*:

At the end of a couple of months the relationship between me and Sangu was that of teacher and student. Sangu was the teacher. If I grew impatient and took over a job belonging properly to a boy not only was the boy reprimanded for dereliction of duty but so was I for acting like a houseboy.

‘Missus doan work,’ Sangu told me over and over. ‘Missus for sit down. Read book. go for walk. Not work.’ Her manner with me was always gentle and tolerant. It was easy to slip into the role she provided for me. (Gare, 1981, p.83)

*Kent Town* (1997), posthumously published, is a series of anecdotes of the life of a young girl, growing up in Adelaide in the 1920s, and is intended to appeal to the younger reader, perhaps one going through the same stages of life. Though of lesser literary interest than the major novels, we will see that the autobiographical *Kent Town* is a useful source for the biographer who needs to check on the subject's early life.

Most of the novels have been useful in their own ways to this biographer. *A House with Verandahs* has been particularly helpful, from a biographical point of view, perhaps more than any of Gare’s works, simply because it is a detailed series of glimpses of Gare’s early family life.
The two major works – *The Fringe Dwellers* and *A House with Verandahs* – will be examined in some detail, because they have the greatest potential to be explored in terms of feminist and Marxist theory. The other works will be discussed more circumspectly because, from a literary point of view they have contributed much less to Gare’s literary success than, say, *The Fringe Dwellers*.

We have now completed this brief review of the early part of Gare’s life, and her origins, and discovered that Doris Wadham, the child, has now become Nene Gare, a young woman with a healthy but perhaps callow interest in exploring relationships with males. In Chapter Two we will follow the next stage of the story of this young woman. Together with a girlfriend, she was to undertake what must have been a remarkable and decisive change, a ‘rite of passage’, namely, to leave the security of her home and family to start a new life in Western Australia.
CHAPTER 2

A NEW START - MARRIAGE AND EARLY CAREER

This second chapter will deal with what could be called a new beginning for the young Nene, since it opens when this twenty-one-year-old, together with a girl friend, leaves the security of her South Australian home and family to start a new life in Western Australia. An attempt will be made to trace Nene’s transition from her Adelaide roots to her early weeks in Perth by revisiting the extant anecdotes of what occurred along the way, and will include those of the meeting with her future husband and their decision to marry.

Nene was on a brief holiday when she met her friend, whom, in her short narrative First Weeks in Perth, she names only as Margaret, although the girl’s name was actually Mae (Frank Gare, 1998). Mae was a young Sydney woman and the girls were both holidaying at Victor Harbour, a popular coastal resort some 100 kilometres south of Adelaide. ‘Margaret’ had been in Adelaide on exchange there from her government job. Employed by the Commonwealth Public Service in Sydney as a shorthand typist, she had exchanged positions with an Adelaide friend. The Commonwealth Public Service at that time allowed its employees to ‘swap’ jobs for brief periods, usually about three months, provided the employees paid their own relocation expenses.

In 1939 Nene wrote her First Weeks in Perth, which, according to Frank Gare, has not been published separately. It may eventually be included in her manuscript novel, entitled Kate Kempler (at present being edited by Terri-Anne 41
White, lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia). A little like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, in her First Weeks in Perth, Gare relates:

We were young and determined to be free and still glad in this year of 1939, when it was unusual for girls to leave home let alone travel to another State to see a cousin waving furiously from the dock. (Gare, 1939, p.1)

Gare’s mother had begged the cousin to keep an eye on the girls, but the latter had other ideas:

We told her we were bound to stay out the week at “Strawberry Hill,” and after that we would see. We didn’t intend to ‘see’ at all. For too many years already, we felt, we had been hampered by parental concern .... We had escaped and were going to stay escaped. (ibid.)

Gare’s quest for freedom from the family one suspects might have stemmed from what could have been an emerging bid for independence and adventure, as well as what the young woman obviously perceived as the need to escape from what she felt were overly protective parental pressures and restrictions. Another ‘reason’ for leaving home and family, despite the fact that Gare had not by then written anything of significance, might have been that she sensed a need to accumulate some completely new experiences. Whether she knew it or not, like many authors, (such as Randolph Stow, who was to leave Western Australia for England, and Dorothy Hewett, who went away from Perth to live in Sydney), Gare may have been unconsciously following the instinct of those who exile themselves in order to gain new perspectives on life back in their home regions.

The girls packed what Gare described as “a meagre assortment of ‘best’ dresses”.

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"'Don't worry about clothes,' Margaret had written. 'Nobody over there
will have seen what we've got.'"

"We compromised on one new fugi silk shirt each" (ibid.). The rest of their
money had to go on fares, although it only cost them ten pounds first class on the
steamship Westralie, which was to take Gare to a new life, and, though at the
time she did not know it, to her future husband.

One suspects that the prospects of shipboard life with fun and adventure,
not to mention chances of meeting other young people and the possibility of a
shipboard romance, may have been the determining factor in deciding their
choice of transport. Cost may have also been an important consideration, as Gare
goes to the trouble to point out "it only cost us ten pounds on the old Westralia"
(ibid.).

The voyage was not without excitement for the girls, as Gare put it:

It had been heavenly enough on the boat – going to bed when we felt
like it, determined every night to stay in bed past breakfast just to
savour but always rising with the lark because it was such a waste,
flirting shamelessly with a group of runners on their way back from the
Stawell Gift – playing Housie, giggling as we tried in vain to follow
the numbers. But in Perth – by ourselves – no family to crush our plans.
What should we do first? What of all the heavenly possibilities? (op.
cit. p.2)

So the girls settled in at "Strawberry Hill," a rather imposing guest house in
Adelaide Terrace. Gare describes Perth as

so many huge houses, colonial and lovely, gracious in their acres of
ground, a river at the bottom of the street glinting dark blue. The trees
in Victoria Avenue, huge shady gums looking as immutable as the
buildings, anchored, native, lords of their domain. (op. cit. p.1)
It is obvious from the above observation that the young woman was very impressed by what she saw of Perth. Her artist’s eye did not fail to register minute details of the Western Australian environment. Her writing pen rather than her accustomed drawing pencils had for the moment become her medium of recording experience.

She goes on to say:

“Strawberry Hill” looked more relaxed – more spread out – further back from the street. On a tennis court to the side my future husband played tennis. *(ibid.)*

She was later to write to her mother, ‘At last I’ve met a boy whose touch didn’t make my flesh cringe’ *(Frank Gare, 1997).*

In *First Weeks in Perth*, Nene Gare records her initial impressions of “Strawberry Hill”:

My cousin helped us with our bags and we entered through the wide open front door, click clacked nervously over the tiles of the hall and found Mrs Rees who escorted us up a broad staircase with rainbow stained glass on the landing. Another short flight took us to our room, tremendous by any standards. Three double windows or was it four? Facing to front and side anyway. The ceiling miles high, two small beds clothed in white honeycomb. The biggest wardrobe I had yet seen, doors wide, inviting to its depths our meagre assortment of ‘best’ dresses. *(Gare, 1939, p.1)*

In interview, Frank Gare, when asked about “Strawberry Hill,” said that it was a very good guest house situated at 197 Adelaide Terrace. He described it as a red brick mansion – a beautiful old house set right back from the street, featuring a wide green lawn between the street and the house. He said he was
very impressed, and that it was the original home of Septimus Burt, the first
Attorney General in the Colony.

The Stawell Gift runners, who had struck up an acquaintance with the girls
on the boat, eventually came knocking on their door in Perth. One of the group,
Jim Williams, who, according to Neil Ingleton, (a friend of Gare's, interviewed in
September 1997), was rather keen on Gare and invited them both to the hot pool
at Dalkeith. Gare records in First Weeks in Perth, a friendly warning given at the
time:

    Don't you know they bathe nude in that pool? Well we didn't. Nobody
    would believe you. Better not mention it. (op. cit. p.2)

It was costing the girls three pounds (six dollars) a week for bed and board
at “Strawberry Hill.” They deduced that if they moved up the terrace to
“Newquay Mansion” they could rent a flat for that and feed themselves, and,
besides, they would be free to invite the runners to a meal. Margaret was
planning to be married after this exchange to Western Australia, so a little
cooking practice would not go astray. They found “Newquay” suited them
perfectly – twenty-five shillings a week for a bed-sitting room with a tiny
kitchenette. And outside the huge windows opening on the street, a sloping
wooden verandah just big enough to take two beds. They took it (ibid.)

According to Frank Gare “Newquay Mansion” originally belonged to the Durack
family. It was a substantial two-storey building with extensive grounds which
looked on to The Esplanade.
Margaret started work on the Monday after they arrived, but Gare had to wait for the promised job. Promised, otherwise she would not have been allowed to come. In due course her job turned up – secretary to the doctor who gave *practique* to the boats visiting Fremantle. This involved a train trip every morning and what Gare describes as, “an eye-opening acquaintance with every disease known to man. Nobody who had the least suspicion of one of them was allowed ashore” (*op. cit.* p.3). Gare then goes on to relate:

The doctor drove her home via Peppermint Grove [and remarked] ‘All the wealthy folk live around here.’

‘Do you?’

‘No. Not a hope. Houses around here cost over a thousand’ (*ibid.*).

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) has confirmed that a general practitioner’s income would have been quite modest in 1939. According to the Association, a doctor who had practised in 1939 informed them he charged ten shillings and sixpence per consultation. His gross income per week was fourteen pounds and out of this he had to pay his rent and receptionist.

Returning to the conversation between Gare and the doctor, we learn that the young woman, upon hearing the price of houses in Peppermint Grove, remained almost dumbfounded, because all she managed to say was, “Pounds! Gosh!” However, she was most impressed by the view and relates that she had never seen such a vast expanse of water, so different from the Torrens. The doctor stopped the car to allow her to have a good look. And look she did, as she would have observed the graceful yachts on the river which prompted her remark, “No sails on the Torrens only flat bottomed punts and rowboats” (*ibid.*).
Questioned on 2 December 1998, about boating on the Swan in 1939, Frank Gare said that yachting was a big sport then, with races held every Saturday afternoon. He remembers luminaries in the business world, such as Bill Lucas, often owned their own craft. Lucas had the Thora. Frank’s friend, Colin Parslow, owned a yacht named Sinbad, in which they all went yachting together. Frank and Nene themselves acquired a yacht in 1940 (see Appendix 4).

An incident involving one of the “running boys”, who thought the large front window of the apartment was open and walked through it, resulted in a crash of broken glass, and a scurry around the next day to find a glazier who could come and repair the damage before it was discovered. And not long after, their landlady Mrs Macdonald told them, “We thought you girls were so good getting the glass fixed.” But as Gare observes, “Not good enough to stay in a law-abiding house.”

“We think you would be happier somewhere else.”

Gare reflects, “Thank God, the parents weren’t here” (Gare. 1939, p.3). They moved up the road to “Salisbury House,” a flat which consisted of a room with kitchen and use of bathroom, and there was a fireplace. By this time it was winter in Perth, and the girls settled in very cosily, bought wool and knitted in front of the fire. They met the West Perth footballers — bathed for them every Saturday and celebrated with them every Saturday night. Gare apparently loved fish soup, and every Friday night the manageress gave her the remains of her fish soup. They did not dine much on meat, but both girls loved tomatoes on toast, and tomatoes were cheap. (op. cit. p.4)
As time went by, the girls drifted from foot-running boys, to sailing and tennis boys. They made friends with ‘disgusting’ looking yachties, went out on boats and became jib hands, hanging on with their toes, the sheet tearing through their palms, their bottoms dipping in the water. They stopped off at Pio Cove, Point Walter, Claremont and Nedlands, walking home at night over the Esplanade grass, frequently hoping that someone had left part of a penny in the gas meter to spare them the discomfort of a cold shower. Gare laments how often she was broke, especially when her job gave out and she had to wait for another. *(ibid.)*

Her secretarial job with the doctor had indeed cut out, and her finances were strained. To use her own words, ‘almost nil.’ However, this resourceful young woman took what she describes as ‘a last walk along Wellington Street’ into the office of McKay Massey Harris, and was engaged as a shorthand typist for their Maylands premises. So keen was Gare to protect her job that, despite an attack of quinsy in her first week with the company, she worked through what must have been a very uncomfortable settling-in period. *(op. cit. p.3)*

Gare loved Perth. There was no way she was going back to ‘stuffy old Adelaide’. She was also falling in love with a handsome young man by the name of Frank – the boy whose “touch didn’t make her flesh cringe”. Of course the feeling was mutual. With her ravishing looks and bubbly personality *(see Appendix 5)* she had already captivated a coterie of young men, but she only had eyes for Frank. And Frank certainly had eyes for her. In interview Frank says of
his wife, “Nene was very charming, very lovely, with a strong personality and a mind of her own” (Frank Gare, 1997).

Frank Gare had matriculated for the University of Western Australia. His early education commenced at a tiny school near Kojonup in the State’s southwest. From there he obtained a scholarship to Albany High School, “I suppose,” he explains, “it was an Inspector’s Scholarship” (Frank Gare, 1997). Subsequently his Leaving Certificate gained him entry to the Commonwealth Public Service, where he worked as a clerk for two years.

By 1939, although he has no recollection of which month, Frank joined the Citizens Military Forces (Militia) in the Artillery Section which was part of the Third Field Brigade. One reason was that the Second World War had started, and although Australia fared much better than most of the rest of the world which had been plunged into this terrible turmoil, a certain amount of austerity had to be observed, even in Perth. An element of food rationing was imposed – coupons were issued for tea, sugar, butter, clothing and manchester. A few lines in The Western Mail of 1 July 1943 (courtesy of the Battye Library) reported that butter rationing commenced in Australia on 10 June 1943. Each person was allowed half a pound per week which appeared quite generous when compared to the English people who had been receiving the meagre amount of two ounces per person per week from the beginning of the war.

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1 Two kinds of scholarships were awarded to WA schoolchildren completing their primary school education at the time. The majority were tenable at Perth Modern School. A smaller number were awarded to promising country students who weren't quite up to the standard of their city contemporaries. These were tenable at the five major country high schools.
Bomb shelters mushroomed overnight. One example was a prominent structure that many recall in Murray Street around the corner from Forrest Place. “Draw that blind! General Tojo can spot your lights from Tokyo,” became a common refrain in war-time Perth. Hence all windows were heavily shrouded by blinds to ensure that not a chink of light penetrated to enable the enemy to recognize its target. Vehicle headlamps shone through a narrow slit in the lens so that only the minimum of light contributed to the safety of the motoring public as they navigated their way through metropolitan and Perth streets at night. Many who were alive at the time will recollect posters which blossomed on walls, warning the public not to indulge in loose talk. Their cautionary message proclaimed, ‘Remember the Enemy has Ears!’ The mood everywhere was tense.

Little sleepy provincial Perth was to see some major changes. American troops were everywhere, and competed with the Australian male for the attention of the female population. A Catalina air base was stationed in Matilda Bay on the Swan River near the University of Western Australia. Australian soldiers were in training for departure overseas and those men who were not physically fit were ‘manpowered’ to fill positions left empty due to the war. Life was changing for everyone so that people’s emotions were being stirred up by the war and the uncertainty of the times.

Just when the young Nene was beginning to enjoy her freedom and independence, this uncertain future loomed before her. One could ask how these circumstances might have affected her development as a writer. Did she suffer an unconscious guilt over having a good time, and knowing that her only
inconvenience was the scarcity of silk stockings, when overseas soldiers were being killed on the battlefield and in the trenches? Perhaps she saw an ironic contrast between the horror of war and the still largely untroubled lives of ordinary citizens who were enjoying themselves in Australia's south-west. This may have been one powerful motivational factor for her to write *The Fringe Dwellers* years later. She might have recognized a parallel situation with the Aboriginal people who were suffering while the general white public "had it easy."

Able-bodied men, as mentioned above, were conscripted to fight for their country at this time, although most wanted to go and were prompt to volunteer. Frank Gare had been no exception. He transferred from the CMF to the Australian Imperial Forces on 2 January 1941. He was due to embark on the *Queen Mary* on 4 June 1941. To use Frank's own words, "Nene virtually insisted" that they marry before he left. We can assume, that among many things which must have been going through the young woman's mind, the one uppermost would be the dreaded thought that her loved one might never return, or perhaps be left to languish as a prisoner-of-war in an enemy jail. She would have faced the real possibility that he might return minus a limb or an eye. One can only guess that at a time of great uncertainty in the world, the chance to grasp at any happiness, however brief, with her beloved was paramount in Nene Gare's mind.

So they were married in Perth's Anglican St George's Cathedral, by special licence, on 13 May 1941. It was a simple ceremony. Reflecting the prevailing
standard of morals, both were still virgins, we are led to understand (Frank Gare, 1997).

The newly-weds booked a flat on the corner of William and Bulwer Streets, Perth. The building still stands (see Appendix 6) and is called “Bulwer Park”. They spent three short weeks on ‘honeymoon’ before Frank’s imminent departure. In an excerpt from her diary Nene recorded:

We had a wonderful honeymoon. I was so pleased to be a married woman with a husband. Every night we would walk down William Street and bought second-hand magazines. Frank thought I was lovely I wasn’t but he thought I was. (Gare, circa May 1941, courtesy Frank Gare)

Indeed, Nene Gare was a very lovely young woman, as her photographs as well as Frank’s memories testify (see Appendix 5).

The choice of the reading matter of the newly-wed Gares, according to Frank, was confined to the English ‘glossies’ such as The Strand, The Windsor, and the Wide World, embracing the likes of writers such as Robert Standish and Somerset Maugham, which confirms that even on their ‘honeymoon’ some good taste for literature was in order.

After Nene had seen Frank off, when he left for Sydney by train to join the Queen Mary, she took up residence at 17 Avalon Flats, Adelaide Terrace, which was more or less a return to her old territory. She continued with her job at McKay Massey Harris and utilised spare time in writing short stories, and, of course, keeping in contact with Frank through letters sent “His Majesty’s Transport Queen Mary, care of Government Post Office, Sydney.”
As already mentioned in Chapter One, Gare said that in 1943 she read some stories in *The Western Mail* and thought ‘she could do as well’. She sent off six, all of which were accepted.

A search of the Battye Library uncovered hard copies of *The Western Mail* commencing 7 January 1943 until the end of December. And while no actual stories written by Nene Gare could be found in this sequence, evidence does exist that she had submitted several manuscripts, and at least one has been accepted for publication. The story accepted for *The Broadcaster* was listed as “The Erring Husband”, by Nene Gare, Como. “Poor Pamela” was listed as ‘much too long for us.’ Under ‘Manuscripts Received’, Nene Gare, Como appears as the author of “Alibi”. Under the heading ‘A Chat with Correspondents,’ Nene Gare’s name appears yet again, this time with her Coffee Point address. The story was “Let’s Have Another”, and received the comment, ‘Has its moments, but too long for us.’ The information was recovered from *The Western Mail* 21 October 1943, p.11, and 28 October 1943, p.11). One could make the assumption that Gare may have re-written some of her stories and had them accepted at a later date.2

On the other hand, *The Western Mail* had no shortage of stories from other Western Australian authors. G.M. Glaskin of Cottesloe had his story entitled “The Other Man’s Job” published 1 July 1943. John K. Ewers’ story, “Just Like the Pictures”, appeared on 20 May 1943. Both were ultimately to become distinguished Australian authors and presidents of the local Fellowship of

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2 A search of the Battye Library at a later date uncovered 1944 hard copies of *The Western Mail* and a short story by Nene Gare entitled “In Possession,” appeared on page 20 of the 13 July 1944 issue. (See Appendix 7)
Australian Writers section. The list of Western Australian contributors is endless, and confirms that *The Western Mail* apparently sought material almost exclusively from Western Australian writers.

As we focus on Nene Gare at this critical point in her life, we can observe that she was poised to begin what was to really be a very accomplished writing career in 'exile,' although with a husband by her side. This was her very own choice, independent of family or home-town alliances, and we reflect that no sooner had she achieved one of the things she most wanted, namely to be a married woman, when suddenly it had evaporated. She had become a 'grass widow' as Frank commenced his war service. No doubt being lonely and bereft, there were at least compensating factors - her steady employment and her part-time writing of stories.

From a small assortment of very short stories, recovered from her private papers, loaned to me by Frank Gare, in fact one or two could be called journal entries and not necessarily published, we can see that Nene Gare recorded some of her thoughts, and was beginning her career as a writer:

I did not go back to Adelaide. I met somebody whose touch did not make me feel fastidious. We married and went to live in a flat, over the road from a man who told me he was writing short stories for a magazine called *The Western Mail*, edited by another man whose duty he believed was to encourage young writers. I bought a magazine, knew I could do at least as well as Bill and wrote six short stories along his lines. A satirical look at a young married woman. All six being accepted I began my career as a writer [italics added]. My job I felt, was to make my audience laugh and I noted now that the more real my tragedies, the more I had suffered by them, the easier it was to make other folk laugh at them. The things I wrote about had, at the time of happening, broken my heart but none of this was allowed to show... If a story was sent back the most frequent comment was 'too flimsy'. They were the stories I had not been able to bring myself to
exploit fully in case I became serious and therefore unpublishable.
(Gare, n.d.)

Malcolm Uren of course would have been the man whom Gare referred to
who believed his duty was to encourage young writers. He was the Editor of *The
Western Mail* at the time. These short stories (which have, as pointed out
previously, been loaned to me by Frank Gare), concentrate on family and family
matters and appear to be autobiographical. In one there is even an episode on
jam-making, "Eclipse", published in *The Bulletin*, relates what it feels like to be
the mother of a grown-up daughter:

I love her. How I love her. But my days seem much fuller of work and
of writing when my daughter is at home. Odd empty intervals vanish
and the hard fact is that not only is there more work to do but I am not
allowed to do it in my own time but must creep about doing it secretly
if I am not to be accused of fussing and doing jobs just to make things
hard for Helen. (Gare, n.d.)

