I have, like all Australians, a vivid picture of the migrant woman. I meet one regularly after work. Our encounters are fleeting, in the corridors of the office or around the lifts, where she appears each night with a mop and bucket, and we exchange a nod or a smile. Somehow it would never occur to me to ask her how things are going in Yugoslavia or Greece, or what her feelings are about Australia, or what her problems might be. I fear that she would not understand my questions, and that if she did, I would not understand her answers. As the sociologists would say, we have 'a conflict of cultures'.

The first migrant woman I knew was even more characteristic - characteristic, that is, of the popular prejudices of the day. She worked in the greengrocer's. She was fat and her complexion was olive (though 'swarthy' may have been the term most commonly used). She wore a black dress and a crucifix and shuffled about in downtrodden slippers. She was an Italian, though everyone called her a 'Balt'.

It was a fact in those days that all migrants were Balts and that all Balts were greengrocers, except for a small minority who ran fish shops or milk bars, and an even smaller minority who ran brothels. Greengrocers' shops remained open on Sunday afternoons - they were almost the only shops that did - because Balts were prepared to work harder than Australians, and went to their rather mysterious churches at strange hours of the morning - thus demonstrating an equal lack of respect for Australian trade unions and the Godly British Sunday.

The woman in black spoke little English, and her husband was rarely seen; he drove the truck or carried the potatoes. But her children were everywhere. Small faces peeped through the beaded curtain of the shop and a baby was always crying at the back. Like the woman in black, the shop was regarded as slovenly.
and unclean. Faded posters for McHiVen's ice-cream, bottles of Lime Koolo and Orange D-Lite, bearing their visible film of dust, stood on unreachable shelves festooned with the paper chains of Christmases past and present. Rich and exotic kitchen smells permeated from the rooms behind; what went on behind the beaded curtain we children could only guess. But I liked the shop for two reasons. There was an enamel basin of rejected fruit, shrivelled apples, blackened bananas and tiny mandarins, any piece of which could be had for a halfpenny. And if I were lucky I would be served by the woman's eldest daughter, a 'startlingly dark, wide-eyed and slender waif called Caterina, with whom I was in love.

Much that was true of the migrant woman then remains true today. Or to put it more accurately, much that these memories suggest is more true than we like to believe. The migrant woman, despite material progress and much greater social acceptance, is still in many ways an underprivileged person. By this I mean that in terms of social well being and personal fulfilment (if not in terms of material reward), she tends to have a worse time of things than either the Australian-born woman or the migrant man. And many particulars are still true: her work is largely menial, her language barriers are high, her sense of apartness and cultural isolation is strong. There is a much greater chance, compared with the Australian woman, that she is homesick, unhappy, lonely or deprived. It is more likely that she has a big family, that she is forced to work to make ends meet, and that some day she will have a breakdown.

The woman in black would now be a very old lady. As for my Caterina, I imagine she is married (and if the figures of intermarriage are to be believed, it is something like ten to one that she has married an Italian). Perhaps she has a second generation family of her own to peep through the curtains of the fruit shop, or await her return from the factory where she works.

Of course it would be