The above paragraph taken from "Eclipse," evokes the common frustrations
of a mother torn between love and ambivalence towards her twenty-year-old
daughter. In what came to be a characteristic of Gare's style, she mostly seems to
write about the people and places which are close to her heart.

So, while Frank was away from Perth, it can be established with some
certainty that Gare would have continued to write short stories for *The Western
Mail*. And if it is true that the best writers are those who have suffered most,
Nene Gare must have had her share of pain and anxiety which would help
'qualify' her to become recognized as eventually one of Western Australia's best
writers.
When we return to this young woman writer in the next chapter, hostilities between the warring nations will have ended, Frank will be back home, though after a short period he will be posted to Papua New Guinea in a totally new role, as Patrol Officer. Nene will be excitedly making plans to join him there.
CHAPTER 3

SOJOURN IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

This chapter aims to document Nene Gare’s life in Papua New Guinea where, in April 1946, she joined her husband, Frank, who had been stationed there on administrative duties in the Territory after the Second World War. Events which occurred immediately prior to her departure for New Guinea will also be recounted.

It was actually at the end of 1941 that Frank Gare first returned to Perth after serving on the Queen Mary for six months as an offsider to the ship’s paymaster in the Orderly Room. While still with the Australian Imperial forces, according to an interview he gave on 8 February 1999, Frank worked in the Area Finance Office part of the Defence Department at Swan Barracks in Perth.

It was early in 1945 that he answered an army advertisement which offered a course to train field officers for service in Papua New Guinea. The successful applicants would undergo a five-month training at Duntroon Military College in Canberra and would become members of what was known as the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (Angau). Subsequently they would be posted to the Territory.

Margriet Roe, a contributor to the book Australia and Papua New Guinea, (W.J. Hudson [ed]) says, in her chapter entitled “Papua New Guinea and War 1941-5”, that Angau was established in Canberra in February 1945. "In May 1947 it [the Angau unit] transferred to Sydney as the Australian School of Pacific
Administration and has continued to this day to train young officers for territorial administration” (Roe, 1971, p.145).

In an interview with Frank Gare on 29 June 1997, he related that the course which he remembered attending provided a good background for the recruits and was especially designed with the intention of equipping the officers with the skills needed to get on with other races. Frank did not explicitly mention the nature of the skills that the officers were meant to acquire. However, he went on to say that the instructors in the training programme included anthropologists, historians, and members of the medical profession. One suspects, therefore, that, having undergone a course that would have provided them with a background in anthropology, history and medicine, they would have been better equipped to handle any difficulties that a conflict in cultural diversity might have engendered.

In one of her many letters at the time (National Library Canberra), Gare documents for her husband how she also was looking forward to going to New Guinea. For instance, in a letter from Geraldton, where she was staying with a friend, she writes, “I’ve done nothing but think of New Guinea since I’ve been up here” (Gare, n.d.). In another from Adelaide where she stayed with her parents while awaiting confinement for the birth of her second child, she expressed her confidence in her husband’s ability to pass the course, and her own ambitions for him:

My heart is set absolutely on your making a terrific success at the school. I believe in your ability like mad darling. Don’t spend a moment worrying over me. Concentrate like mad all through the

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3 Details about the first born child of the Gares have been withheld out of respect for the wishes of the family.
week and then sit down on Sunday and write me ten closely written pages all about how much you love me and what progress you've made, but mostly about how miserable you are. I think I'd feel quite happy if only you'd write and tell me how miserable you are. (Gare, circa 1945)

In her book, *An Island Away* (1981), which might be called a memoir of this overseas experience, Gare documents how she had decided to travel to Adelaide, her home town for the confinement. She already had, as has been mentioned, a boy aged about two years and a few months, whom she named as Christopher in the book:

My Perth doctor, under threat of my travelling all the way to Adelaide by motor car, was induced to sign a paper saying I would not give birth on the aeroplane if I left within a certain time. We booked a flight for me. (Gare, 1981, p.7)

Gare’s powers of coercion which she could call upon in order to obtain what she wanted cannot go unnoticed here.

In the comfort and security of her parents’ home, Gare relaxed. In a letter to her husband from Adelaide, headed 109 King William Street Kent Town, and dated Saturday, 30 June 1945, she writes:

Hello Angel. Yesterday I saw my doctor. He’s quite nice, Frank, and seemed rather impressed because I’d had Dr Nattrass in Perth.... Anyhow, everything is perfect and the baby in exactly the right position. (Gare, 1945, p.1)

Further on in the letter she goes on to say:

Today I had a letter from the R.S.L. and one from The Western Mail enclosing two rejections, “Spring Cleaning,” apparently has been accepted, which is rather a feather in my cap, because Malcolm Uren
didn’t like it, if you remember. I’m sorry the other two were rejected. I wrote them just lately and what I need for my morale is to have a story printed which I have written lately. Do you think when I am more settled I will write properly again Frank? And do you think it’s all gone? I do want to succeed. I don’t think I could write much right here tho, I’ll wait until I have a room of my own. (op. cit. p.2)

Malcolm Uren was the Editor of The Western Mail at that time, and his opinion would of course have ‘carried a lot of weight’. Therefore, if “Spring Cleaning” were accepted at a later date as it obviously was, Nene Gare has every right to consider this to be ‘a feather in her cap’, as she might have looked on it as the beginning of her writing career. As this letter to her husband indicates, the acceptance of this short story has, to a certain extent, boosted her flagging morale. Nevertheless, in seeking Frank’s assurance that when she is more settled she ‘will write properly again,’ shows the negative effect the rejections have had on her morale. However, despite this, Gare demonstrates that she is very determined to succeed as a writer, and not unlike a lot of women writers even today, she sees a “room of her own” as a means to further the development of her career.

Gare wrote often to her husband in Papua New Guinea, and made sure she kept him well-informed not only on business matters, but even on small everyday occurrences and trifles. One suspects she deliberately included these snippets of domesticity, in order to make her husband feel less isolated, and more part of the family from which he was temporarily separated. In a letter dated 30 June 1945 – which has been quoted from earlier in this chapter – Gare writes:
I've just had a bath, and mother wanted me to fill the bottle, place it on a cushion, and place my feet on top of that so I wouldn't get cold feet. I'm certainly well looked after. (ibid.)

An undated letter, originating from 109 King William Street Kent Town, contained news of an article which (since he was now a member of Angau) Gare knew would be of interest to her husband:

In the paper today was a tiny article about how the head of Angau had entertained the Duke at lunch. I was quite thrilled about it and almost felt that I'd entertained the Duke myself Frank. Is it really all right for me to write you a lot of letters? Will it take your mind off your work if I bombard you? Please answer this question. (Gare, circa 1945, p.3)

That Gare showed a certain amount of pride and joy when she read that the head of Angau had entertained the Duke at lunch, goes to show that, although a modest person herself, she was not above being impressed by the article which reported the Duke's meeting with the head of her husband's unit. Pride in her husband and her husband's work, which she hesitates to interrupt with 'a lot of letters,' perhaps reveals not only Gare's either inherent thoughtfulness or the psychological insecurity resulting from separation, but also, to some extent, the caring relationship that they shared.

Being pregnant, Gare was especially glad to bask in the love and warmth of her parents' home when she returned after spending some years in another state. As she had already written to her husband she was being well cared for:

'Now you can tell us all about New Guinea and Murdock's new job,' Mother said. [Murdock of course was what Gare called Frank in the book *An Island Away*] 'Your father worries about you. Are you sure you'll be all right up there with all those black men?' (Gare 1981, p.9)
Gare then continues relating some of her own thoughts on how she might settle down among a people about whom she knew so little:

I might have known. Personally I had taken it for granted that I was going to settle down among all those black people like a white queen from another world. I did not know much about blacks myself.... Dad said, 'So you're going to see a bit of the world? I envy you. Wish I were younger.' (ibid.)

Gare strikes a parallel with Katharine Susannah Prichard, who placed herself in an Aboriginal environment in the Pilbarra in order to research material for her fiction works, including Coonardoo. According to Prichard's son, Ric Throssell, in his book, Wild Weeds and Windflowers: The Life and Letters of Katharine Susannah Prichard, Katharine travelled with a then four-year-old Ric in tow to the end of the railway line at Meekatharra and four hundred miles further on by truck, to Turee Station in the State's north-west. This was beyond the Ashburton River (Throssell, 1982, p.48). He then goes on to say that Katharine wrote:

It's terrifically hot - and the dust storms - suffocating.... And of course I'm enciente [sic] with stories, delighted and quite mad with the beauty and tragedy of them.... And the blacks are most interesting - fair haired - and I find them poetic and naïve. Quite unlike all I've ever been told, or asked to believe about them. I'm doing some character studies. But feel "to [sic] honour bound" not to touch the legends. (op. cit. p.49)

Nene Gare, still unable to join her Frank, relates that the Department of External Affairs 'must have found me one of their biggest single problems.' She says she wrote every other week, and, as the long dreadful war was at an end, she
was determined to be reunited with her husband at the earliest possible moment (Gare, 1981, p.37).

'No!' the Department wrote back. I was not to set foot in New Guinea until the last prisoner of war had been captured and sent back to Japan. Especially since I had two small children. *(ibid.)*

At this point it is opportune to return to Margriet Roe, and to quote from her chapter, "Papua New Guinea and War 1941-5", in order to amplify the above quotation:

Landing at Buna, the Japanese over-ran coastal missions, plantations and hospitals, trapping some Europeans.... Throughout 1943, 1944 and much of 1945, the Allies advanced northward with General Douglas MacArthur and his American forces in the vanguard but not until their surrender in August 1945 were parts of the mandated territory and then its islands finally cleared of Japanese. *(Roe, 1971, p.141)*

Meanwhile, Gare had arranged to stay in Townsville for two months. She ultimately arrived in Townsville on approximately 16 February 1946. Part of her plan was to see as much of the East as she could, expecting to move up the coast to Cairns, but she was beginning to reconsider the wisdom of the idea. Travelling with infants was not the simple thing she had thought it to be. She had given safe delivery to a baby girl, Lief, in Adelaide - whom she later referred to as ‘Merit’ in her book, *An Island Away.*

Having first been advised that air travel to Townsville was her only option, she later learned that the passenger ship, *Canberra,* had advertised berths were available. By this time - the end of August 1945 - she had tearfully farewelled her parents in Adelaide. However, according to Frank Gare, his wife remained in
Sydney for several months, firstly living in a house at Palm Beach which he had rented for her, and during the latter part of her sojourn, with a friend whom she only identifies as Helen in *An Island Away*. Gare documents how her friend alerted her to the imminent sailing of the ship:

The day after I booked and paid for my ticket to go by aeroplane Helen said ‘Listen to this.... “Berths available for passengers to Townsville on S.S. Canberra. Sailing 17th instant.” That’s day after tomorrow. Didn’t you want to go by boat?’ (Gare, 1981, p.44)

Gare then goes on to relate how she frantically cancelled her air booking, and when the sailing date arrived - 8 February 1946 - she hurried Helen through her morning duties, fearful that the ship might sail without her. “‘We seem to be the only ones here,’ Helen remarked, looking about the deserted decks” (*op. cit.* p.45).

Despite having two children in tow, Gare apparently struck up some sort of shipboard flirtation with the ship’s chief officer whom she names Justin in the book:

He was an older man whose age did not matter because it went with a sunburnt face, thick snowy hair, brilliant eyes and thin devilish eyebrows, one higher than the other.... The voyage must have been half over before I allowed myself to enjoy Justin.... Now, married and a mother it would never have occurred to me to flirt. One did not risk what one had worked hard to achieve. Besides, until Justin I had not been tempted.... So it was days and shy days before it dawned upon me that not only were my feelings pleasant and diverting, provided one’s husband was many sea-miles away they could safely be indulged.... I know now of course that the proper thing to have done was to bed him. Goodness, what an opportunity to have let slip. The most attractive man I ever met in my life and I did not know A from a bull’s foot as my father would have put it. (*op. cit.* pp.47,48)
Gare’s naivety is perhaps reflected in the way she made certain the shipboard friendship remained just that and nothing more. As she recalls in later years, she realized she did not know ‘a from a bull’s foot’. However, one is also inclined to believe, despite her assertions of what she should have done, that remaining faithful to her marriage vows would have always been uppermost in the young woman’s mind. Undoubtedly, Gare was flattered. As she went on to write:

Certainly I was catching up with Life. A husband, children and now an admirer. Who would have believed it of me? Certainly not I. My accomplishments dazzled me. (ibid.)

Notwithstanding, Gare's attitude now seems to be a bit immature, as one would expect shipboard flirtation to be part of the ‘agenda’ for ships’ officers. Then again, Gare was no stranger to having lots of adoring young men flocking to her door, as her memoirs of her early months in Western Australia testify.

The *Canberra* was sailing for Lae to pick up some nurses who were being brought back to Australia:

Murdock, though stationed at the moment at Lae, had not yet had a permanent posting and I was not sure how he would react to having several tea chests and trunks tacked on to him. (Gare, 1981, p.51)

Gare explains that the question was whether to leave most of her stuff aboard and thus be sent on to her husband, or to keep it with her in Townsville. The Ship’s Officer (Justin) was continuing on to Lae, and in a few days would be with Frank Gare (Murdock) and he had promised to look him up. She decided,
however, to keep the luggage under her eye, and store it in Townsville: “I was afraid he might simply throw everything away” (*ibid*).

Still struggling with red tape and obviously anxious to join her husband and settle down, Gare recalls that she wrote yet another letter to the authorities:

> I liked my first taste of the real tropics so much I sat down as soon as possible and wrote another letter to the Department of External Affairs. We were haggling about income tax at the moment. They had to be certain I owed nothing.... Apart from this the department considered it was not yet safe up there. When I wrote asking for a tentative date my letter was left unanswered as before. (*op. cit. p.52*)

Meanwhile, roughly about 28 February 1946, Frank had been posted to Salamaua, which is located a small distance south of Lae on the east coast of Papua New Guinea (see Appendix 8). In interview, Frank described the place as an isthmus, with a tropical climate: “An idyllic little township with the sea back and front” (Frank Gare, 29 June 1997). After four to five months at Salamaua, he was transferred to Mumeng, located approximately 80 km north-west of Salamaua. In *An Island Away* Nene Gare gives a brief description of Salamaua:

> He had been posted to Salamaua which he described as an isthmus, the loveliest spot he had seen. ‘The ground is covered with short grass and there are gardens everywhere, also flowering shrubs and tropical fruit trees. The sea is at the front of our house and behind as well. Along from us there is a little beach and we also have a tennis court and swimming pool though most of the wire around it is damaged. This was a recreation area for a while.’ (Gare, 1981, p.60)

One of Frank Gare’s first postings on 28 December 1945 was to the Duke of York Island, situated a short distance from Rabaul, between New Britain and New Ireland. According to Frank, interviewed on 8 February 1999, there were
100,000 Japanese prisoners-of-war in Rabaul. Being in charge of the small island, Frank Gare’s main purpose was to ensure that the indigenous people did not turn on the Japanese who were unarmed. He was to remain here until he left for Salamaua at the end of February in 1946.

As a patrol officer, Frank’s duties generally included maintaining law and order, keeping a census, and looking out for any health problems that might occur in the villages. He explained that a patrol officer was a cross between a policeman and a magistrate. For example, there were “native” police on the staff, and when they made arrests, a patrol officer would charge the law breaker, and another patrol officer would hear the case in court (Frank Gare, 1999).

Randolph Stow who went as a Cadet Patrol Officer to Papua New Guinea, and later wrote *Visitants*, set in the Trobriand Islands, uses his book to depict incidents in a patrol officer’s life in the villages, and also to set down aspects of Papua New Guinea culture. An extract taken from Stow’s book may serve to illustrate some of these aspects:

“I do not speak of this to shame you,” Alistea said. “Three of you have been in the calaboose in Misima because of it. It has been forgotten for thirteen years. But the Patrol Officer who heard of it and punished those three men could not find Taudoga. He was gone. So I am asking you, when everyone else has forgotten: What did you do when he was King? And where is Taudoga today?” (Stow, 1979, p.59)

It appears that this Taudoga was an evil man who listened to the rantings of Buriga:

Buriga told the people that if all the Dimdins were killed the world would turn over, and any Dimdim that remained would be changed into a native, and all the natives would be changed into Dimdins. And
because of Buriga's talk, a soldier and a trader and some other Dimdins were murdered. (*op. cit.* p.57)

Apparently no one seemed to know Taudoga, or where he was born:

He was not a Misima man and not a Muyuwa man. Perhaps he was a Kaga man. We only know these things about him: he believed in Buriga's talk, and he was mad, and he wanted to kill. (*ibid.*)

Ultimately, Taudoga, accompanied by men who were returning to Kaga, established himself there and appointed himself King (*op. cit.* p.58).

The Trobriand Islands, in which *Visitants* is set, is "miles away" from any of the places that Frank Gare was attached to as a patrol officer. And while Frank's job was to charge the law-breaker and punish the offender (like the patrol officer in the quotation taken from *Visitants*), by his own admission (12 April 1999), he did not encounter the likes of Taudoga or Buriga. In other respects, however, Stow's book confirms the kind of duties Frank was expected to perform. For instance, on page 95 of *Visitants*, there is mention of the people of a village looking over an old census book. Reference to a patrol preparing to set out appears on page 77. The presence of the Government is confirmed in the following quotation taken from Stow's book:

Old Mak was fed up about having us hanging around all afternoon, and left me to entertain myself. So most of the time I sat at the table on the verandah, watching the canoes go out to the *Igau* with all our stupid gear: the patrol-table, the chairs, the typewriter, the patrol-boxes, all the Government's signs of rank. (Stow, 1979, p.180)

Frank Gare was away on patrol for two or three weeks at a time. As Gare was to write in *An Island Away*, and as documented in this chapter, there was
plenty of work for her to do. It can be assumed that she continued to submit short stories to *The Western Mail*. According to Frank, she was sending letters to Malcolm Uren, the Editor of that publication. Entitled “Letters from a Patrol Officer’s Wife in New Guinea,” they were being printed in that paper.

An extensive search of the Battye Library covering the beginning of January 1946 to the end of December 1947 failed to find any of these letters. Gare did not arrive in Papua New Guinea until April 1946 and the Gares returned in 1947. The search also included all the Christmas supplements. Additionally, a further search was done covering 1 January 1948 to 30 December 1948 with no results.

Nene Gare’s main job, however, was to look after her children with the help of Sangu, her servant girl, whom we will meet later on in this chapter. She also had to supervise the houseboys in their duties of cooking and cleaning the house which had been allocated to Frank Gare and his family.

In the case of Nene Gare’s battle with the Department of External Affairs, we now learn that her long wait was finally coming to an end. Nevertheless she was still in Townsville in the early months of 1946, awaiting her first glimpse of the strange land where she was to rejoin her husband. It was around April 1946 that she was given the all clear, and what she described as ‘an orderly panic’ took place as she purchased every useful thing that caught her eye in the shops:

My actual permit and taxation clearance arrived together and I took them straight to the Airways office. I was offered two seats on the next morning’s plane and took them without hesitation…. At the hotel I said goodbye to all my friends who apart from a couple, heirs to the island of Sark, consisted of the entire hotel staff. (Gare, 1981, pp.63,64)
One can easily imagine the relief and joy that Gare must have felt when she received her travel clearance, perhaps only to be matched by her excitement at the prospect of reuniting with her husband, and reaching the destination which had been occupying her thoughts for so long. Gare’s popularity with the entire hotel staff is reflected in the manner she writes of them as her friends. This goes a long way to demonstrate the kindly spirit of Nene, who was able to endear herself to strangers whom she had only known for a relatively short time. Gare also exhibits some other of the essential characteristics inherent in many writers – the ability to mix and get on with anyone she meets in any situation.

She then goes on to write that they touched down at Cairns for coffee for which she was more than grateful (ibid.):

At Morseby I had felt a slight disappointment. The place did not look much different from Australia. There were the eucalypts and the dun-coloured earth... Lae did not come up to expectations either except that most of the faces were dark and red and green laplaps predominated over sober khaki. But there was an easy atmosphere, continual chatter and laughter of native boys and the heavenly feeling of being a family again with Murdock [i.e. Frank Gare] to take charge. (op. cit. p.65)

Gare arrived in Lae on 10 April 1946, and she documents in *An Island Away* that they were due to leave next morning for Salamaua, an hour’s journey by boat, accompanied by the Assistant District Officer for Morobe, Ian Fuller. She also relates her encounter with Sangu, who was to become her servant girl:

Sangu was waiting for us at the tiny jetty when our workboat slid alongside, a little apart from the police boys.... She waited patiently for us to disembark then moved forward and took us over... When we were a few yards from the jetty Sangu said gravely, 'I Sangu Missus.'
‘I hope Christopher isn’t too heavy for you,’ I said after I had greeted her. ‘He could quite well walk couldn’t you Christopher?’

‘Ah, he fine boy,’ Sangu laughed into Christopher’s face. ‘He like to be carried like bebe, hey?’ She bounced him on her hip and Christopher laughed delightedly. (op. cit. p.68)

Gare then goes on to relate how she approached Ian Fuller to suggest that Sangu might help her with the children:

Later, on that first day, Ian told us part of Sangu’s history. She had described herself to him as half-Chinese. Ian said Sangu had been sent over to Salamaua to get her away from a crowd of boys who were intent on murder. He did not know why except that it was thought Sangu had provoked them in some way.

I was indignant. ‘I’m sure it isn’t Sangu’s fault. She speaks so gently and see how clean she is?’ I said, ‘I was wondering if she might help me with the children for a while. At least until it is safe for her to return to Lae.’

‘Jolly good idea. She needs something to do. Keep her out of mischief.’

‘Oh, that’s wonderful, Ian.’ I hesitated. ‘How do I approach her?’

Ian shrugged. ‘Just tell her. You don’t have to ask her.’

I started. ‘I couldn’t do that.’

Ian started back at me, genuinely at a loss. ‘I suppose you can pay her some fairly small sum if you want.’ He mentioned a ridiculous amount. I could not have got a girl for ten times as much back in Australia. I already had a yarn with Ian about the way things went on here.

‘Keep things impersonal,’ he had advised. ‘That’s the way they prefer it, believe me. Another thing, they work harder and respect you a lot more if you remember you’re the boss.’ I did not know if I should be capable of this boss and servant business. It sounded unfriendly. (op. cit. pp.69-70)

Gare’s friendliness towards all human beings she met, regardless of their status in life, is reflected in the way in which she feels incapable of following Ian Fuller’s advice. She sees Sangu as a gentle and blameless person, perhaps as she might have perceived her character, Trilby, in The Fringe Dwellers. She may have even partly modelled Trilby on Sangu!
Gare then goes on to document in *An Island Away* that she did not want to lose Sangu's services by acting in too arbitrary a fashion. So while Ian acted as intermediary, telling Sangu what her duties would be, she murmured in the background trying to convey to the girl that not too much would be asked of her, and that she need not take the job if she were not willing (*ibid*):

> She was more than willing. We fixed up about pay there and then. Ian spoke to me afterward and told me I was paying her too much but I thought three dollars a month miserably little. ‘She’d have done it for nothing,’ Ian said casually, ‘but please yourself.’ (*ibid*)

Gare's inability to comprehend Ian Fuller's way of dealing with Sangu as a servant, again reflects her human compassion for those she perceives as the underdogs. Obviously it was common practice in the Territory to show the native who was boss, to pay them poorly if at all, and to expect servitude and respect in return. Ian Fuller might not have been able to comprehend Gare's philosophy. No wonder he 'started' [sic] back at her 'at a loss,' unable to understand her reasoning. It would be a rare person indeed who would question an arrangement made entirely in their favour. But Nene Gare was apparently that rare breed of person who saw beyond her own personal comfort to put others before herself, affording them the dignity and respect that she felt every human being was entitled to, regardless of their position in life. As a matter of fact, the relationship between Gare and Sangu (based on Gare's account) turned out to be one of friendship and mutual companionship, rather than that of servant and mistress.
No doubt before her journey to Papua New Guinea, Nene Gare would have taken steps to help familiarize herself with the country and its people. It is possible that, among the literature that she would have read, Margaret Mead's book, *Growing up in New Guinea*, first published in 1930, would have been included. The book is primarily a sociologist's account of the life, relationships, and ideals of a small Polynesian society, which in itself might have helped her understand the people with whom she was to have daily contact. Furthermore, it might have helped her comprehend what her life would be like as the wife of a patrol officer. For example, Mead relates:

> Government officers make patrols several times a year, sometimes for purposes of medical inspection, once a year for tax collecting, and at other times. Civil cases are heard during patrols. A native is furthermore permitted to take complaints either criminal or civil to the district officer at any time. (Mead, 1954, p.226)

The nature of Frank Gare's duties in Papua New Guinea have already been mentioned earlier in this chapter. Mead's account, therefore, substantiates Frank's report. A more recent account is provided by Bruce Elder in his book *Papua New Guinea* (1988):

> Although Papua and New Guinea were under Australian administration many of the highland villages were so isolated they were visited infrequently by government officers. The two territories were governed by patrol. An Australian patrol officer, accompanied by local police and carriers, would visit villages and check on health, carry out a census, collect taxes and hold court. (Elder, 1988, p.14)

At this point, maybe it is appropriate to note the kind of climate and vegetation that would have greeted the newly arrived Nene Gare. Her own
description of her surroundings is to be found in *An Island Away*. However, Graham Houghton and Julia Wakefield, in their book, *Papua New Guinea* (1987), provide a more recent description of both climate and vegetation:

Papua New Guinea's climate is tropical, which means it is usually hot and humid.... Most of Papua New Guinea experiences heavy rainfall, but Port Moresby, the capital, has an annual rainfall of only 1000 millimetres per year. The wettest areas are the south coast of New Britain, Bougainville Island, and the mainland around Lae, which can receive as much as 9000 millimetres in a year.... Over 75 per cent of Papua New Guinea is covered by tropical rainforest. Plants grow quickly in tropical climates, and many trees reach 45 metres or more in height. At their bases the roots spread out above the ground, forming buttresses where ferns and parasitic plants can flourish. There are also many different kinds of palm trees in the forests. (Houghton and Wakefield, (1987, pp.7,8)

As previously mentioned, when Gare was reunited with her husband at Lae they proceeded the next morning to Salamaua, an hour's journey by boat. Of Salamaua, Gare writes in *An Island Away* of the spectacular beauty that greeted her on her arrival:

Never before in my life nor since have I experienced such peace and content as folded us about during our first weeks at Salamaua. I was spellbound, bewitched, enchanted. Our surroundings were unbelievable. Wherever I looked I saw beauty, splendid seascapes, a green hillside with a path enticingly lost to view around its perimeter, down the road massy trees loaded with fruits and flowers, hibiscus everywhere and of every colour. (Gare, 1981, p.71)

This must have been the kind of background that Nene Gare, as a writer, was unconsciously seeking; and if she was going to benefit from her travels and experiences she must surely have thought that she had found here the place which would act as a stimulus for her work. Her typewriter had accompanied her and
would have been invaluable for writing letters to friends and for what she might have perceived as a kind of continuing apprenticeship to authorship:

Murdock had scrounged a beautiful desk for me.... There was plenty of work for me to do. Murdock needed me to type his reports and I had a bit of reporting of my own to do. Dad wrote to ask me if I could send down some salmon. He sounded aggrieved that we should have so much and he none at all. I wrote letters to everyone I knew. There was so much to tell. (op. cit. p.77)

It seems most likely that the ‘bit of reporting,’ to which Gare alluded in the above quotation, were the letters she was sending to Malcolm Uren, the Editor of *The Western Mail* for publication in that Perth newspaper. However, before we proceed any further, let us look at Gare’s relationship with Sangu.

Gare’s relationship with Sangu, as already discussed, cannot be described as that of mistress and servant, and this is testified in her report in *An Island Away*:

During the long evenings when Murdock was busy with reports Sangu and I sat as far from the insect-surrounded lamp as possible and talked.... We sometimes discussed the years of the war and Sangu could never sufficiently express her loathing of the Japanese who had occupied Lae. ‘They kill children – eat them, missus.’ Holding an imaginary knife Sangu would direct it toward her round stomach. ‘Like this, eh? We be happy when Australian come back missus.’ (op. cit. p.76)

Gare of course is merely reporting Sangu’s version of the Japanese invasion of Lae, and she does not substantiate or verify it in any way. Cruel as the Japanese have been portrayed during the Second World War, perhaps Sangu’s imagination took flight, and, then again, rumour may have given rise to this perception and been allowed to persist in the local population.
Houghton and Wakefield, who have been quoted earlier in this chapter, provide a further quotation which amplifies Gare’s report of the invasion of Papua New Guinea, as told through Sangu:

In 1906 Australia took over the government of south-eastern New Guinea, and named it Papua. During the First World War the Australians occupied the German colonies, but they were invaded in their turn by the Japanese during the Second World War. The Japanese were finally driven out of New Guinea by the United States and Australian soldiers in 1942. Papua New Guinea was once again under Australian mandate. (Houghton and Wakefield, 1987, p.11)

Nene Gare, as already stated, joined her husband in post-war Papua New Guinea in 1946, and hence An Island Away is based on this period. However, it was not until 1981 that Macmillan published the book (with the assistance of the Literature Board of the Australia Council).

The Papua New Guinea episode would have opened up a lot of new horizons for Nene Gare. As a developing writer, her experiences in a strange land, where the customs and culture differed so vastly from her own, must have proven of immense value and provided stimulus to the emerging author in so many ways that perhaps even she was not aware. That she considered this episode in her life to be of some significance is reflected in the writing of the book, aptly titled An Island Away. That she was, in later years, to write a book about our own Indigenous people in Western Australia, and call it The Fringe Dwellers, encourages one to suspect that she may have modelled aspects of this novel and its principal characters on some aspects of the Papua New Guinea experiences.
When we return to the life of Nene Gare in the next chapter, the year will be 1947. The Gares will have returned from Papua New Guinea, Frank will have resumed his old job with the Commonwealth Public Service, and Nene’s time will be then and in the succeeding years mostly taken up with caring for their children, yet still vigorously pursuing her writing career by submitting short stories to *The Western Mail* and, presumably, other publishing outlets.
CHAPTER 4
THE FRINGE DWELLERS I – INTERPRETATIONS
FROM A FEMINIST/MARXIST PERSPECTIVE
AND HOME-COMING TO PERTH

The objectives of this chapter are to assess *The Fringe Dwellers* from a feminist/Marxist point of view, and to compare this novel with some of Gare’s other works, particularly *A House with Verandahs*. I also intend to continue the detailed story of Gare’s earlier writing career, which perhaps laid the foundations for her greatest achievements.

We begin with the Gares’ return from Papua New Guinea in 1947, when the population of Perth was 508,762 persons (from Statistical Register of Western Australia 1946-1947, courtesy of Battye Library). In an interview conducted on 3 July 1998, Frank Gare told me that, after their return to Perth, he was able to resume his job as a clerk, with the Commonwealth Public Service. At the time, accommodation was not easy to obtain in Perth, but they managed to find rooms at the Cambray Guest House in the central City above Winterbottom Motors. This was on the corner of St George’s Terrace and Mill Street. They remained there for several months until they moved to a brick and tile house at Number Two, Viking Street, Dalkeith. After twelve months they obtained a permit to build a house at Number Four, Grose Road, Applecross. Then, and in the succeeding years, Frank says, Nene Gare’s time was taken up mostly in caring for their three children and writing short stories which she submitted to *The Western Mail* and other publishing outlets. (F. Gare, 1998)
If we now look at the female and male roles as depicted in Nene Gare’s fictional works, in terms of feminist literary theory, and try to identify inequalities on a gender basis we find, not unexpectedly, the characteristics which persisted in the patriarchal society of Australia at that time. According to Kate Millett, in her book, *Sexual Politics*, “Under patriarchy, the concept of property advanced from its simple origins of chattel womanhood, to private ownership of goods, land, and capital” (Millett, 1971, p.121).

Individual social role models of the 1940s were being challenged and the shifting of the power base to a more equitable distribution of gender power was a process that had been accelerated by the then shortage of “manpower,” as it was termed, in Australia during World War Two. Posters, advertising “Keep the farms going while the men are fighting,” promoted the establishment of the Women’s Land Army in 1943. Tom Austen, in *Western Images*, captions a photograph of two young women with two draught horses which are shown pulling a plough with the words, “Land Army members on WA farms take hard work in their stride. The hand-ploughing at Fairbridge is done by horse” (Austen 1996, p.131).

Much later, Miriam Dixson (1976), in *The Real Matilda* writes:

The equal pay decision of 1973 was a most important step forward - though as Minister for Labour Clyde Cameron told a forum on Women and the Workforce on 14 December 1973, far more formidable obstacles lie ahead: ‘questions of equal opportunity and equal representation in the workforce at all levels.’ (Dixson, 1976, p.36)
In other words, what Dixson is saying is that, despite the equal pay decision of 1973, even in the mid-seventies, women had a long way to go before they would achieve recognition as equals alongside their male colleagues in the Australian work-place. For instance, Clyde Cameron would have been well aware in 1973 of the fact that women in the work-force, on the whole, had for years been forced to contend with poor working conditions and had generally been overlooked in favour of men when promotions were considered. Thus lucrative positions had been traditionally denied them. In the post-war sweatshops, bosses capitalized on the work-force of women from lower socio-economical groups, including the female migrant community. These women, because of lack of representation in the work-place, simply had to endure such exploitation. Barrett, in *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist Feminist Encounter*, draws on a passage by Bowles and Gintis in which they had quoted a study by Bluestone which attempted to isolate statistically the weight of different factors affecting pay differences:

They construct a hypothetical white, male, unionised, 'primary sector' worker and a black, female, non-unionised, 'secondary sector' worker. Statistical returns allow the predication that the male worker's hourly wage is likely to be more than three times greater than the female's [italics added]. Of this ... 36% is due to sexual differences [italics added], 17% to racial differences, 22% to labour market segmentation, and 25% to differences in education and job experience. (1988, p.129)

When Gare was growing up (if we recall that she was born in 1919) Australia was, of course, still a dominantly patriarchal society. Therefore men ruled in virtually every sphere, council, Church and home. The word of fathers
and husbands normally was not supposed to be questioned. Derek Whitelock in his book, *Adelaide 1836-1976*, puts it like this:

> Adelaide was as "male chauvinist" as they come: women do not figure at all in the photographs and biographies of distinguished citizens in books like Pascoe's. Women are mentioned in the old histories merely as adjuncts to their husbands. (Whitelock, 1977, p.176)

Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* (1971), casts further light on patriarchy's role in the society of this period:

> Patriarchy's chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. Mediating between the individual and the social structure, the family effects control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient. As the fundamental instrument and the foundation unit of patriarchal society the family and its roles are prototypical. Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads.... Traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife ... and children, including the powers of physical abuse and often even those of murder and sale. Classically, as head of the family the father is both begetter and owner in a system in which kinship is property. (Millett, 1971, p.33)

Though Gare was raised in a very loving and caring family, if one looks at both *The Fringe Dwellers* and *A House with Verandahs*, these novels obviously reflect the sexist times in which she lived. Both books yield feminist/Marxist resonances. Women are depicted as a marginalized group in a society where males have the final word. Aborigines, at the bottom end of the socio-economic hierarchy, are what Marxist theory would call a socially disadvantaged class, and, as we shall see, are portrayed as such in *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961).
Gare began writing her best known novels in the Sixties, which, according to Robyn Rowland (1984), coincided with the first wave of the so-called women’s movement. In fact, Rowland, in *Women Who Do and Women Who Don’t Join the Women’s Movement*, says: “If many women were inspired to join the women’s movement in the 1960s, and demand liberation, how is it that some did not?” (p.22). It is unlikely that Gare would have joined the women’s movement - although she was to say in an interview, and more fully documented later in this chapter - that at thirty she would have called herself a dyed-in-the-wool feminist. It is obvious, however, that Gare used her writing as something of a forum for her ideas, particularly in works such as *The Fringe Dwellers* and *A House with Verandahs*, as has already been mentioned.

To prove that Gare’s writing was directly influenced by the women’s movement would be no easy task. Certainly women were demanding equal pay for equal work at this time. As early as 1929, The Women’s Non-Party Association (WNPA) had “campaigned strongly for equal pay for equal work” in South Australia (Bacchi, 1986, p.424) and by the 1970s feminist writers such as Germaine Greer were also attacking the patriarchal system.

Dixson (1976) puts it this way:

> Patriarchal society has taken one group of human qualities - tenderness, nurturance, compassion, inwardness - pushed them down one end of a sexually-structured value spectrum, labelled them ‘feminine,’ and thereby, to varying degrees depending on the specific type of patriarchal society - downgraded their value or standing. (Dixson, 1976, p.66)
Giulia Giuffrè, in her 1985 interview with Gare, later published in *A Writing Life* (1990), asked the writer if she would call herself a feminist. Gare’s response was:

At 30, I’d have called myself a dyed-in-the-wool feminist. I now know that there are degrees and mostly the degrees go by age, with bolder, braver decisions being made when one is young, and more considered ones being made after 60. And 70, and 80. Women of 90 and 100 still make decisions, quieter, possibly more effective. (p.22)

Feminist or not, Gare has demonstrated that she has an understanding and empathy for the underdog in society. Indeed, in the very same 1985 interview in Perth, when asked whether she wrote fiction, her reply was:

Not very much.... Everyone has a job, don’t you think? Mine has been such a little job: making poorer people known to anyone who reads me and trying to make them understand what it’s like to be poor and what it’s like to be Aboriginal. That was my job as I saw it. I see as my greatest achievement the writing of the short stories in *Bend to the Wind*. Anything that furthers understanding must be good. (*op. cit.* p.16)

The series of short stories in *Bend to the Wind* (1978), as already mentioned in Chapter One, is the result of Gare’s observations of the everyday happenings in the lives of the Indigenous Australian people around her, who were to become her friends. Written honestly and sympathetically by her, the stories reveal the gentle humour and humility that Gare obviously believed to be part of the Aboriginal psyche. They again draw attention to the status of a people deprived of their heritage and to their battle to survive in the white persons’ culture.
“Mutton Flaps” and “Rent Day” are two such stories in *Bend to the Wind* that go a long way to reflect the Aboriginal psyche and their way of looking at things.

In the former short story, Mrs Magdalen returns from a trip to the City, presumably for medical treatment for a heart condition. She arrives back at the reserve, tired and hungry after the bus journey and all she can think of is a plate of stewed flap. Her husband reminds her: ‘Flaps not what ya sposed ta eat didn’t that doctor say? Too fat e said. No more bread an drippin neither’ (Gare, 1978, p.21). Pressed to find out about his wife’s medical condition after she had been seeing the specialist in Perth, Mr Magdalen asks:

‘Now!’ he said, ‘You gunna tell me what that doctor said,’

Mrs Magdalen rearranged her circular hips. ‘Didn’t see im,’ she flung her bolt.

‘What, woman?’

‘I said, I didn’t see im’

‘But you was sent down to. Got ya bus fare – an all that money I give ya.’ Mr Magdalen’s mind raced ahead of his words, uncovering more and worse perfidies. ‘An you writin back fa more – sayin ya had ta have all that medicine.’

‘That was after I had a bad run. Knew I’d win it back again an I did.’

‘An ya didn’t even see im. That specialist.’ Mr Magdalen looked back on all those empty weeks of Mrs Magdalen’s absence.

‘Wasn’t nothin ta see im bout. Soons I got down there, way fum all this lot roun here, an you, an all the row an that, I start feelin awright again. Then I think, I’m down ere. Mights well have a good holiday while I can, an so I did. Ya not gunna tell me somethin wrong with that I hope.’ (op. cit. p.28)

“Rent Day” highlights certain Aboriginal attitudes and perhaps shows their unwillingness to conform to white officialdom and bureaucracy. A quotation
taken from this delightful short story best illustrates what Gare perceived to be their cautious way of reacting to white authority:

Living up here was a bit different from living in the tent. Mrs Yorick was an independent woman who wasn't used to being bossed about — didn't take to it either. At least on the ridge she'd been her own boss.... Thing was, she was stuck here and nothing to do but make the best of it, rent day and all.

‘Five dollars,’ the young chap said cheerfully, ‘if you don’t mind Mrs Yorick.’

‘Five dollars eh,’ Mrs Yorick refused enlightenment.

‘For the rent.’

‘Rent money?’ Black eyes acknowledged nothing.... Mrs Yorick said reluctantly, ‘I thought we hadda go down the office an get it.’

‘You can. But if it’s not there on the day I come up and get it. Like last week’.

‘Don’t member that’ ....

Bravely Mrs Yorrick asked, ‘Spose I don’t got that money?’

The young chap shook his head reprovingly. ‘Come along Mrs Yorrick. Five dollars isn’t much surely’ .... The money was in the tin behind the packet of tea. She reached for the tin and opened it, sheltering her action behind round padded shoulders. She made absolutely and certainly sure that the number of the dollars was five and not six nor yet three, then she rolled the remainder into a tube and placed the tube back inside its vault. (Gare, 1978, pp.55,56)

That night Mrs Yorick said to her husband, ‘Ya know something? I don’t seem ta be settlin down like’ (op. cit. p.57). As a result the Yoricks return to resume tent life on the reserve. However, before they leave they bequeath the house to one of their Aboriginal friends:

It was rent day again. The young fellow had almost finished his round — only the Yoricks to collect from and he was through. He knocked on the closed door.... The door opened and a careful head peered forth. Not Mrs Yorick’s head, nor even Mr Yorick’s head. A strange one.

‘Hello!’ the young fellow straightened attentively. ‘Mrs Yorick home?’

The head shook itself. The eyes in the head rounded with alarm.

‘You wantim Miz Yorick?’

‘Rent day,’ the young chap explained.... The eyes seemed about to engulf the head.
‘We collect the rent every week,’ the young chap said in as kindly and gentle a manner as he could. ‘Maybe Mrs Yorick left it with you.’ ‘Miz Yorick guv this to us fellers, this lit-tle house. She say we live ere an her go back an live in tent. She say nothing bout rent. What this rent? We gunna get in trubble bout this rent, me an Choe?’ (op. cit. p.59)

Gare’s empathy for the disadvantaged in society is reflected in her dedication to promote understanding of Aboriginal people’s attitudes through her writing. As she was to say when interviewed by Giulia Giuffré in 1985 and published in *A Writing Life* in 1990 (and already more fully quoted on page 83):

> Everyone has a job, don’t you think? Mine has been such a little job: making poorer people known to anyone who reads me and trying to make them understand what it’s like to be poor and what it’s like to be Aboriginal. (Giuffré-Gare, 1990, p.16)

*The Fringe Dwellers*, published in 1961, was set in Geraldton in order to portray the lives of the Aboriginal people whom Gare knew to be then living on the fringes of country towns. A brief look at the novel may help establish the significance of Gare’s role as a white commentator on Aboriginal society, and the part such a work as *The Fringe Dwellers* has played in the process of reconciliation and understanding between non-Aborigines and Aborigines in Australia.

Although *Green Gold* (1963), initially entitled *Green Bananas*, was Gare’s first novel (probably written between 1952 and 1954), *The Fringe Dwellers* (as previously stated) was the first to be published. The idea for the latter came to Gare while she was living in Geraldton where her husband had been appointed District Officer for Native Welfare. Gare was quite shocked at what she
observed of relations between white men and Aboriginal women. In an interview with Marion Campbell, conducted for the *Fremantle Arts Review* (1986), Gare said:

I heard of a councillor and a man in quite a high position in Geraldton who were going regularly to the reserve to try and make the Aboriginal girls sleep with them. In fact I wrote a little play about it. *Never Go Quietly*. (p. 5)

*Never Go Quietly* appears in Gare’s collection of short stories, *Bend to the Wind*:

The scene is a reserve for black Australians....
From stage left approaches a man in taxi driver’s uniform.
Following him come two more men, each carrying several bottles. The taxi man knocks on door....
Bob: Before we get started I want something clearly understood. If you two see me or my friend in town you pass on without stopping to speak, eh? You don’t know us. We don’t know you....
Madeline (coolly): I know who you are. You’re on the council, aren’t you? In that office with the mayor.
Bob (heartily): The less you know about me the better young lady.
(Gare, 1978, pp. 108, 109, 111)

The above excerpt taken from *Never Go Quietly* illustrates perfectly Gare’s reaction to what she observed of relations between white men and Aboriginal women.

*The Fringe Dwellers* took Gare two years to write. A letter from the London publisher, William Heinemann, dated 21 August 1961, and made available by the *National Library*, reads:

Dear Mrs Gare, I hope by the time my letter arrives your book will have found in Australia the appreciation it merits. We have so far sold just under 3 000 copies, which is very satisfactory for a first novel. We
look forward to getting your new book. Depressingly enough, the papers today report from Middlesbrough the first outbreak of popular hostility against coloured people that we have had since the Notting Hill Gate incident.
Yours sincerely
James Michie.

The Fringe Dwellers, written from a woman’s point of view, could be called an informed and informal sociological study. Most feminists strive hard to work for the feminist cause mainly to benefit white middle-class women like themselves. However, Gare’s novel highlights the plight of disadvantaged groups in our society, twice cursed to be female and black. She raises both feminist and racist issues at the same time.

Dr Bobbie Sykes, a black Australian from Queensland, and one of several women to contribute to Women Who Do and Women Who Don’t Join the Women’s Movement, writes:

A question often raised in conversation with white women is why there are so few black women involved in the women’s movement.... Black women, sensitive to the feeling of embarrassment which always being the inferior party in the helper/helped dyad creates, stay away from the women’s movement and, in general, away from relationships with white women either individually or in groups. This emotional level avoidance of the women’s movement is quite apart from the fact that the goals of the women’s movement are also often in direct conflict with measures deemed necessary for the survival of the black community. (Sykes, In Rowland [ed] 1984, pp.63,64)

This statement was selected to amplify Gare’s point of view in The Fringe Dwellers by showing that the novel supports indirectly the argument that the feminist cause mainly benefits white middle-class women. Black women and under-privileged groups rarely benefit from the women's movement. As Sykes
has implied, the movement’s goals often undermine ‘measures deemed necessary for the survival of the black community’ [a view presumably held by the members of the black community].

And if any further amplification were necessary, a quotation by Gayatri Spivak, from *In Other Worlds* (1988), provides further support. Notwithstanding that Spivak is writing about illiterate Indian women in Bengal, whoever reads the text of *In Other Worlds* would not find it difficult to identify with our own situation in Australia and see the parallel:

How, then, can one learn from and speak to the millions of illiterate rural and urban Indian women who live “in the pores of” capitalism, inaccessible to the capitalist dynamics that allow us our shared channels of communication, the definition of common enemies? .... The academic feminist must learn to learn from them, to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be corrected by our superior theory and enlightened compassion. (Spivak, 1988, p.135)

Both *The Fringe Dwellers* and *A House with Verandahs* document the day-to-day lives of an under-privileged working class people. For example, a passage in *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961) reads:

Trilby grinned.... ‘Look, I’m going to get washed,’ she told Noonah. ‘I’ve found a tap’.... Trilby went back to the humpy and searched quietly for something to wash in.... When she had washed herself she took the basin to the side of the hill and flung its contents in a silvery sweep over the hillside. A river of rusting tins and trash already littered the slope, and under a wattle just over the brow glinted a stack of amber bottles. (Gare, 1961, p.27)
Similarly, a quotation from *A House with Verandahs* (1980) indicates that the facilities in this household were not much better than those which the Aborigines endured at the reserve:

> When she could afford it, Mother replaced her round tin tubs on their wooden stands with two cement troughs. We did not have taps over these troughs for some time, nor drainage (Gare, 1980, p.16).

Even a visit to the lavatory meant having to negotiate a small space between the privy and the horse’s stable:

> Both Kitty and Roachie our dog were getting on when I was born, and as cross as crabs with everyone but Mother and Dad. Kitty watched all day for the opportunity to bite passers-by. To get into our lavatory one had to slip between a two-foot space between the stable and the lavatory, and visitors were Kitty’s main victims. Nobody ever warned the poor things. (op. cit. p.13)

Geoffrey Bolton, in *Daphne Street*, records the day-to-day lives of working class people during the 1930s Depression, as well as the standard of housing they experienced. Of one particular family he writes:

> Bill Payne, the elder son, remembers that with only four main rooms for a family of five, conditions were rather cramped.... The floors in the main rooms were covered with linoleum. The house was not equipped with power points, the few electrical appliances which the Paynes could eventually afford had to be connected by double adaptors to the lighting connections. Internal heating was only available through wood fires in the lounge and one bedroom.... Bath water had to be heated in the laundry copper and carried into the house. (Bolton, 1997, pp.91,92)

This exemplifies and confirms Gare’s accounts of the kind of living conditions poorer people experienced during the Depression. Furthermore, the
quotation demonstrates that working-class people, like Gare’s parents, were of course not alone in their adversity.

We might now look at a comparison between *The Fringe Dwellers* and *A House with Verandahs*. The assertion of the value of family comes through in both novels, as for example in the figures of the Comeaways, and in the relationship between the parents in *A House with Verandahs*. One can also see a similarity between Mary, the mother (sometimes affectionately called Molly by her husband), in *A House with Verandahs*, and Mrs Comeaway, the mother, in *The Fringe Dwellers*. Both feel out of their depth when confronted with what they find to be unfamiliar circumstances. Mary is too shy, too scared to come to the Mothers’ Meetings at the local school where the fashionable middle-class women gather in confident groups. Mrs Comeaway feels too intimidated by her white neighbour’s patronizing invitation to join her for morning tea. Fashionable middle-class women at the time, as portrayed in *A House with Verandahs*, are also well depicted by Carol Bacchi in “The ‘Woman Question’ in South Australia”:

> Middle-class women were not simply dupes of the domestic ideology. They needed to be seen as part of the class to which they belonged. As a result, their attitudes commonly reflected their class allegiance. But, within these limitations, they struggled to improve their status. Therefore they generally approved of the new importance placed on their maternal role since it increased their domestic power and won them political rights, and because they shared the conviction that the families of the ‘lower orders’ required supervision. (Bacchi, in *The Flinders History of South Australia* (Eric Richards [ed] 1986, p.425)

The above quotation, to a certain extent, illustrates and supports Gare’s documentation in *A House with Verandahs* where she makes the observation that
her mother felt too shy, too scared, and too out-of-her-depth to attend the Mothers’ Meetings (p.23). The text certainly implies that the mother felt out of her class.

Continuing the comparison between *The Fringe Dwellers* and *A House with Verandahs*, we find similarities continue to emerge. For example, the male characters in both households do not seem to place a great deal of importance on the need to work. Consequently, the patriarchs spend most of their time idling around, while the women attend to everyday activities vital to keep the families functioning effectively. As Gare writes in *The Fringe Dwellers*:

Mrs Comeaway raised her shoulders high and let them fall again. ‘E never did like work,’ she told her daughter philosophically, leading the way out to the other room. ‘Now then!’ She swayed over to the black stove in the corner and opened the oven door. ‘Not a bloody crust,’ she said disgustedly. ‘I tell ya what, Trilby. You just nip over an tell Mrs Green we got damn all ta eat an will she let ya have something till we go down town. Ask er fa what ya want yaself, weeties or something. She’ll have it. Has to with all them kids. An say does she want anything down town.’ (Gare, 1961, p.29)

The keen sense of awareness of the social differences that alienate these children from the rest of society seems to stand out, as opposed to the adults’ indifference. The adults’ attitude of ‘like me as I am, or lump me,’ can be contrasted with the children’s sensitivity and embarrassment when their parents fail to conform to perceived correct standards of middle-class white community practices. For instance, in *A House with Verandahs*, the children are disappointed and hurt when their mother never turns up at the Mothers’ Meetings:
‘Too busy,’ she told us, folding our Mothers’ Meeting notices into tiny squares - and too shy, too scared, she might have added. Too out-of-her-depth with the confident lot who waited in bright chatty groups in the playgrounds outside the classrooms. (Gare, 1980, p.23)

Trilby, in The Fringe Dwellers, displays a sense of shame and embarrassment when she discovers her mother has taken home a serviette from her white neighbour’s, thinking it to be a handkerchief:

‘Mum, you didn’t bring it home,’ Trilby said on a great wail. She rushed at Stella and grabbed the napkin from her. [Stella had prevailed upon her mother to allow her to have the little red-checked square which she saw emerging from her pocket] She held the piece of material up before her.
‘You’ll just have to pretend you forgot about it,’ she said at last. ‘I’ll take it back and tell her you put it in your pocket by accident. She’ll think you don’t know anything, Mum.’ (Gare, 1961, p.111)

In the following section it is intended to show how Trilby’s sense of shame and embarrassment, after discovering her mother has taken home her neighbour’s serviette, leads her to explain the purpose to which a serviette is put:

‘She lent you this serviette,’ Trilby said passionately.... ‘And you don’t wipe your hands on it before you have your tea. You wipe your hands on it after, and even then you only pretend to’. (op.cit. p.112)

Trilby tells her mother that people pretend to mop their mouths with the serviette, then they crush it up a bit and return it to their plates so that it can be folded again and put back in the drawer. She explains, however, that you’re supposed to wash it every time it is used, but if it is only crushed up a bit you don’t have to. (ibid.) Trilby’s pains to enlighten her mother on the niceties of white society stem, it appears, not only from her wish to be part of the white
community, and live like a non-fringe dweller in a decent house, but also from a more unconscious emotional need, manifested in her desire to distance herself from her fringe-dwelling origins, and the depressed lifestyle she sees her mother endure. An example of this tendency is also to be seen when she rejects Phyllix, her boyfriend:

‘If I stay with you, the things that happened to her will happen to me,’ Trilby said pleadingly. ‘I want a proper house to live in and I’ll get a humpy. I want nice things to wear, my own things, not other people’s cast-offs. And I’ll end up with one single dress’... Trilby’s eyes were closed, and over her head Phyllix looked unseeing into the grey and misty bush. ‘I’d stay with you,’ Trilby said at last, haltingly. ‘You don’t know how easy that’d be. But it’s not only me, Phyllix. It’s something I live with, here,’ her clenched fist struck her heart as though she would hurt the thing that lived in her breast. ‘It keeps telling me I’ll end up like that old woman if I don’t get away from you all.’ (Gare 1961, p.255)

It is this intangible ‘thing’ in her breast, this unconscious need to rebel and be different that provokes Trilby’s diatribe. In other words, the serviette has become a symbol, not only for one of the niceties of polite society, but it is emblematic of the falsity yet refinement of white society of which Trilby would like to become part. The serviette stands opposed to the lifestyle from which she seeks to escape.

In the Fifties in Western Australia it was the practice when entertaining, even among some working class people who later might become part of the newer gentility, to offer serviettes to guests. This observation was no more than an adherence to supposed “good manners” on the part of a considerate host or hostess. Noreen Routledge (1953) in the Foreword to Etiquette for Australians, puts it very succinctly. She says: “What is etiquette? Is it not the expression of
thoughtfulness, courtesy, intelligent action and fair play” (p.vi). We can be fairly certain that Trilby would not have been conversant with the works of Routledge, but what Gare did suggest Trilby would know was the way people in polite society behaved. She would know that this differed from the behaviour of the Indigenous people. It might seem that Trilby’s wish, therefore, was that she not be made to feel discriminated against and marginalised because of her Aboriginality and the colour of her skin. By looking at these unhappy people, such as the mixed blood Trilby, Nene Gare was able to explore in The Fringe Dwellers the problems of Indigenous people living at the time in country towns like Geraldton.

It is perhaps appropriate at this point to make another link between A House with Verandahs and The Fringe Dwellers, in order to compare the reactions of the siblings when their parents fail to conform to community expectations, a matter touched on in an earlier paragraph. Just as in the sequence which dealt with the serviette episode and Trilby’s response, the next scene from A House with Verandahs and those that follow, will focus on the siblings’ disappointment when their mother failed to turn up at the “Mothers’ Meetings.” The reasons and purpose of holding such meetings need to be explained:

‘Couldn’t you come just once?’ we pleaded.
‘I might. One of these days.’ It was enough to give us hope. We looked out for her every single Mothers’ Day but we might have known. No mother for us in that mob. We were orphans, second-class children, members of the humble group making its way from first to seventh grades with no help from cake-making mothers. (Gare, 1980, p.23)
The reasons for such meetings were varied, but they were mostly held to discuss fund-raising projects to benefit the school. Teachers in the 1930s and 1940s endeavoured to encourage parents to participate in any school activity that would ultimately benefit the institution their children attended. In *A House with Verandahs* Gare documents this practice and its reason:

Schools tried to involve parents. Mothers were supposed to attend Mothers' Meetings to discuss bazaars and picnics and Johnny’s and Audrey’s progress. Our mother came to school once every two or three years in order to enrol another of her children. (*ibid.*)

Therefore, mothers were expected to attend “Mothers’ Meetings” to discuss and organize fund-raising functions such as lamington drives, jumble sales and the like for the purpose of raising money in order to purchase any equipment or service that would contribute in making their school a viable and attractive institution. Many readers of this thesis could verify from their own recall that schools encouraged parents to participate in such activities, and children eagerly looked forward to seeing their mothers turn up and help organize these events.

Children liked to think that their parents became involved in such practices, especially if the parents of their peers already were. And while some parents may have had their own very good reasons not to attend these meetings - one suspects that poorer and less educated families with meagre resources stayed away simply because they felt out of their class as the following quotation already presented in its entirety on pages 92-93 of this chapter suggests:

‘Too busy,’ she told us ... and too shy, too scared, she might have added. Too out-of-her-depth with the confident lot who waited in bright chatty groups in the playgrounds outside the classrooms. (*ibid.*)
The quotation confirms the above assumption, but it also illustrates the children’s awareness in this ‘fictional’ family of the real reason for their mother’s absence. However, it does not negate their perception of feeling ‘second class children.’

Gare grew up in quite humble circumstances in Adelaide during the 1930s Depression, and was never slow to let this fact be known. When interviewed by Alison Fox, of The Daily News about The Fringe Dwellers in 1976, Gare explained why she could see things from the Aboriginal point of view: “I had experienced some of the things they were experiencing. We were a big family - and poor - when I was a child” (Fox-Gare, 1976, p.33).

Gare’s own experiences as a child of working class people would have made her sufficiently aware of the class struggle that existed between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The workers, according to Marxist ideology, are the class opposed to the bourgeoisie. Gare’s family of course belonged to the proletariat. This would have placed her in an advantageous position when writing about such minority groups as indigenous people, who surely are still at the bottom end of the socio-economic hierarchy in Australia.

This same paragraph also takes us back to The Fringe Dwellers, and therefore to compare Aborigines with Europeans. In doing so, one would have to observe that, despite their lack of education and refinement, Aboriginal people demonstrate that they have a lot to teach non-Aborigines in the way they have respect for the family, their elders, and the land. After all, Mr Comeaway
generously invited his brother, Charlie, to ‘come down ere and live in this house,’ when Charlie complained that a deposit on a house was hard to get:

‘You still thinkin a comin down ere, Charlie?’ he enquired with kindly condescension.

‘Yeah, we still thinkin,’ his brother returned comfortably. ‘Only thing, that damn money pretty hard ta get. That deposit ya gotta pay’.... Mr Comeaway took a breath. ‘Ya can come down ere and live in this house.’

Charlie took him up swiftly. ‘Ya mean the lot of us? The whole four an the kid too?’ (Gare, 1961, p.133)

Gare recognized the Aborigines’ respect for the family and their willingness to accommodate kin, despite often being put to great inconvenience themselves. This is reflected in The Fringe Dwellers where, for the Aboriginal people, there is always ‘plenty a room’ (op. cit. p.134).

I suppose for a white person to appreciate the Aborigines’ respect and identification with the land it might be necessary to understand the central significance the land holds for Aborigines. R.M. Berndt, in Aborigines of the West (1979) writes:

The land was sacred because within it were manifested mythic beings of the Dreaming. Through these beings it was possible for men to perform land-renewing and land-sustaining rituals which were believed to ensure continuation of natural species. (Berndt and Berndt, 1979, p.9)

Robert Eggington, as a contemporary 1995 Aboriginal writer, renders his version of some aspects of Aboriginal culture in The Smell of the White Man is Killing Us (1995):
By the warmth of the campfires our old people told stories of respect through the balance of law. These laws since the beginning of time nurtured and balanced the existence of life in harmony with nature. Images and symbols depicted upon natural Earth elements such as sand, rock faces, banks, and crushed ant hills by inscribing and the application of ochre represented earthforms such as waterholes, rivers, hills, fire, stars, tracks, and sites that told of stories of ceremonial activity. The origins of our culture are as Ancient as the Earth, stories telling of the formation of the Earth by Spiritual Beings have been passed on through Dreams of Song and Dance. (Eggington, 1995, p.1)

Brought up in a large family herself, Gare had intimate knowledge of the deeply bonded extended family and the solidarity of underprivileged groups. Her close contact and affinity with the Indigenous people, whom she met in Geraldton, and her enduring sympathy for the underprivileged, allowed her to draw on her own experiences while writing *The Fringe Dwellers*.

It is perhaps fitting at this stage to introduce another view advanced by Ken Colbung, and published in *Aborigines of the West*:

A lot of our Aboriginal culture is disappearing. I have travelled over a lot of Australia, visiting places where the culture is supposed to be. But I am not always sure it is there, permanently. People say to me: ‘Don’t you worry about this - it’s there, and it won’t be lost.’ It is assumed that in Western Australia we have a powerful traditional Aboriginal background. When you get up into these ‘tribal’ areas, you will find that the people are having to fight hard to retain it. During the early years of settlement, missionaries went out to different outback areas, and there they remain today! They said they would live ‘alongside our culture’: but mostly they did all they could to change it. (Colbung in Berndt and Berndt [eds] 1979, p 103)

Colbung confirms the nature of Aboriginal culture before the Europeans had their impact on Aboriginal settlement. His quotation reflects the situation as it is exemplified in Gare’s life and work.
Being interviewed by the press is almost always part and parcel of a writer’s life. Gare was no exception, and often found herself being interviewed about her novels by journalists or other writers. One such interview took place in the summer of 1985. Gare and her husband, Frank, had been settled in Shelley Cove for nineteen years, their children had by this time left the parental home and were leading lives of their own. Gare’s last novel, *An Island Away*, had been published in 1981, and she was now able to devote more time to what she called her hobby of painting. Giulia Giuffré (who has been quoted several times already) in her book, *A Writing Life: Interviews with Australian Women Writers* (1990), asked Gare whether she felt that in her books there was a tendency to idealise Aborigines, especially Aboriginal women. Gare replied:

I’m more inclined to idealise the older ones because I thought they were so good, the women especially, with their children. They don’t mind what sacrifices they make so that their children can get an education. (in Giuffré-Gare, p.19)

 Asked whether they were based on any particular Aboriginal women that she knew, Gare’s response was:

Yes, Mrs Green was Mrs Rees, Mrs Comeaway was a mixture of Mrs Dan and Iris Rees, Mrs Yorrick was Vicki Forrest and Mrs Magdalen is Mrs Forrest, too. They were so good, so really good. I suppose there’s a bit of my mother in them too. (ibid.)

Gare’s response to Giuffré’s question reveals that she could be called a ‘bricoleur’ of sorts, as she makes use of the materials she has at hand. As she was to say, she doesn’t get around much, so just has the people around her to study. The women she mentions in the interview are from her characters in both
The Fringe Dwellers and Bend to the Wind. That she sees her mother in them is testimony to the high esteem in which she held her Aboriginal friends. That Gare deemed them important and interesting enough to depict as characters in two of her books, reveals just how much these people came to mean to her. Conversely, it is perhaps worth noting the absence from the books of almost all the middle-class people with whom she and her husband must have mixed.

In an interview on 8 August 1997, with Peg Brearley, who is Gare’s sister, I sought verification of Gare’s comparison of the Aboriginal women with her mother. Brearley’s response was: ‘Our mother was very kind, unselfish and loving towards her children, and Nene may have seen the resemblance there.’ She went on to add, however, that she saw her mother differently. softer, very private and proud. From Brearley’s reply one gains the impression that she felt her mother perhaps would not have appreciated being compared to Aboriginal women.

Notwithstanding the above, Gare’s philosophy had always been that all people are equal. As she told Marion Campbell, in the Fremantle Arts Review interview:

I think I’m very conscious of there always being an upper and a lower and I object to that strenuously. The people up here always look down on the people down here and I can’t stand it because it’s only because they’ve been born into that particular sphere; it’s nothing to do with them. (Campbell-Gare, 1986, p.4)

From the above statement it seems certain that Gare believed that no person had the right to feel themselves superior to anybody else. By identifying
qualities of her own mother in the Aboriginal mothers around her, Gare unites all caring mothers. And far from denigrating her mother by the comparison, does this not simply affirm mother love, regardless of the ethnicity of the heart from which it springs? Clearly, the colour of one's skin does not render the love less effective.

In *The Fringe Dwellers*, Gare ironically exposes the so-called Christian mentality that prompts do-gooders like the sanctimonious Mrs Henwood, who seeks to inform her Aboriginal neighbour, with grave concern;

‘And you'll find very little colour prejudice,’ Mrs Henwood said gravely. ‘You, Mrs Comeaway, can help stamp it out where it does exist.’ Her eyes held Mrs Comeaway’s. Mrs Comeaway tried to remember what they reminded her of... ‘We all of us realize,’ Mrs Henwood continued, still grave and solemn, ‘that you have a lot to learn about our white way of life and that you probably need help. We are prepared to give you that help, Mrs Comeaway.’ (Gare, 1961, pp.107,108)

Gare was obviously well aware of the colour prejudice that existed in the Sixties, and of the unfortunate conditions that Indigenous people endured on the reserves at that time.

*Jack Davis: A Life Story* (1988) presented by Keith Chesson, relates Davis’ experiences when he and a friend attended a church service where a visiting missionary, recently returned from China, was addressing the Sunday meeting:

A row of ladies dressed in their Sunday best, with hats and lace, gloves and buttons, looked down their noses at us. Some of them even humphed their disapproval of our temerity in invading their sanctuary of Christian virtue, while others met us with cold stares of disbelief. The visiting preacher spoke of poverty in China, and of the tradition of sharing and extended-family responsibility which enabled the Chinese peasant to survive. I believe the message was completely lost on the
Brookton church community, although it contained the very essence of Christianity: that I am my brother's keeper. (pp. 125-126)

The above quotation is intended to illustrate that true Christianity is not merely about dressing up in one's Sunday best to attend Church. Nor is it about Mrs Henwood's implication, that as a member of her Church and the ladies' Guild, it was her duty to become acquainted with her neighbour and welcome her to 'our little community' (Gare, 1961, p.106).

It is perhaps fitting at this point to introduce a further quotation by Shirley Smith, better known as Mum Shirl, from the book of that name and written with the assistance of Bobbie Sykes. Mum Shirl corroborates Jack Davis' experiences, and Nene Gare's depiction of Aboriginal fringe-dwelling life:

I was told that as my Grandmother lay very sick at Erambie, my Uncle George Perry jumped on a horse bareback and rode to Cowra to fetch the priest as my Grandmother had asked. But while it was alright for us to cross the river to go to Mass in his church, it was 'out of his diocese' for him to cross the river to attend to my Grandmother. My uncle then rode in the pouring rain to fetch the priest from about 28 miles away. By the time he got back, my Grandmother was dead. (Smith and Sykes, 1992, pp.18-19)

Mum Shirl goes on to write: "While religion and God have always played a big part in my life, church itself has not, or at least the 'going to church on Sundays' sort of church" (ibid.).

In the Giuffré interview of 1985, subsequently published in A Writing Life (1990). Gare was asked whether she thought Aborigines had given anything to the white people. Her reply was, 'They've tried to, but we won't accept it. we
won't accept that we should share. White people will have to change' (pp.19-
20).

Gare’s response in the above quotation reflects her enlightened attitude
towards the Aboriginal people whom she recognized as a devalued and
downtrodden section of society as she portrayed them in *The Fringe Dwellers*.
She was to say later in her journal, whilst on the set for the filming of that novel:

> After all it is the actors’ chance to force us to see what we have done
to them, and to make us understand how it feels to be set aside and
disregarded. (Gare, 1986)

Gare’s empathy towards the ‘underdog’ and her resolution ‘to make poorer
people known to anybody who reads me’ - she knew what it was like to be poor -
is reflected in the above attitude, and must have imbued on her life and work.

When Gare says, ‘We won’t accept that we should share. White people
will have to change,’ one gathers what she had in mind was land rights. This can
be verified in the Giuffré interview in which she argued:

> I’m for land rights, of course, but I’d like them to have the mineral
rights as well. Then they could set up a kingdom of their own, and
have their own laws and regulations’. (Giuffré-Gare 1990, p.20)

Gare, were she alive today, having been a defender of Aboriginal causes,
might well have entered the Native Title debate on land rights. She might not
have been able to do much directly - that was not her style - but she might well
have considered writing a sequel to *The Fringe Dwellers*.

Gare’s novel, *The Fringe Dwellers*, has produced an honest, authentic and
compassionate sociological study, acclaimed by both non-Aboriginal and
Aboriginal people. Interviewed by Marion Campbell, and published in the *Fremantle Arts Review*, the following quotation taken from that interview, testifies how well-received *The Fringe Dwellers* was among the Aboriginal community:

> Her efforts have not only been vindicated by the response of Aboriginal leaders such as Kath Walker who acted in *The Fringe Dwellers*, but by that of Mary Forrest from Geraldton. ‘She read it and said, “I didn’t know you people could feel that way about us.” That was all I needed.’ (Campbell-Gare, 1986, p.5)

The Aborigines in the book are depicted as victims of their white-dominated social environment. The novel questions male ascendancy and all forms of ‘othering’ which reduces minorities like women and black people in our society to a ‘nobody.’ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément in *The Newly Born Woman*, put it like this:

> There has to be some “other” - no master without a slave, no economico-political power without exploitation, no dominant class without cattle under the yoke, no “Frenchmen” without wogs, no Nazis without Jews, no property without exclusion. If there were no other, one would invent it. Besides, that is what masters do - they have their slaves made to order. (Cixous and Clément, 1996, p.71)

Cixous’ and Clément’s quotation supports what has previously been said about ‘othering’ in *The Fringe Dwellers*. The ‘other’ is represented by the Aboriginal people and women. The dominant or master class is the white bourgeoisie, and, in particular, their males. Conversely, the Indigenous Australian people remain the slaves, while women and the proletariat are not far behind.
For Gare, it should not have been this way, however. To her, all people are
born equal. Gare, as previously stated in this Chapter (p.104), has said, when
asked if Aborigines had given anything to white society, ‘They’ve tried to but we
won’t accept it, we won’t accept that we should share’ (Giuffré-Gare, 1990,
pp.19-20).

Olga Hoyt, an American writer, consulted with anthropologists in Australia
to write the book Aborigines of Australia (1969). In her acknowledgements she
states that her scientific source material included Aboriginal Man in Australia,
education, housing, health, and employment there is no limit to the contributions
the aborigines [sic] can make to the society, now and in the future” (Hoyt, 1969.
p.120). She goes on to say:

To some the assimilation of the aborigines foretells a loss of their
culture, a culture that has been built up many thousands of years before
the white man set foot on the continent. But their culture need not be
lost. Each aboriginal group is being urged to keep its language,
develop its own art, poetry, and music, retain parts of the ritual, and
always cherish the essence of the doctrines expressed in its mythology.
Still retaining their heritage, these aborigines can indeed walk along in
dignity with their brothers, the “other Australians,” the whites of the
continent. (ibid.)

Gare would have known all this but sadly in the 1960s, at the time she was
writing The Fringe Dwellers, these opportunities were rarely available to the
Indigenous people of Australia. At the time of the 1985 interview with Giuffré,
things were not much better. It is only comparatively recently that Aboriginal
people have begun to be heard in their own right, and are demanding more justice
for their people, including land rights. However, even in the final years of the
twentieth century they still have much to achieve, as witnessed by the WA
Government's current obduracy about acknowledgement of Mabo-based land
rights, especially in the north of the State, where mining and pastoral interests are
pressing for extinguishment of these rights.

The novels, *The Fringe Dwellers* and *A House with Verandahs*, might be
seen to mirror Gare's own life. Being a woman writer in the Australia of the
Fifties and Sixties cannot have been all that easy. As Miriam Dixson has written
in *The Real Matilda*:

> As late as 1969, it could be said that women here experienced
discrimination in employment, education and training on a scale which
'would receive widespread publicity and outraged condemnation if it
were directed in the same overt fashion at colour or religion' (Dixson,
1976, p.35)

From a feminist/ Marxist point of view, Gare's struggle could be seen to parallel
those of the very people she was writing about in *The Fringe Dwellers*.

Gare's own childhood is reflected in *A House with Verandahs* (1980),
which chronicles her life and the lives of her family in Adelaide in the early
Thirties.

Gare's books were not written according to the chronology of the events of
her life. In 1961, *The Fringe Dwellers*, the first of her novels to be published,
was based (as stated previously) on a number of Aboriginal people she had met
and become friendly with in Geraldton. This has been confirmed by Frank Gare
in an interview on 29 June 1997. He said then that it was while he was District
Officer for the Native Welfare Department in Geraldton, between 1954 and 1962.
that his wife wrote *The Fringe Dwellers*. It was during this period that his wife became acquainted with 'a lot of' Aboriginal men and women:

They had to pass our house to reach the town from the reserve where they lived. And it was not unusual for me to arrive home from work to find Nene entertaining her Aboriginal friends, while they were enjoying the inevitable cup of hot tea. (Frank Gare, 1997)

It might appear uncharitable to say that Gare's interest in these people was to further her own cause. After all, she was writing a novel about them, so becoming better acquainted would have certainly helped with the book and her career. However, it seems that, given Gare's understanding and empathy for the 'underdog', having these people in to tea in her own house was a natural extension of her caring and benevolent nature. In other words, her interest was probably to her credit as a human being, as much as to her ambitions as a writer.

The Aborigines in *The Fringe Dwellers* are depicted as victims of their contemporary social environment, the one created by White Australia. They represent the bottom end of the socio-economic hierarchy, what Marxist theory would call a socially disadvantaged class, with no definite political structure - a group of people differentiated against and struggling to survive their alienation from the opposing classes.

In his *Introduction* to Marx's *Capital*, G.D.H. Cole writes:

He [Marx] sees human history as a series of class struggles which are at once economic and political in their character. The opposing classes change again and again in the course of historical evolution, but the struggle goes on, and will go on as long as production and the State are organized on a basis of class differentiation. The struggle between labourers and capitalists, which is the present phase of this evolutionary
process, Marx regards as a stage - the last stage - of humanity's march towards a classless society. (Cole, 1957, p. xix)

It is appropriate, perhaps, to focus on a quotation from an historian to better illustrate the Aboriginal situation in Western Australia in the Sixties. For women, the Sixties was a somewhat more enlightened era in Western Australia, due to the emergence of the so-called Feminist Movement. However, changes to Aboriginal welfare had still left a great deal more to be desired for Indigenous Australians. According to Geoffrey Bolton, in his contribution entitled "Black and White after 1897," published in C.J. Stannage's *A New History of Western Australia* (1981):

It was only in 1960 that the Department of Native Welfare came to a policy of encouraging children to remain with their families during primary education in place of the former practice of separating them and sending them to missions (Bolton, 1981, p 159)

Australians need to be concerned, indeed Australians should feel ashamed, that at the end of the twentieth century Aboriginal infant mortality is still higher than that of white children. Bolton goes on to write:

As late as 1977 gastro-enteritis and diarrhoea - characteristic diseases of underdeveloped communities - were the major cause of admission to hospital of Kimberley Aboriginals under five years of age. Although the Aboriginal infant mortality rate in that year in Western Australia (36.5 deaths in every 1000 births) was significantly lower than the Northern Territory (48.1) or Queensland (48.6) it was over three times the state average. Despite the improvements which took place for most Aborigines after 1950 there was still much to stir the social conscience of Western Australians. (op. cit. p 166)
Gare well documents in *The Fringe Dwellers* how Mrs Comeaway lost two children through enteritis, which exemplifies Bolton’s comments on the Aboriginal infant mortality rate in Western Australia. Her daughter, Noonah, who is a nurse at the local hospital, tells her mother that she had seen many children hospitalized due to stomach trouble: ‘Noonah compressed her lips, and vowed silently that the new baby wouldn’t get enteritis, not if she could help it’ (Gare, 1961, p.154).

On the other hand, if we look at Gare’s autobiographical *A House with Verandahs*, set in the 1930s, we are reminded, if only by inference, that men dispossessed by the Depression became working class casualties, and patriarchy ruled at every level. By adopting the different settings for *The Fringe Dwellers* and *A House with Verandahs*, Gare has, by accident or design, provided richer material for both feminist and Marxist analysis. For instance, in *A House with Verandahs* Gare depicts the women playing a supportive role to those men who were obviously casualties of the Depression:

> Manny arrived at our place practically every morning except sale days, and he and my father talked and yarnd the day away, the difference between them being that Dad worked as he talked and Manny just rested his feet.... Mrs Manny once came to our place to find out why Manny was not out looking for work. The two wrangled bitterly in our sitting-room whence Manny had been called when his wife appeared. Mother heard what went on because she happened to be dusting the bedroom which was across the passage.
> ‘Just what I thought,’ Mrs Manny greeted. ‘I knew you wouldn’t be out looking for a job.’
> ‘I stopped for a moment,’ Manny said, ‘to rest the feet. They give me trouble.’ (Gare, 1980, p.37)
Derek Whitelock, in his book *Adelaide 1836-1976*, has this to say about how the Depression affected the Adelaide people:

> The depression of the 1930s was an unusually pinched and bitter time in Adelaide and left a legacy of apathy and ruin (Whitelock, 1977, p.173).

There were other grim times, notably in the 1890s and during the bleak depression of the 1930s when 200 factories closed down, one out of three trade unionists in Adelaide was out of work, and some of the unemployed camped in hessian tents along the Torrens.... In the worst days of the depression, some of the unemployed wretchedly encamped on the Exhibition Grounds or near the City Bridge felt themselves driven to political extremes. But red flags and Marxist placards outside the Treasury Building were exceptions to the rule. (op.cit. p.170-171)

The above quotation supports the realistic picture of the times which Gare gives in *A House with Verandahs*. It adds confirmation that men already dispossessed by the Depression became working class casualties.

*The Fringe Dwellers*, to return to this first novel, could be seen as a statement of the Australian socio-economic-race-gender struggle which must have been embedded in the author’s own unconscious. The wilfulness of Trilby’s resistance could be seen as a microcosm of Gare’s own predicament as a writer, feeling as she must have that she had to conform to the recognized stereotype of being both a woman and, by origin, of a lower socio-economic class. By focusing on women in the novel, making them visible as people who challenge and question, Gare unmaskst their ‘invisibility’ and restores them to a full state of consciousness. We turn at this point to Cixous and Clément, and take a statement from *The Newly Born Woman* (1996), in order to amplify the
sentiments of this paragraph, and give credence to the argument introduced in the opening sentence of this chapter:

I saw how the white (French), superior, plutocratic, civilized world founded its power on the repression of populations who had suddenly become "invisible," like proletarians, immigrant workers, minorities who are not the right "colour." Women. Invisible as humans. But, of course, perceived as tools - dirty, stupid, lazy, underhanded, etc. (Cixous and Clément, 1996, p.70)

Trilby, in The Fringe Dwellers, struggles against her dark skin and social status. Trilby's dilemma is three-fold, since she is an Aborigine and a woman and poor. She refuses to become a fringe dweller, seeing her mother demeaned, yet she realizes she cannot be fully a white person either. She rejects her boy friend, Phyllix, who can only offer her a life as a sort of outlaw on the fringe:

"Trilby, will you stay - for a while?" Phyllix said at last, his need as great as her own. Trilby nodded. Phyllix found her mouth and tasted salt from the tears that once again were seeping through her closed lids. She wanted to tell Phyllix what she knew he most wanted to hear - that she would stay not for a while, but for always. And she could not. The thing that lived in her heart would not let her. So long as she had youth and strength and pride, so long would she seek to escape this life. (Gare, 1961, p.257)

Trilby could be seen as, in some senses, the prototype for all the upwardly striving Aboriginal women such as those who have now achieved entry in the professions and academia in Australia.

The foreground of the Australian society is the white Anglo-Saxon male. Their attitudes towards minority groups such as Aborigines and women, yesterday and today, especially where they are reflected in the larger community.
point to prejudice and discrimination which relegates them to ‘othering,’ rendering them as the ‘other,’ to be put down and so to be of no consequence.

Trilby wants to distance herself from her Aboriginality and all that goes with it. She almost pleads with Phyllix for understanding:

Don’t you see, Phyllix? She was as young as me once, maybe just like me, wanting all the things I want, and now - all she wants is not to be called a nigger. (op. cit. p.255)

Sally Morgan in her book, My Place (1987), parallels Trilby’s dilemma as she reflects on the family’s social status, and the shame a black grandmother feels for her Aboriginality:

‘You bloody kids don’t want me, you want a bloody white grandmother, I’m black. Do you hear, black, black, black!’ With that, Nan pushed back her chair and hurried out to her room.

‘You know we’re not Indian, don’t you?’ Jill mumbled.

‘Mum said we’re Indian.’

‘Look at Nan, does she look Indian?’

‘I’ve never really thought about how she looks’.....

‘You know what we are, don’t you?’

‘No what?’

‘Boongs, we’re Boongs!’..... It took me a few minutes before I summoned up enough courage to say, ‘What’s a Boong?’

‘A Boong. You know, Aboriginal. God, of all things, we’re Aboriginal!’

‘Oh.’ I suddenly understood. There was a great deal of social stigma attached to being Aboriginal at our school.

‘I can’t believe you’ve never heard the word Boong,’ she muttered in disgust. ‘Haven’t you ever listened to the kids at school?’ If they want to run you down, they say, “Aah, ya just a Boong”. Honestly, Sally, you live the whole of your life in a daze!’ (Morgan, 1987. pp.97-98)

Trilby, like the Morgan children, is hurt and angry by the prejudiced attitude that she sees the white community display towards her people. Excited over the prospect that her parents will soon be allocated a ‘partment’ house, she
is disillusioned and furious when she learns that the dwelling will come to them unpainted. She sees this as discrimination:

'I think they’re just being mean,' Trilby said furiously. 'I wanted a painted house. Now everyone’ll know it’s just a nigger’s place.' ...

'Why, you just a young hussy, sayin things like that bout ya own people,' Mrs Comeaway said, raising [sic] to stand threateningly over her daughter. 'What you say a thing like that for eh?'

'It’s not me - it’s them,' Trilby said, angry tears choking her voice. 'They spoil everything for us. They try every way they can to make us feel mean and little. Even down at the post office they try. We’ve got a name, haven’t we? So why do they have to lump us all under “Natives.” What’s so different about us? They’re beasts. I hate the lot of them.' (Gare, 1961. p.64)

Trilby’s outburst represents the poignant cry of generations of young black women denied the basic human right to be treated with dignity and respect in a society that judges human beings by their skin colour, and bestows on them their status accordingly. The unpainted house is really a metaphor, and reflects the many things left undone which would have had the potential to improve the quality of life for our Indigenous Australians - such as sanitation on reserves and proper medical care for babies and young children.

From a feminist/Marxist perspective, The Fringe Dwellers and A House with Verandahs share common themes delineating attitudes directed towards marginalized groups, such as women and Aborigines. As an oppressed group in our patriarchal society, women have been compared in status to indigenous people and the proletariat. The Australian Aborigines, on the other hand, as previously pointed out, are what Marxist theory would call a socially disadvantaged class at the bottom rung of the socio-economic hierarchy. Roger Gottlieb, in Marxism 1844-1990, sheds some light on the matter:
In understanding the contemporary battleground of gender, the socialist-feminist analysis both challenges and enlarges Marxist theory. While it continues to focus on the mode of production, it recognizes that the twin dynamics of patriarchy and capitalism form a unified system of oppression. (Gottlieb, 1992, p.138)

In other words, what Gottlieb is saying is, that women are oppressed two-fold, firstly by the patriarchal system which seeks to keep women in their place, and then by the capitalist system which endeavours to perpetuate the oppression through racist or bourgeois ideology. And of course to be black, working class and female distinguishes the most oppressed group of all.

In *A House with Verandahs*, Gare’s ‘fictional’ family, like most Australians at the time, is depicted as relatively poor. They recycle everything in their battle to survive. Household repairs are usually done by the mother and household and family management are also the mother’s responsibility. Compared with the relatively tranquil world of the father (at home) the nurturing work of the mother is relentless. As the daughter says:

> We never feel we get enough; we are always fighting and scrambling around telling her what has happened to us during our days, claiming her ears, her hands, her eyes, and if she sits, her lap.... Dad transacted no business but his own, leaving the conduct of family affairs to Mother. (Gare, 1980, pp.1,12)

It can be seen then, that full responsibility of family care and support - setting aside the economic contribution of the father - both material and emotional, falls to the mother. This seems in contradiction to the view now held by socialist-feminists and expanded by Gottlieb, who says:
Along with equality in the public sphere, socialist-feminists have stressed that it is essential to reorganize the family. Men need to take an equal share in child rearing and to take equal responsibility for emotional intimacy (Gottlieb, 1992, p 139).

The above view of socialist-feminists really amounts to an attempt to challenge long-held patriarchal convictions that women are biologically more attuned to be nurturers than men. Of course this conviction suits the male's purpose and is fashioned to meet his needs, since it 'keeps the woman in her place,' and provides a means of control over a subordinate group.

Most of Gare's creative work has been shown to be closely linked to events in her own life. *The Fringe Dwellers* and *A House with Verandahs* document the lives of a working class oppressed minority. Dedicated to Gare's parents, *A House with Verandahs* illustrates many of her childhood and family experiences, and uses them as the basis for the novel. *The Fringe Dwellers* is founded on Gare's observation of at least the Indigenous people she met and befriended in Geraldton, especially since in these years her husband was stationed there as District Officer for Native Welfare.

It is appropriate to look at Gare's literary career in the light of the writing of the above two novels, but it still remains to be emphasised that both books serve to illustrate the feminist/Marxist perspective outlined in the objectives for this chapter.

It has already been mentioned that *The Fringe Dwellers* was published in 1961, and at that time Gare was forty-two years of age. She was living at Geraldton with her husband and three children. Although *Green Gold*, a novel
documenting the Gares’ banana growing venture at Carnarvon, (as stated previously) was written earlier, it was not until 1963 that this was published. However, Gare had been writing short stories for some time. Interviewed in June 1997, Frank Gare told the author of this study that his wife had been successfully sending short stories to *The Sydney Bulletin*, *Meanjin*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Western Mail*, *The Adelaide Advertiser*, *The Canberra Times*, *Australian Short Stories*, and *The Geraldton Guardian*. Quite an impressive list! Frank also related that his wife came down from Geraldton ‘around 1956’ to attend the Summer School at the University of Western Australia, where she undertook a creative writing course organized by Hew Roberts. It was while she was in Perth, apparently, that she joined the Fellowship of Australian Writers, then the State’s leading writing group, where both professional and amateur writers could meet in an atmosphere of mutual interest. It was in 1964 that she was accepted as a Fellow. (See Appendix 9 for copy of application form).

By the time Gare wrote *A House with Verandahs* (1980), she was living in their house at Shelley. This proved to be the last of her many moves. On the other hand, when the Gares first moved back to Perth in 1962, they bought a brick and tile house at Number Four, Leonora Street, Como, as they had sold their Applecross house in 1952 to finance the banana-growing venture at Carnarvon. This was prior to transferring to Geraldton. Back in Perth in 1962, Frank took over the position of Commissioner for Native Welfare from Stan Middleton, who retired in that year. It was a position he was to hold until his own retirement in 1979.
Their children, Lief, Arran and Shelley were now aged seventeen, fourteen, and ten respectively. Both Lief and Arran went to Applecross High School, while Shelley went to Santa Maria, which was nearer to the Shelley home.

The Gare children all excelled in their studies. Lief took up nursing, and later gained a degree in that profession. When Arran and Shelley left secondary school, they each went on to the University of Western Australia, where Shelley obtained an Honours degree in English. Arran also gained a Bachelor of Arts, and subsequently went on to get his PhD at Murdoch University. He is now Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

Shelley initially worked at *The West Australian* as a journalist, then went to Sydney and was employed with *Cleo* magazine where, for a short time, she was Editor. She eventually transferred to London and stayed there for seven years. At that time she worked for a magazine called *Company*, and later *The Sunday Times*. She now lives in Sydney, and is the Features Editor for *The Australian* in that city.

Lief, who is a fully qualified nursing sister, continues to practise her profession at Fremantle Hospital, and lives in Fremantle. (Frank Gare, 1998)

It was not until 1966, when Nene Gare was forty seven, that she was to obtain the longed-for ‘room of her own’ in which to continue her writing and painting activities. In the June 1997 interview, Frank Gare said that an architect was consulted to design a house for the family at Number 339 Riverton Drive Shelley Cove (see Appendix 10). The house included a mandatory studio.
complete with easels and bookshelves, and was equipped with two new
typewriters. The bookshelves alone cost £4,000. This was to be in marked
contrast to the small room on the back verandah in the Geraldton house where
Gare had written *The Fringe Dwellers*.

The years at Shelley from 1966 onwards (although, sadly, Nene was to die
there in 1994) must have been very fulfilling for the family. Frank was well
established in his profession, the children were excelling at school, and Gare had
demonstrated her skill and ability as a writer and painter. As a Western
Australian writer who had contributed to the State's literary emergence, she could
well be proud to take her place alongside such distinguished names as Dame
Mary Durack, Dorothy Hewett and Elizabeth Jolley.

Of her painting (in an interview with Marion Campbell, written in 1986 for
the *Fremantle Arts Review*), Nene says:

> I can get rid of a lot of frustration. When I can’t write, I can paint. It’s
> for amusement; I don’t try to say anything with painting (p 4)

Despite her modest assertions, as already documented in Chapter One of
this study, Gare won a number of prizes for her paintings throughout her life.

Apart from their Shelley address, the Gares also owned a holiday house at
Lake Thomson - three miles inland from Woodman’s Point - where they would
often retreat for a break. Nene Gare delighted in these excursions and records
such an occasion in one of her diaries:

> We went to Lake Thomson on Tuesday, and had a lively easy day as
> usual. Out for lunch to see exhibition at Fremantle on the 13th our
wedding anniversary Oyster Beds, house wine more like cool drink
Food not too good (Gare, n.d.)

Asked about his wife’s diaries, in an interview on 14 September 1997, Frank said, “They are more soliloquies. Of the eighteen, half would be formal diaries, the others big column diaries.”

“What period do the diaries cover?”
Frank: “They started 1982-83 and continued from 1985 to 1993.” He does not know the reason for none covering 1984.

“How long did they take to fill?”
Frank: “Some one year, some all over the place.”

“Did Nene jot down ideas for her novels in the diaries?”
Frank: “Not that I can recall.”

“Did she record meetings and interviews with members of the family, and people outside the family?”
Frank: “She would have.”

“Did she make any first drafts in any of her diaries?”
Frank: “No, only one unnamed short story.”

“Did she use her diaries to keep loose papers and other documents, receipts, notes and letters?”
Frank: “No, not in diaries.”

However, asked by Giulia Giuffre in a 1985 interview (subsequently published in A Writing Life, 1990), if she had taken notes and kept a diary, Gare replied:
I keep a diary, I take notes. The notes especially have been invaluable. There are ways of phrasing sentences, mispronouncing words, which one could not possibly remember after days or weeks or years. On the other hand, the music of a sentence is something that impresses itself on the mind permanently. In my memory I hear Adelaide people talking. Meekatharra and Geraldton Aboriginals. I hear it and I type what I hear. (p. 17)

Gare’s response in the interview reveals much about her methodology and the dedicated manner in which she approached her work. And she was, of course, in very good company. It is well known that the novelist Katharine Susannah Prichard, who was based at Greenmount, relied very much on research notes of her similar recorded experiences which later helped form the background to her novels.

Gare’s note-taking must have been invaluable in writing The Fringe Dwellers, if for no other reason than to capture the Indigenous usage of Australian English.

Returning to the narrative of Nene Gare’s life, settled in her Shelley house, with three children, who were still furthering their education, and a husband who had progressed very well in his chosen career, we find that Gare had every reason to be proud of the family’s achievements. She continued to write and to paint - this would always be a welcome distraction from writing. And as for writing, she still had many objectives to fulfil.

She still had the voices of the Adelaide people to record in A House with Verandahs (1980). The Geraldton Aboriginals she was to document further in the short story collection, Bend to the Wind (1978), and of course she would
never forget the people she met in Papua New Guinea. They would live again in
An Island Away (1981).

We can now see Gare as an accomplished writer who, relying on her varied
life experiences, contributed much to the emergence of the mid-century literary
heritage of Western Australian writing. She has been shown to be a capable and
loving mother who successfully raised three children, and who watched her
husband achieve prominence in his profession. At the same time she was a
professional author rising steadily in her chosen field.

It needs to be emphasised that, as far as the author of this study is aware,
Frank Gare’s role in Native Welfare, it would seem, had nothing to do with
actions that constituted what has come to be known as the ‘stolen children
generation’. His position as District Officer for Native Welfare in Geraldton
involved attending to the needs of the Aboriginal community, and included trips
through the Murchison and outlying sheep and cattle stations in order to check
that the Indigenous inhabitants were receiving their entitlements.

When Frank Gare took over as Commissioner for Native Welfare in 1962,
he continued in the footsteps of his predecessor, Stan Middleton, who had
already implemented many worthwhile changes of policy that would benefit the
Indigenous people of the State. For example, according to Geoffrey Bolton
(1981) in his contribution to C.J. Stannage’s A New History of Western Australia:

Between 1953 and 1956 Middleton was probably at his peak
Expenditure on Aboriginal welfare was increased until by 1956 for the
first time in sixty years it reached one per cent of total expenditure
from consolidated revenue.... In planning the future of the notorious
settlements at Moore River and Carrolup he at first tried various
experiments to render them more workable before the decision was taken in 1951-52 to close them and hand them over to the missions [italics added]. In the Kimberleys two unsuccessful settlements were closed down, and here again the missions were encouraged to set up new posts where a need was perceived. It was a considerable shift from Commissioner Neville’s approach [italics added] (Bolton, 1981, pp 154, 156)

Frank Gare, in continuing in the footsteps of his predecessor, Stan Middleton, had already had some experience as District Officer for Native Welfare in Geraldton. This would have stood him in good stead as Commissioner.

To return now to Nene Gare, however, and in summing up this chapter, I claim to have considered The Fringe Dwellers from a feminist/Marxist point of view. This book has also been compared in certain respects to A House with Verandahs. The reader has been informed of many details of these two works and the life of the writer, and we leave her, at this stage, about to continue the best years of her writing career.

I would argue further that in their own ways each novel - The Fringe Dwellers and A House with Verandahs - has its particular strengths. It is difficult and perhaps irrelevant to say that one is better than the other, although The Fringe Dwellers did receive wider critical acclaim and was subsequently made into a feature film. On the other hand, A House with Verandahs was well accepted and received good reviews. One reviewer in particular (as previously stated in Chapter One of this study) went as far as to compare the novel to Ethel Turner’s Seven Little Australians. The important thing is that both novels give significant insights into the life and work of Nene Gare.
In the next chapter we will further explore feminist/Marxist interpretations of *The Fringe Dwellers*, continue to detail Gare's career as a writer, and give an account of certain readers' views of *The Fringe Dwellers*. 
CHAPTER 5

THE FRINGE DWELLERS II – FURTHER FEMINIST/MARXIST
INTERPRETATIONS, CONTINUANCE OF NENE GARE’S WRITING
CAREER, AND CERTAIN READERS’ VIEWS OF

THE FRINGE DWELLERS

This chapter further explores feminist/Marxist interpretations of The Fringe
Dwellers, comparing this novel with some of Gare’s other works, particularly A
House with Verandahs, it continues to detail Gare’s career as a writer, and will
give an account of certain readers’ views of The Fringe Dwellers.

Responding to a question in the already quoted interview (see Chapter One,
p.35) with Marion Campbell, published in the Fremantle Arts Review (1986),
Nene Gare implied she had no trepidation, as a European, in writing about
Aborigines. Gare at once evoked her own upbringing, saying in essence that she
was in a position to understand the predicament of the Indigenous people because
she had been ‘brought up in more or less the same way’ (Gare, 1986, p.5).

Gare’s sympathy and empathy for the underdog is reflected in many places
in her writing. She knew what it was like to be poor and overlooked, and
therefore was able to identify with the socio-economic status of urban Aborigines
whom she saw as being marginalized in our society. For example, in A House
with Verandahs, the daughter writes:

Mother had an awful job fitting clothing into her housekeeping
allowance. I had my first new dress when I was eight or nine.... Boots
and shoes were difficult and hell because whilst their soles lasted they
had to be worn regardless of whether they fitted.... Jake wore Ben’s
cast offs when he was made to. When we could get away with it we wore none at all. (Gare, 1980, p.90, 91)

In another interview with Gare, (a minuscule part which has already been quoted in Chapter One, p.20) conducted by Alison Fox and published in *The Daily News* in 1976, Fox records, - and here the quotation is presented in its entirety:

> It was her sympathy and empathy with the Aborigines she met in Geraldton when her husband was District Officer there for the Native Welfare Department that inspired much of her writing.
> “I did not work with the Aborigines, I was just their friend,” she said.
> “They had to walk past our house to get to town and back from the reserve where they lived. They would come in for a cup of tea. We got on well together. I found I could see things from their point of view. I had experienced some of the things they were experiencing. We were a big family – and poor – when I was a child.” (Fox-Gare, 1976, p.33)

Gare sees her own past experiences reflected in the class struggle of Aborigines. If we look at the work from a Marxist point of view, and examine the case of the Aboriginal people, we can detect that the twin dynamics of capitalism and race form a unified system of oppression. From a feminist point of view the twin dynamics of patriarchy and capitalism also form a unified system of oppression which can be seen to be embodied in Gare’s work.

Gare’s kindliness and hospitality towards her Aboriginal ‘neighbours,’ whom she accepted unconditionally as friends, demonstrated her inherent humane qualities of compassion and good heart, such as would put some paid social workers to shame. As she herself had said, ‘I did not work with the Aborigines, I was just their friend.’
According to Marion Campbell, writing for the *Fremantle Arts Review*, *The Fringe Dwellers* drew good initial critical response from Britain, where it was first published, with the exception of *The Times*, whose reviewer called it a 'dime epic' (Campbell, 1986, p.5).

Australians might easily be tempted to dismiss *The Times*’ opinion as being of little consequence, especially considering the novel was so well received in this country, and was taken up by Bruce Beresford, the Australian director of *Tender Mercies* fame. He made *The Fringe Dwellers* into a feature film in 1986. It cannot have been an easy exercise for a reviewer on the other side of the world to make a sound judgement on the merits of *The Fringe Dwellers*, when limited knowledge of Aboriginal people, and general community attitudes towards them and their culture, would have been most unlikely on the part of the critic concerned. It is not surprising therefore, that the review was less than flattering, and perhaps one should make allowances for *The Times*’ negative response.

On the other hand, William Heinemann the London publishers of *The Fringe Dwellers*, in a letter to Nene Gare (see Chapter Four, p.87) spoke of the novel in glowing terms.

*The Fringe Dwellers* is a book about what is now widely admitted to be serious problems – an oppressed people, and race and class conflict. It is a book about a country where the original inhabitants were pushed to one side and excluded from having any real participation in their own welfare and interests.

In the Introduction to an English translation of *Capital* by Karl Marx, G.D.H. Cole (1957) writes:
The idea of ‘one law for the rich and another for the poor’ is also as old as riches and poverty. It did not need Marx to invent the idea of State and law as powers external to the wills and interests of classes excluded from any active part in their administration. (p.xix)

Gare perceived the Aboriginal people as oppressed – victims of class discrimination. She saw them for what they were, a minority group, racially vilified, denied any political will or representation in the public arena.

Therefore, from a Marxist point of view, the political and social domination of the Aboriginal people, which is exposed in The Fringe Dwellers, is appropriate matter for a Marxist reading.

Julie Lewis, the well-known Perth fiction author and biographer, when asked, “Does the book have a special Western Australian quality?” replied:

“It has a regional flavour, which has the advantage to help people understand the problems of the local regional area that may not apply anywhere else.”

When asked further whether the book might have helped towards the process of reconciliation, Lewis said she was unsure. “It might with open fair-minded people willing to listen.” She deliberated. “There is an enormous amount of prejudice.”

Lewis then went on to say:

One of the main difficulties facing Aboriginal people is the education that they receive in white schools which led them to certain expectations and improvements in their life-styles, only to be dashed when they returned to the reserve.
To the question, “Do you think the book would change public attitudes towards Aborigines?” her reply was,

“It might, we tend not to give any real thought to how it feels to be given left-over clothes.”

Lewis could hardly have made a more appropriate statement, as witnessed by Trilby’s reaction in the novel, when given second-hand clothes by a well-meaning white neighbour:

‘I’ve had enough of other people’s clothes,’ she said angrily.... “You can’t see?” Trilby was yelling with rage. “It made her feel big, that’s what. She wasn’t giving something to me. She was giving something to herself. Oh!” [italics added] ..... Trilby fled down the back steps and across to the rubbish bin. She thrust all the clothes deep down into the mess that was already there, then she raced back into the house again. Mrs Comeaway, having been shoved once, made haste to flatten herself against the railing, and in a flash, Trilby was back carrying a bottle of kerosene and a box of matches. She threw kerosene on the clothes and started striking matches. (Gare, 1961, pp.116,117)

We now continue to document other critics’ views of The Fringe Dwellers.

Patricia Kotai-Ewers, a former WA President of The Fellowship of Australian Writers, when asked whether the book had a special Western Australian flavour replied:

“It has a sense of space about it – freedom, an unpopulated feel about it, typically Western Australian.”

To the question, “Do you think the book could change public attitudes towards Aborigines?” Kotai-Ewers replied:

“I think she gives understanding, shows such a human picture of them, to a certain extent, it probably could.”
“Does the book help towards the process of reconciliation?” The answer to this question was:

Well I think it would have to. It shows the plight of Aboriginal people. It also shows their reserve and that they do not place any importance on possessions.

Patti Watts, who is a former executive member of The WA Fellowship of Australian Writers, described *The Fringe Dwellers* as “a wonderful book”. She responded positively when asked whether it had a special Western Australian quality. Asked, “Would the book change public attitudes towards Aborigines?” Watts replied that she thought it should.

“Might the book help towards the process of reconciliation?”

“It should do.” was her reply.

One can see that Nene Gare definitely adopted her role of novelist partly to be a commentator on contemporary Aboriginal society, in the hope that *The Fringe Dwellers* would help towards the process of reconciliation and understanding between non-Aborigines and Aborigines in the Australian community. Gare, in her fiction, reports a case of conflict between a black and white child at the local school, and the resultant happy ending when a white mother forgives Trilby’s treatment of her daughter. Trilby feels shame and inwardly blames her behaviour on her Aboriginality. The following quotation exemplifies that understanding and reconciliation can happen if people are willing to make the effort:
'You smacked a girl across the nose yesterday,' the head stated. 'I wanted to tell you that the girl's mother wrote a note to the Primary School headmaster this morning.' Trilby waited. The thing she had been dreading was happening — and the feeling was much better than the one that had preceded it. She felt able to manage anything in the way of anger or abuse which this man might pile on her. 'The head teacher reached for his pipe. 'I think she must be quite an understanding woman,' he said almost casually. 'She wants the thing dropped. She doesn't want anything done about it. No punishment for you', he looked up under his lashes. 'You think that was a pretty nice gesture for her to make. Trilby?'

'Yes sir,' Trilby said woodenly, a shade sulkily.

'Okay! Skip off,' the head said briskly, turning himself about to face his desk, beginning at once to ruffle through some papers upon it. Trilby's mouth opened and so did the narrowed grey eyes. Only later was she ashamed. Not because of the hurt she had inflicted nor because the girl's mother had acted so generously in the matter, but because this was the way any ignorant coloured girl might behave, to lash out with tongue and hands, to lose control. Never, she vowed, would she let that most despised half of her get the upper hand again. (Gare, 1961, pp.103-104)

The Aborigines in *The Fringe Dwellers* and the women in *A House with Verandahs* are seen to be devalued, oppressed and discriminated against.

Certainly, in *The Fringe Dwellers*, the Aboriginal people were denied drinking rights, were neglected on reserves, and often refused service in restaurants and milk bars, as has been documented in this thesis. However, the discrimination and oppression in the latter novel are reflected more in the manner women perceive themselves to be subordinate to their masters (a legacy of the patriarchal system), and allow themselves to be subjugated to the males who are only too happy to dominate their households. One need go no further than this chapter (p.135), where the mother's hopes of moving to a larger and more comfortable house are thwarted by the father who tells her that she really does not want to leave.
Miriam Dixson (1976) in *The Real Matilda* also enlightens us somewhat in this respect:

Our treatment of Aborigines has left us with a lot of guilt. And if there is any meaning in the idea of formative experiences, then early (and continuing) Australian male experiences with Aboriginal women – that luxurious phrase ‘black velvet’ is certainly suggestive – have contributed an early layer to the general low esteem in which women are held in our country. (Dixson, 1976, p.74)

As reported earlier, Gare has said, ‘Anything that furthers understanding must be good.’ Asked in the 1985 Giulia Giuffré interview, and published in *A Writing Life* (1990), “Is that what led you to write?” Gare replied:

Yes, I knew what it was like to be poor and overlooked. I always feel for the underdog. I think the privileged people make most of the wrong decisions. There are far too many wealthy people in Australia who don’t know what else to do with their wealth but multiply it. (Giuffré-Gare, 1990, p.17)

It is in order to remind ourselves of the primitive conditions in which some Aborigines still live on the outskirts of society, and the resultant health problems which follow, that Gare, in *The Fringe Dwellers* depicts the lives of these people ‘living’ in makeshift humpies with no running water or proper sanitation. These are the people whose existence many ‘white’ Australians would rather forget. Of course, most of these whites live their privileged lives in the comfort of well-appointed houses, enjoying good medical and social amenities, such that many Indigenous people could only dream about.

One surmises that, with her feeling for the ‘underdog,’ Gare’s intention (consciously or unconsciously) was to make a political statement in her book.
After all, she had said that she saw her job to make poorer people known to anyone who reads her work, and to make them understand what it is like to be poor, and what it is like to be an Aboriginal. She rarely succeeds so well as in Chapter Sixteen of *The Fringe Dwellers*, where she documents how Mrs Comeaway lost three infants from enteritis epidemics. Her daughter, Noonah, who is a nursing aide, asks:

‘How did you lose them, Mummy?’
‘Stummick trouble mostly,’ Mrs Comeaway said matter-of-factly. ‘Aint much ya can do bout that once they get real bad.’
Noonah nodded. She had seen many children hospitalized because of stomach trouble. ‘Enteritis,’ she told her mother. ‘It’s caused through . . . .
‘Damn thing,’ Mrs Comeaway pondered. ‘Seems ta hop from one to the other, too. There’s seasons for it I spose, just like ya get colds when it’s wet and blowy. Nothin you can do bout it.’ (Gare, 1961, p.154)

As reported earlier in Chapter Four, Professor Geoffrey Bolton has said Aboriginal infant mortality is still higher than that of white children. As late as 1977 gastroenteritis and diarrhoea, characteristic diseases of under-developed communities, were the major cause of admission to hospital of Kimberley Aborigines under five years of age.

Another problem faced by Aboriginal people, before drinking rights were introduced in 1967, was the discriminatory attitude levelled at Aborigines over the consumption of alcohol. At the time Gare wrote *The Fringe Dwellers*, Aborigines, unless exempt from the provisions of the Native Administration Act, were banned in hotels. It was also a punishable offence for anyone to supply intoxicating liquor to an Aboriginal person.
In Chapter Three of *The Fringe Dwellers*, Gare reports the outcome of an Aborigine being in possession of alcohol:

Mrs Green looked at the two girls. 'Skippy got picked up for receiving. They caught him with a bottle of conto,' she explained. 'He got off all right, but he's still mad about sleeping down the jail. Said he got cold.' (Gare, 1961, p. 31)

In *The Geraldton Guardian* of 18 May 1954, there was a report under the caption INTOXICATING LIQUOR, NATIVE STRIKES TROUBLE:

A thirty-three-year old native station hand named Richard Charles Wittamara of Moonyoomooona who appeared in the Geraldton Police Court yesterday before Messrs L.J. Chapman and S. Criddle Js P pleaded guilty to three counts of having received intoxicating liquor last Saturday when not exempt from the provisions of the Native Administration Act. A fine of £1 was imposed on each of three counts of receiving liquor. (p 3)

As the above report illustrates, Aboriginal people denied drinking rights would almost always find a means of obtaining drink if they wanted it through white acquaintances who were prepared to break the law. This proves that the law was ineffective. All it apparently succeeded in doing was to create further problems for both the black and white community.

For instance, as Gare highlights in *The Fringe Dwellers*:

Near the outskirts of the town a taxi cruised past. Mr Comeaway hailed it with a peremptory gesture and all three climbed in.

'An if we call up the camp,' Horace said graciously, sinking into his soft leather seat, 'I might just find I had a bottle or two hid away.'

If ya got the money ta pay for it,' the taxi-driver offered, 'I can get as much as youse three'll want.'

'Could do with a drink,' Charlie said wistfully.

'Yeah boy,' Mr Comeaway enthused. 'We might do that.' (Gare, 1961, p. 196)
In *A House with Verandahs*, Gare also succinctly profiles women's subordinate social status, subordinate, since the wife always places her husband's wishes and happiness before her own, almost as if she herself were of no importance, and hence her needs should take second place to those of her spouse.

Gare's invented family in *A House with Verandahs* has seven children who crowd into a pathetically small house. Mary's efforts to move are always undermined by her husband. And because she considers the needs of her spouse paramount, she is reluctant to utter one word of protest. Obligingly, she agrees to whatever he suggests. The following quotation from *A House with Verandahs*, identifies Mary as the obedient 'giving' wife, whose chief concern is to keep her husband happy, while ignoring her own needs in the process. This illustrates woman's subordination to the male:

"But what about your father?" Mother's dreaming came to a halt. "Dad would get used to being there. You said yourself he liked Second Avenue."

"Are you sure he could get used to another house - at our age?"

Fay said desperately, "Mummy, you can't let this chance go..."

"I know, but I'm thinking of your father. Would he be happy anywhere else?"

"Think of yourself for once. Don't you want it?" ... [After much persuasion by her daughters] Mother came at last to her decision. She would like to live on Second Avenue in Aunt Liz's house with its lovely garden ... At that moment Dad came through the back door ... Fay decided to strike while the iron was warm. She told Dad about the proposed deal. She said clearly, "Mummy says she'd like to do it - go up and live in Aunt Liz's house... Dad looked as if he'd been shot through the heart. He stood dead still. His gaze went straight to Mother..."

Then Dad said, "You don't really want to leave here, Molly old girl, do you?" And just as if all that had gone before had never been, Mother smiled sweetly and lovingly and said, "No dear. I suppose not." (Gare, 1980, pp.142-143)
It is interesting to note that, with all the discussion on the merits of Aunt Liz's house with its lovely garden, no one mentions whether it has any verandah. After all, this is presumably where the novel gets its name, because of the mother’s supposed wish to have a house with verandahs. A brief mention is made earlier in the novel when the siblings discuss what action their parents should take when they learn that their landlord proposes to sell the house over their heads. One of the siblings clearly states: ‘Our new house has to have a verandah all round, ... for Mother’ (Gare, 1980, p.64). It is even more interesting to observe that Nene Gare has marked and signed where she wishes the book to end, crossing out the extra text in which it is documented that the mother gets her house with verandahs. (See Appendix 15 for photocopy of the end of *A House with Verandahs*)

Women and their families were mainly fostered within a patriarchal society, subordinated to the male order of things. The general expectations for women at the time Gare was growing up were that they would settle down to become ‘non-working’ wives and mothers. Women were generally recognized only as appendages of their husbands, became their property, and were required to become good housewives and carers for their children. This is to some extent confirmed in Miriam Dixson’s *The Real Matilda* (1976):

That family structure, long pre-dating the nineteenth century in western communities, probably always denied an adequate outlet to woman’s healthy and sound emotions by the extent to which it accentuated her subordinate social status.... Woman’s subordinate place in ... society was very marked; she shouldered a great share of the labour but took little part in its recreations. (Dixson, 1976, pp 67, 92)
Simone de Beauvoir, in her contribution entitled "Women and Creativity,"
which is the text of a lecture she delivered in Japan in 1966, and subsequently
published in French Feminist Thought (1989), edited by Toril Moi, puts it like
this:

Now, traditionally, women are not independent, but rather the property
of their husbands and their children. At any moment, their husbands or
their children can come and demand explanations, support or
assistance, and women are obliged to comply. Women belong to the
family or the group, and not to themselves. (de Beauvoir, 1989, p. 18)

Gare's own mother, it seems, was dedicated to her family and was much
loved by them. She was always available to meet the demands of each of her
children. Her home became an impenetrable fortress, where, within its confines,
the family sheltered in a haven of warmth and parental love that no woes from
the outside world were expected to permeate:

Home! It is wonderful the amount of comfort and shelter our small
house provides. It is a bit like Mother. None of us ever feels he gets
enough. I sleep in a double bed with my eldest sister and my cousin
Marnie, in winter there are far too many of us to fit around the fire, but
we are like those trees planted close so they can support each other.
(Gare, 1980, p. 2)

It was the year 1956, while Nene Gare was living in Geraldton* that she,
according to her husband Frank Gare, started working on the manuscript of The
Fringe Dwellers.

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* As already stated, her husband was District Officer for the Native Welfare Department
In a simple asbestos house at 63 Brede Street, (See Appendix II), perched on top of a hill which commanded a magnificent view of the ocean, *The Fringe Dwellers* came into being, as Gare worked away in a small room on the back verandah.

Interviewed on 29 June 1997, Frank Gare recalls how his wife had given him strict instructions not to purchase an asbestos house before she left for a holiday in Adelaide. However, when subsequently she saw the dwelling which was to become their home for eight years, Nene Gare was delighted. It seems obvious that her artist’s eye was captivated by the seascape. And who knows what inspiration that view of the waves evoked in the writer?

Frank Gare was away from home for one week out of each month, in the course of his duties as District Officer. He had to travel through the Murchison as far as Wiluna. At other times he made special trips to the sheep and cattle stations checking on any problems the Aboriginal people might have had. (Source, Frank Gare, 1997).

It could not have been easy for Nene Gare to combine her duties as wife and mother with her writing career. In those days there were no ‘writing centres’ (although there was Tom Collins House, the Headquarters of The Fellowship of Australian Writers, down in Perth). There was no government subsidised child care – she had three young children, Lief eleven years, Arran eight, and Shelley four. Of her hectic schedule, Gare reports in her ‘diary’ (courtesy of Frank Gare):

I was so busy there was not a minute to spare. I used to get up early, get breakfast and get the children off to school and Frank off to work, then type for three or four hours. (Gare, n.d.)
Despite her busy life as a writer – she was also working on *Green Gold* – Gare found time to become an active member of the Business and Professional Women’s Association, and was made Programme Director. This entailed compiling a monthly journal from articles out of *Time* magazine (Frank Gare, 1997).

Christine Nesbit, who is the current Honorary Secretary of the Albury branch of The Business and Professional Women’s Inc., (as it is now known) was able to tell the writer of this study that the association was formed in 1930 in Geneva, Switzerland. It was not until 1947 that it was formed in Australia, with branches in Melbourne, Newcastle, Perth, Bendigo, Brisbane and Hobart. One can only speculate that the Geraldton branch was also formed in 1947, as a letter from the Geraldton Historical Society revealed little information, other than that the Association became defunct. A branch has been re-formed but its current members do not have any records of previous activities.

*The Fringe Dwellers* relates the story of two part-Aboriginal sisters, Noonah and Trilby, who return from mission life to rejoin their parents living on a reserve on the outskirts of a Western Australian country town. Their younger siblings, Stella and Bartie, remain at the mission, although later they also rejoin the family.

The Comeaways represent an Aboriginal family fighting to preserve their togetherness at a time in history when young children in the so-called stolen
generation were forcibly removed from their parents and sent to missions and institutions in conformity with the government’s then policy of ‘assimilation’.

Set in Geraldton, in the 1960s, *The Fringe Dwellers* looks at the lives of Aborigines in the town, and exposes the two classes represented in the novel (the upper middle-class whites exemplified by the class which produced Capitalism, and the lower working-class Aborigines).

Roger Gottlieb (1992) in his book *Marxism 1844-1990* has this to say on classes:

Marx believed that the mode of production naturally divides social life into antagonistic classes, groups determined by relations to the mode of production. In all but the most primitive societies, an exploited class performs the bulk of the productive labor; and a ruling class controls or owns the forces of production, decides how much of the economic surplus will be distributed, and/or controls the process of production. (Gottlieb, 1992, p.11)

Noonah and her father and Uncle Charlie represent the exploited class. Being members of the proletariat, all they own is their labour power. They perform the bulk of the productive labour for the ruling class who controls or owns the forces of production.

Gottlieb expands further on this theme:

As a class, the proletariat is initially composed of peasants who are forcibly driven off their land and thus economically compelled to join in capitalist production. Members of the proletariat own only their labor power and must work for wages to survive. (*op. cit.* p.22)

The Aboriginal people in Gare’s novel could be said to share a common bond with dispossessed peasants in other countries who were driven off their
land. As is now widely recognized, the Australian Indigenous people, as a result of the invasion of their country by the whites, were driven from their means of production – their hunting and fishing grounds. Subsequently, in order to survive, they are compelled to join in capitalist production, as happened in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Gare’s novel reflects the sadness of a universal problem – one culture or race setting itself against another. The invaded oppressed by the invaders, the stronger gaining supremacy over the weaker. The text is a product of a whole range of conditions – racism, sexism, capitalism, which were exemplified in Western Australia at the time of Gare’s writing.

Tom between two cultures. Noonah, the Comeaways’ eldest daughter, chooses to become a nursing aide and is accepted at the local hospital. She is tolerated if she lives up to the expectations of white society. On the other hand, Trilby rebels against her Aboriginality. Being black, working-class and female, defines her as being one of the most oppressed classes of all, and, as such, her battle with the bourgeoisie is threefold. While Noonah is more or less accepting of her Aboriginality and tries to make the best of the unhappy situation that people of mixed blood have to endure. Trilby rebels, seeks to escape from her people and go to the City, ostensibly to assimilate with the wider community and become part of white society. Mrs Comeaway eventually gets allocated her house, but never quite manages to gain acceptance from the middle-class neighbours. Despite Mrs Henwood’s assertions to the contrary, Mrs Comeaway finds that colour prejudice does exist. The irony is underlined by Mrs Henwood’s
automatic assumption that the removal of prejudice is a responsibility of the
Indigenous people:

‘And you’ll find very little colour prejudice,’ Mrs Henwood said gravely. ‘You, Mrs Comeaway, can help stamp it out where it does exist.’ (Gare, 1961, p.107)

Marxists think that religion is the ‘opiate of the people’ and it is
exemplified consciously or unconsciously in the above ironic passage in the text, especially where it reads earlier: ‘As a member of my church! I thought perhaps we could have a cup of tea together and get acquainted’ (op. cit. p.106).

One is presumably intended to get the impression that Mrs Henwood’s invitation to her Aboriginal neighbour, rather than being motivated by true neighbourly love, is engendered by a mere ‘obligation’ to the Church, of which Mrs Henwood is a member. Borrowing Marx’s axiom again, that religion is the opiate of the people, the Church has provided the ‘crutch’ which makes the Mrs Henwoods of this world feel good. As Trilby would have said, ‘She wasn’t giving something to me she was giving something to herself,’ a further illustration of Gare’s insight into the disadvantaged.

The theme of the novel revolves around the ubiquitous enigma since time began, of race, prejudice, and oppression. The author tries to capture the nuances of Aboriginal speech in a simple conversational style exemplified in this passage from The Fringe Dwellers:

‘Ya know what?’ Mr Comeaway ruminated. ‘We sposed ta keep this house only to ourselves. No lations, no peoples comin down for a holiday like. E says tell em we don’t have no beds for em.’
‘They aint partickler bout beds.’ Mrs Comeaway said dubiously. 
(Gare, 1961, pp.64-65)

Though Gare commenced writing *The Fringe Dwellers* in 1956, it was not until 1959 that she submitted the manuscript for publication to Heinemanns of London. The book was subsequently published by them in 1961.

From information obtained from Frank Gare, the novel was supported by Florence James who worked as an editor for Ursula Winant in London. James was instrumental (through frequent letters) in helping Gare with *Green Gold* as well as *The Fringe Dwellers*.

Despite extensive enquiries, Nene Gare’s contracts and edited drafts of this period appear to have been lost. The family do not have definite recollections and a letter to the publishers has so far been fruitless. However, according to Frank Gare, Nene Gare apparently did not have a public launch of the book. Certainly there is no newspaper record of such an event. *The Fellowship News*, however, as was their normal practice, would have reported and congratulated Nene Gare on her novel’s appearance. Members were always congratulated on their achievements at a Fellowship meeting, and the author usually provided a copy of the book for the Fellowship Library.

As has already been reported, at the beginning of this chapter, and as demonstrated by Marion Campbell writing for the *Fremantle Arts Review*, *The Fringe Dwellers* drew a good initial response from Britain where it was first published. Gare’s novel also received unequivocally good reviews in Australia.
A review by Randolph Stow, Western Australian novelist and poet, published in the *Australian Book Review* (1961) reads:

"An here’s ole Heartbreak Hill," Mrs Comeaway said luxuriously. "An we don’t walk up him tonight. Ya gotta walk up this damn hill ta know what it’s like. Gunna get arkattack fum that hill one a these days. There, up we go an round the top."

"An that’s," she might have added, "where Mr Gare lives. Partment man. Mrs Gare’s a real nice woman." Heartbreak Hill is Mount Misery, in Geraldton, and the one behind it is “Nigger Hill,” where the fringe dwellers squalidly congregate.

This is the first time I have seen my home town appear in fiction, and I won’t deny that the fact that in reading the Comeaways’ story I furnish it with a background of non-fictional houses and people adds considerably to my belief in it. But the book doesn’t need this sort of in-group appreciation. It is, by any reader’s standards, a very convincing, and well-written, Australian novel. (Stow, 1961, p.3)

When one reads Stow’s review one gets the impression that here is a writer who not only appreciates the literary merit of the novel, but also the fact that it takes him back to the environs of his home town. Stow apparently recognized Nene Gare’s concern for the Aboriginal people, and seems aware that they would think of her as ‘a real nice woman,’ a woman who in writing this book would be fighting their cause.

Gavin Casey, writing for *The Daily News* in 1961, with a bold caption “This WA First Novel is Excellent,” had this to say in his review:

To the growing Australian literature that is not of the tribal aborigines [sic] or the station “boys,” but about the unhappy people of mixed blood who nowadays present the greater problem, *The Fringe Dwellers* is a noteworthy addition. It is strongly and compassionately written, recognizing weaknesses but also strengths, and laughing often with the Comeaways and their neighbours, but never at them. (Casey, 1961, p.21)
In her 1980 book, *A House with Verandahs*, which is set in Adelaide in the early 1930s, Gare profiles her own upbringing and the battle to survive in those difficult Depression years. The following passage shows a loving son's concern to see household conditions improved in order to make life easier for his mother:

As he grew older and understood more, Ben wanted the kitchen made cooler for Mother during the summer, and he wanted Dad to put a tap in the wash-house so that Mother would not have to carry water by the bucket. He wanted the cracks at the side of the house permanently fixed.... The roof of Dad's shed had been used firstly as a convenient place to throw odd bits and pieces, and progressively as a dump for everything too valuable to be thrown away, yet not in good working order. There were two old prams, sulky wheels, broken chairs, large and small pieces of leather, split horse collars, handless baskets trailing strands of raffia, holey saucepans and long planks of wood. (Gare, 1980, pp.13, 14)

By her own admission, Gare was brought up in circumstances which bear some relationship to those of urban Aborigines and recalls in her book the lifestyle of her family when she was growing up all those years before. The above quotation from *A House with Verandahs* illustrates that point. That she noticed similarities in her lifestyle which she compared with that of the Aborigines testifies to her having some qualification to tell their story.

One might also compare Gare's accounts of her own upbringing with Patrick White's depiction of the lifestyle of some members from the lower socio-economic stratum of society in his story, "Down at the Dump" (1964):

Wal Whalley did the dumps.... But no one had an eye like Wal for the things a person needs: dead batteries and musical bedsteads, a carpet you wouldn't notice was stained, wire, and again wire, clocks only waiting to jump back into the race of time .... Best of all, a rusty boiler into which the twins would climb to play at cubby. (White, 1964, p.286)
This quotation was selected from White’s story as it closely parallels the quotation already given (page 145) from Gare’s work. Both exemplify the lengths to which people will go, especially those on low incomes in their efforts to salvage any commodity, no matter how old and disused it might be in case it might come in handy.

If one is to compare *The Fringe Dwellers* to Gare’s other novels, the first comment that should be made, is that, apart from *The Fringe Dwellers* and *Bend to the Wind*, the other novels are intentionally autobiographical.

To return to the narrative of Nene Gare’s life, despite the family’s poor background and limited finances, Gare’s mother was determined that her children should enjoy as good an education as any other child. As the daughter in *A House with Verandahs* says:

> Mother might fight against the cost from the safety of home, but she wanted all of us to digest as much education as she and Dad could afford. (Gare, 1980, p.29)

Admirably, considering the prevailing thought in those times, that education was wasted on girls, *this* family was not making any distinction between sons or daughters. All would be offered the same opportunities, as the following quotation attests:

> Our nearest schools were Norwood Primary and Norwood Central, but Mother wanted something better for us. Girls who drifted into jobs as generals and mothers’ helps went to the Norwood schools, likewise boys with a similar lack of ambition. We were all sent via the avenues and Payneham Road to genteel East Adelaide Primary, where even if we did turn out to be generals and builders’ labourers, we should have had our chances first along with the sons and daughters of councillors and clerks and shopwalkers. (*op. cit.* p.23)
Notwithstanding the attitude of Gare’s parents, and, because of the general expectations for women at the time that Gare was growing up, Australian girls would have rarely entered the professions, and would, as has been observed earlier in this chapter, mostly have become wives and mothers, even in the 1920s and 1930s. Women were mostly recognized only as subordinates to their husbands. A woman still became her husband’s ‘property’ upon marriage. As Derek Whitelock has said (previously quoted in its entirety in Chapter Four p.81), “Women are mentioned in the old histories merely as adjuncts to their husbands.”

*The Fringe Dwellers* is undoubtedly the book by which Gare is most remembered. The feature film based on the novel, as already stated, was a finalist at the Cannes Festival in 1986. Directed, as stated earlier, by Bruce Beresford, it was filmed that same year, in Queensland.

In her journal, made available by the National Library, Canberra, Gare documents her experiences and thoughts on the film’s set.

We went first to see the reserve which they had built specially…. It was, apart from many more houses than were on the Geraldton reserve, exactly the same as the first two houses we saw when we first arrived in Geraldton. I have come all the way from Perth to add my bit to what Bruce feels about the film. To my surprise and relief most of the actors know exactly how much this film might mean to them… And there are still, after nearly 200 years, people living in the manner you will see on film. (Gare, 1986)

The above quotation demonstrates Gare’s deep concern for the way Aboriginal people have been treated. The depth of Gare’s concern goes beyond
the mere writing of her novel, it expands to the actors who, she is relieved to find, appreciate what the film might mean to them. The quotation shows that Gare did not just write the novel and put it behind her, it reveals a woman whose pursuit of justice for all people would continue to be part of her life’s work.

Peter Coleman, writing for *The Observer* in 1966, is quoted by Donald Horne (1966) as claiming that

> despite official claims our policy towards the aborigines [sic] has in one fundamental respect never changed. Once the idea was to kill them off; then the more humane programme was to let them die out peacefully and meanwhile to smooth their dying pillow, now the policy is to assimilate them. (p.113)

The above passage exemplifies Gare’s comments that not much had changed in two hundred years.

Gare’s journal contains some very pertinent comments and observations she made while she was on the set when the film was being shot. For instance, she said that the girl who was taking the part of Trilby was a dancer and moved like one, and went on to say:

> She wanted to know why I had written the book, and I told her from the time I was in New Guinea and Carnarvon, then in Geraldton where I had come across this racist attitude and had felt indignant about it. The milk bar scene went on and on, I watched each take as if it had been the first. How could anyone get bored as I was told I should? (Gare, 1986)

Obviously Nene Gare’s indignation at the racist attitudes she had encountered on her travels was to have a big influence on her life and needs to be part of our understanding of her character. And why should she not be bored
when she was to see all the characters she had created come to life on the screen? This must have been a very proud and rewarding moment for the author, and we who read her report can understand how excited she must have felt.

In *The Fringe Dwellers*, Gare documents how Noonah and Trilby, despite their mother's advice that it would be better not to go in, defy their mother and march into the milk bar and order two shakes:

> The attendant looked them over, coolly casually. 'Shop at the top of the street serves you people,' he said. 'Go on! Beat it!' Whilst he spoke his eyes kept darting to his customers. (Gare, 1961, p.52)

The nervousness of the milk bar attendant testifies that he was aware that his every move would be monitored by his white customers, and reflects the attitudes that prevailed at the time.

Incidents such as this, which Gare depicts in her novel, were quite common during the Fifties and Sixties in Australia. Geoffrey Bolton, in his contribution, "Black and White after 1897," in Stannage's *A New History of Western Australia* reports the attitude of the white population towards Aboriginal people in those days:

> Aboriginal soldiers were refused service not only in hotel bars, where the law frowned on their presence, but also in tearooms and restaurants in country towns. It was only in 1952 that a waitress at Williams who refused service to a uniformed Aboriginal veteran of the Korean war found that such actions excited publicity in the Perth press. (Bolton, 1981, p.155)
Aborigines, such as the Comeaways in *The Fringe Dwellers*, are relegated to 'the reserve,' so that to them living in a proper house can only be a dream. As Mrs Comeaway marvels:

This was the Wild Oat Patch which the town council had bulldozed out from the undulating sandhills and sown quickly with the seed of the wild oat for protection from the wild southerly winds which swept in off the sea. Along the outskirts of the area, several houses were in the process of being built. 'We been here seven years,' Mrs Comeaway marveled, 'an all that time they been buildin these houses. Gawd knows where the peoples come from ta fill em up.' (Gare, 1961, p. 55)

From a Marxist point of view, we can see in the novel that the Indigenous Australians were largely being ignored. Houses were being built as Mrs Comeaway observes, but it is obvious that only white people were filling them. The Aborigines have neither the resources or political power to speak up for justice and equality. Yet as human beings they had every right to expect this.

Unfortunately, being at the bottom end of the socio-economic hierarchy, these people find themselves in an unenviable situation from which it is difficult to escape. Gottlieb explains how class position affects conditions in people’s lives:

The first aspect of the social primacy of the mode of production is thus simply that human beings are divided into groups which differ in terms of income, wealth, power, prestige, control over daily living conditions, and resources to accomplish ends. Our class position -- structured by the mode of production -- sets a multitude of conditions of our lives. Because of our class we have particular resources, choices, friends, expectations, and problems. Class divisions also create class interests. Members of the ruling class have an interest in protecting and enhancing their superior power and their unearned wealth. (Gottlieb, 1992, p. 12)

By 1979 the State Housing Commission announced that through its office, a total of 817 rental properties had been built in the town comprising:

- Rental houses: 660
- State pensioner apartments: 74
- Aboriginal grant rental homes: 83
- Total: 817

(Bain, 1996, p.302)

Therefore, it can be seen that the Indigenous people fared the worst when allocation of housing was considered. It should be remembered that when Gare was writing *The Fringe Dwellers*, almost twenty years earlier than when Bain compiled these statistics, the position would have been even worse.

Nene Gare, in both novels, *The Fringe Dwellers* and *A House with Verandahs*, never fails to enlighten the reader on how the situation was for the underprivileged at the time – in the early 1930s during the Depression in *A House with Verandahs*, and in the Sixties in *The Fringe Dwellers*.

Returning to this chapter’s aims, it can be said that a reading of *The Fringe Dwellers* from a feminist/Marxist point of view has been extended and Gare’s career as a writer has been further detailed. The accounts of certain readers of *The Fringe Dwellers* have been documented. *A House with Verandahs* has been explored, and the family structure examined in relation to the patriarchal system that prevailed at the time. As stated earlier in this chapter, Nene Gare did see her
own past experiences reflected in the class struggle of Aboriginal people. Hence, *The Fringe Dwellers* and *A House with Verandahs*, from a feminist/Marxist point of view, have much in common. Each novel evokes attitudes directed towards the marginalized and oppressed groups of Aborigines and women. In those respects, therefore, the two novels have been compared and found to be consistent.

The discussion in the next chapter will centre on the latter part of Nene Gare's life and her death in 1994, and will be largely taken up in concluding this study.
CHAPTER 6
CAREER END – LAST YEARS

This chapter will seek to focus on the latter part of Nene Gare’s life, from the beginning of a protracted illness, the subsequent debilitating tiredness, and eventually her inability to continue with her writing and painting up until her death in 1994.

According to Frank Gare, it was at Christmas in 1962 when Nene was admitted to the South Perth Community Hospital suffering from angina. It was to be the first of many such attacks. It was also in that year that she gave up smoking, prior to this having been a heavy smoker.

Being faced with her own mortality may perhaps have prompted Nene to write in one of her diaries (made available by Frank Gare):

Since 1962 I’ve realized having [sic] my life end soon. While all this resignation is taking place, tiredness at night and on waking. What heaven not to get up. Now I had perhaps years more to live. (Gare, circa 1962)

Indeed Nene Gare did have many more years to live. However on 6 August 1987 she was to have a heart by-pass operation which was performed by Mr P. Gibson, at Royal Perth Hospital. She was confined to hospital from 5 August to 13 August. Frank relates that, on her discharge, Nene refused to convalesce at Bethesda, insisting on going to Thomsons Lake where their holiday house was located. Apparently, she had instructed him to put the two dogs in the car, call for her at the hospital, and drive straight down to the lake house, despite ‘a
tremendous wound in her chest.' Nevertheless with rest – she remained in bed all of the time – she eventually became ‘fairly well’, and was able to resume her normal activities such as gardening and going for walks. The Gares’ Shelley house was right on the Canning River, therefore walking along the banks was to become a pleasurable pastime for the convalescing Nene. Although Frank said that from the by-pass onwards Nene mostly occupied herself with nothing more strenuous than keeping in contact with family and friends.

It was on 3 November 1993 that Nene Gare’s papers went to the National Library, Canberra. Comet Transport conveyed them in seven large cardboard cartons. They were subsequently converted to twenty-nine boxes in The National Library.

On 25 May 1992 Nene Gare was admitted to the Fremantle Hospital suffering with her first heart attack. She had had angina the previous day, and on 26 May experienced a stroke which left her unable to speak. She gradually improved over the first few days, although she could not communicate well or write properly. However, she was able to draw, and found this a useful tool in helping her to ‘converse’ with her visitors. For example, if she wanted to convey who she was referring to in her ‘conversations,’ she would simply draw that person’s house. According to Frank, Nene apparently thought this a great joke.

Bruce Pascoe, a publisher and friend, called in at the Shelley house to visit the Gares in late October 1993. At that time he wrote a poem entitled “Nene”, perhaps meant to be a valediction. The poem (made available from the Fellowship of Australian Writers) is a moving tribute to someone who obviously
was a very dear friend. Pascoe says a good deal about the woman who endeared herself to so many:

She’s dying you know,  
the spirit trembling to  
fade through the flesh.  
She watches each of our  
faces in turn as we  
talk of her, fascinated,  
amused by our concern  
observing us from afar,  
absent. The woman who  
bossed us and goaded with  
reckless humour has retired  
faint and innocent  
and left just the spirit  
a wraith over which it is  
too easy to talk. (Pascoe, 1993)

As we come to the latter part of Nene Gare’s life and record some of the incidents that occurred along the way, it seems not only fitting, but essential to include another tribute from someone who was near and dear to her, to the woman this study is about.

Dr Arran Gare, Nene’s son, who is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, wrote in the Preface to his book, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*:

The real source of inspiration for this work was the personality of my mother Nene Gare who died in May this year. This book is dedicated to her, and what she stood for. (Gare, 1994, p.vii)

Interviewed in November 1997, by correspondence, Dr Gare was asked how much he had enjoyed reading his mother’s books, and whether he thought the
reading of them might have influenced his life in any way as a philosopher. His response was:

I enjoyed immensely reading my mother’s books. And this led to reading much more. This strongly influenced my philosophy. I have been vehemently opposed to any form of reductionism which would diminish the significance of life, and have been a staunch defender of the importance of literature to life, particularly the importance of narrative and of empathy. This has put me at odds with the mainstream of philosophy. (Gare, 1997, p.1)

Asked whether he recalled any major incidents in his mother’s life which seemed to him to have had a significant effect on her writing career, Dr Gare’s reply was:

Her writing career was not affected by incidents but by her life – growing up in Adelaide as part of a big family in the Depression; moving to Perth as a young woman; going to New Guinea; going to pioneer a banana plantation in Carnarvon; living in Geraldton, and getting to know intimately the Aboriginal population. (Gare, 1997, p.2)

In an interview with Verna Duscher, one of Nene Gare’s friends, she relates of the day she called by on an impromptu visit to the Gares. Apparently Nene was a hoarder, and Frank, it seems, had decided to have a clean-up and get rid of a quantity of old letters, cards, magazines, and newspaper cuttings. Nene was not too happy about this, and saw the opportunity to entrust the material to Verna, for safekeeping.

According to Verna, it was about May in 1994 when she revisited the Gares at their Shelley home. As she recalls the occasion she relates:

She looked really lovely wearing a blue dress sitting on a blue deck chair, under the big lilac trees. It was then that she asked me for the
return of the material. I remember the occasion, as I was studying painting at Tafe, and had taken some of my work for Nene’s appraisal. (Doscher, 1997)

Did Nene perhaps have a premonition of her own death to ask for the papers back? We can recollect that she was to die on 29 May 1994.

According to Frank, from the time of her heart attack Nene was an invalid. From then on she took things very quietly, no longer writing or painting, as by this time she had become very shaky and increasingly tired. The last entry in her diary was dated 2 November 1993.

Sunday, 29 May 1994, is a day that the Gare family will surely never forget. Nene awoke feeling well and expressed a desire to go to Thomsons Lake. They left after breakfast. Frank recalls, she seemed so happy looking for wildflowers in the nearby bush, and picked roses and camellias from their own garden. They returned home about mid-day, Nene arranging her flowers in two vases.

Frank relates that he retired to the bedroom to change his clothes as Nene prepared to make herself a tomato sandwich. Disturbed by a loud cry from the kitchen, he rushed in to find his wife crouched over the bench muttering that she was unable to move. He helped her to the settee in the living room, endeavouring to make her comfortable with cushions. She was having trouble breathing, and experiencing some discomfort in the chest, so he immediately moved the oxygen cylinder from another room to where she was and attached the mask to her face. However, with one last gasp, Nene Gare’s life, it seemed, had ended. Finding no pulse, Frank immediately called their local general practitioner, Dr Malcolm
Hoare, from nearby Rossmoyne, who arrived promptly and confirmed that Nene Gare’s life had indeed reached its end.

Their family was contacted immediately. Lief, their daughter who lived in the same area, was there in a matter of minutes, and the other two children, a daughter and a son from the Eastern States flew over that same evening. A long time doctor friend of Nene’s in Sydney, Helen Wechsler, when informed of Nene’s death, sadly remarked, “It was the smoking that did it” (Frank Gare, 1999).

Frank recollects that it was his wish that the body of his wife remain in the house that night. He slept on the adjacent settee in the same room. Death may have separated them, but obviously a loving husband was finding it hard to sever the ties that had bound them for more than fifty years.

The next day (Monday) the funeral director arrived to lay out Nene in the casket, and the neighbours came and said their final farewells. On Tuesday, 31 May, a private cremation took place at the Fremantle Cemetery. Apparently this was in accordance with Nene’s wishes (See Appendix 12 for Death notices).

Lief’s husband, Robin, and their son Michael, took one end of the casket, while Frank and Arran took the other end and carried it out to the waiting hearse. This procedure was again followed when they reached the cemetery to which they drove in their own cars. Frank pointed out that there were no outsiders and no parson. Each member of the family placed a red rose on the coffin. Frank placed an extra rose, representing a tribute from Nene’s sister, Peg, from Adelaide, who obviously was unable to be present. Nene’s favourite piece of
music. "Moonlight Sonata," was played on a compact disc, during what must have been a very sad and emotional experience for them all.

Frank and his family received many letters of condolences both from individuals and organizations. Obviously Nene Gare was held in very high regard by a great number of people. A letter from the President and members of The WA Fellowship of Australian Writers, dated 1 June 1994, reads:

Dear Frank, the President and members of the WA Fellowship of Australian Writers send their sincere condolences to you and your family at this sad time. We honour Nene for her many personal attributes and her considerable writing achievements. She will be sadly missed by us all. On behalf of Walter Vivian, President.

A letter from Joan Williams, dated 11 June 1994, apologises for her delay in writing: "I was over at Rottnest when you lost dear Nene," and goes on to read in part:

During the last few months I’ve often thought of her and bitterly regret that I didn’t ring and hear her voice once again speaking of the things she enjoyed, her painting, grandchildren, the little dogs and the garden around her. She was so modest about her own achievements, but very proud of the achievements of her family.... Thank you, Frank, for looking after her so well, also your family. With loving sympathy in which Vic joins me. Joan Williams.

Nene Gare was indeed fond of her little dogs. Appendix 13 has a picture of her holding one of her pets.

Frank still retains Nene’s ashes. He confessed, “I can’t bear to part with them.” Where they finally rest has yet to be determined. He has said that, after his death, it would be left to his daughter, Lief, to inter the ashes together with
his own, either in a potted rose bush, a plain pink ‘Princess Margaret’ rose, Nene’s favourite, dug up from the Lake Thomson block, or under a Norfolk Island Pine that Nene planted at Rottnest, ‘up from the jetty.’

Though one may, as did Nene’s doctor friend, conclude that it was the years of smoking that contributed to her heart condition, Frank Gare related that as a young child, possibly around eight or nine years of age, Nene had suffered with rheumatic fever, which had left her with an enlarged heart. He went on to say that in spite of this, his wife led a very active life, participating in activities such as tennis, horse riding, yachting, and dancing. She also led a very busy life whilst in Papua New Guinea.

According to her husband, the milestones in Gare’s life include such highlights as the birth of her children, and the episode in Papua New Guinea.

Asked by Giulia Giuffrè in a 1985 interview, and published in *A Writing Life* (1990), did she have any problems juggling the roles of writer with those of wife and mother, Gare replied:

Fit my writing into my life? this is exactly what most women do: fit it into any old corner where it will not overlap and cause friction. My priorities were my husband and my children. As the responsibilities grew less and as I earned more money I moved from the pantry into a room of my own. There was a spell when the children were all at primary and high schools when, if I got through the washing, ironing, cleaning and cake cooking in one day, I could spend the next three mornings writing. On Fridays I shopped, and the week-ends belonged to the family. And this is not to say I did not enjoy my family. I think this period was the happiest of my life. (Giuffrè-Gare, 1990, pp.21-22)

As can be seen by this interview, Gare’s attitude to her duties, bearing in mind that her first priorities were her husband and children, was obviously
orderly, well-organized and disciplined. The interview also allows the reader a glimpse into this writer's everyday life, and how she managed to fit her writing into what would have been an already very busy daily schedule.

As asked by the same interviewer, "Does the thought of death hold any particular sting for you?" Gare's response was:

I think it won't, when the time comes, and I have got plenty of people up there that will help me through – or down there. When you get things wrong with you – I've got all sorts of things wrong with me – you just can't help being philosophical. You think, more or less. 'One of these days, when it gets too bad, I'm just going to lie down, and I won't have to get up any more, and I won't have all these hassles.' It will be a rest. I don't feel like that yet, but I expect to feel like that.

(op. cit. pp.23-24)

Nene Gare indeed had lots of things wrong with her as this chapter has already recorded. No doubt she could not have foreseen, at the time of this 1985 interview, the heart by-pass operation that awaited her two years into the future.

It may be significant to note that Nene Gare was born on 9 May 1919, was married on 13 May 1941, and died on 29 May 1994. Her first heart attack occurred on 25 May 1992. And at the risk of sounding superstitious, Nene's given names were Doris Violet May!

The Gares did enjoy a very happy married life of fifty three years, which was to end in 1994. The death notice read:

Gare (Nene): Peacefully at Home on May 29, leaving a family bereft. A private cremation was held on 31 May. A bright spirit at rest.
In the Conclusion to this thesis the achievement of this whole study of Nene Gare's life and work will be reviewed on the basis of its original objectives.
CONCLUSION

In concluding this thesis and looking back on the objectives, I believe I have fulfilled my undertaking to introduce Nene Gare’s life and work generally to other scholars and critics, and hence to correct, in part, the neglect of this writer.

This work has undertaken an introductory biographical study of Nene Gare and a critical reading of her work with special reference to The Fringe Dwellers.

Gare’s two major novels, The Fringe Dwellers (1961) and A House with Verandahs (1980), have been examined in more detail than the other works since they both have the potential to be explored in terms of feminist and Marxist theory. These two novels have also been compared in accordance with another objective of this thesis.

In remaining faithful to the purposes of my research, I have endeavoured to present as accurate as possible a record of the events of Nene Gare’s life consistent with available data. Robert Blake in The Troubled Face of Biography has said of Lytton Stachey’s biography, Eminent Victorians:

He was, for all his brilliance, glitter, irony and wit, an unsound biographer: he was concerned with effect rather than truth. (Blake in E. Homberger and J. Charmley [eds] 1986, p.77

I have attempted in this biography of Nene Gare to present what is an account of this writer’s life from currently available primary and some secondary sources. However, I also recognize that ‘the truth’ as we find it is mediated by circumstances. Nietzsche (cited in Selden and Widdowson, 1993), asserts that
people first decide what they want and then fit the facts to their aim. They also quote and comment:

‘Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them.’ All knowledge is an expression of the ‘Will to Power.’ This means that we cannot speak of any absolute truths or objective knowledge. People recognize a particular piece of philosophy or scientific theory as ‘true’ only if it fits the descriptions of truth laid down by the intellectual or political authorities of the day, by the members of the ruling elite, or by the prevailing ideologues of knowledge. (pp.158-159)

I accept that truth is to a greater or lesser degree mediated by language. My biography of Nene Gare’s life has remained as factually intact as I can make it, warts and all.

Leon Edel’s comment in New Directions in Biography is worth noting:

“How,” exclaimed Virginia Woolf when she sat down to write the life of her friend Roger Fry – “how can one make a life out of six cardboard boxes full of tailors’ bills, love letters and old picture postcards?” (Edel, In Friedson [ed] 1981, p.2)

The sources which have made this study possible, have come (as has already been acknowledged) from some of the twenty nine boxes of Nene Gare’s papers in The National Library, Canberra. (Virginia Woolf was not alone in her attempt to recreate a life out of the contents of cardboard boxes!) Other data has come from family, friends, and, of course Gare’s own works.

In concluding this biography of Nene Gare, I would assert that we learn, among many things, that this woman writer was unafraid to defend those whom she perceived to be the ‘underdogs’ in our society. At a time in history when most people complacently closed their eyes to the injustices suffered by
Australian Indigenous people, Gare highlighted through her writing their problems and their battles with white bureaucracy.

Gare could well be regarded in Australian literary history as an important facilitator of understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture. She should be recognized as a compassionate and caring person who made it a large part of her life’s work to try and increase people’s understanding of what it is like to be under-privileged and what it is like to be Aboriginal.

This whole study of Nene Gare’s life and work has been based on its original objectives. With this in mind, due consideration has been given to feminist and Marxist theories which have been shown to have the potential to be explored in The Fringe Dwellers and A House with Verandahs. No doubt other researchers and commentators will continue to find the life and work of Nene Gare an appropriate subject for study.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


OTHER SOURCES

Principle source Frank Gare, husband of the late Nene Gare, who responded to interview questions, provided photographs, general information, and a quantity of miscellaneous papers.

Mrs Peg Brearley, Nene Gare’s surviving sister: Supplied details of family history, responded to interview questions and made photographs available.
Dr Arran Gare, Nene Gare's son, responded to a questionnaire about his mother.

The National Library Canberra made available the following:

Folder 1, Series 1, Box 1, letters from Nene Gare to Frank Gare 1945-88.

Notebook: Series 7, Folder 9, Box 13.

Folder 16, Series 4, Box 7, Correspondence from William Heinemann Ltd to Nene Gare.

Notes Nene Gare: Folder 9, Series 7, Box 13.
LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1 (see Ch 1, p.19) Photograph of Nene Gare’s parents.

Appendix 2 (see Ch 1, p.20) Photograph of Nene Gare’s family home.

Appendix 3 (see Ch 1, p.26) Photograph of Nene Gare (second from front) with some of her siblings.

Appendix 4 (see Ch 2, p.47) Photograph of Nene sitting on yacht owned by the Gares.

Appendix 5 (see Ch 2, pp.48 & 52) Photograph of Nene Gare as a young woman.

Appendix 6 (see Ch 2, p.52) Photograph of “Bulwer Park”.

Appendix 7 (see Ch 2, p.53) Facsimile of short story “In Possession” by Nene Gare, published in The Western Mail.

Appendix 8 (see Ch 3, p.66) Photocopy of map showing Salamauna – Papua New Guinea.

Appendix 9 (see Ch 4, p.117) Photocopy of Application Form re membership as F.A.W. Fellow (courtesy Battye Library).

Appendix 10 (see Ch 4, p.118) Photograph of 339 Riverton Drive, Shelley Cove.

Appendix 11 (see Ch 5, p.138) Photograph of 63 Brede Street, Geraldton.

Appendix 12 (see Ch 6, p.158) Photocopy of Death Notices (published in The West Australian).

Appendix 13 (see Ch 6, p.159) Photograph of Nene Gare holding her little dog.

Appendix 14 (see Ch 1, p.28) Photocopies of self portrait/sketches.

Appendix 15 (See Ch 5, p.136) Photocopy of the end of A House with Verandahs.

Appendix 16 Copies of Book Covers of The Fringe Dwellers, A House with Verandahs, Green Gold, Bend to the Wind and An Island Away.

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Appendix

"I have an accident the night I barged off," Huck said matter-of-factly. "I ran straight into a motor here in Fowlersburg."
He stood dead still. His gaze went straight to Mother. The two exchanged one of those long looks full of secrets. Then Dad said, "You don't really want to leave here, Molly old girl, do you?"

And just as if all that had gone before had never been, Mother smiled sweetly and lovingly and said, "No dear. I suppose not."

Fay had to go home. She wanted to stay and fight, but there was Andrew and the baby and she couldn't lose and cherish them whilst separated by several miles.

"What about the cottage?" I asked one day. Off and on I was still worrying about our crack.

What cottage? Mother as usual was cooking, sitting toward her end of a swivel, again as usual.

"The Norwood one."

"You mean your father's old home?"

"Yes, why don't you take that if you think Dad would be too lonely on Second Avenue?"

"Mother looked stung. "What about Fay? She's so near him on the Second Avenue house."

"What about Dad and his place?"

"Why, Mother said. "Some of them live in Norwood."

She left her cutting and went over to Dad's shed, me behind her. As often happened with me I seemed to have struck gold without having done any really through thinking.

"Adam, Mother called excitedly, why don't we take the cottage at Norwood?"

"What cottage at Norwood?"

"Charles Street, Mother said inquiringly. "That's your home. Dad stopped wiping his hands and as his and Mother's gaze met I felt proud but I did not say so."

"Yes, Mother said, "It's a thought."

And that's how my father happened to go home and my mother happened to go her house with the verandas.

Appendix 12

Appendix 13

Appendix 14

Appendix 15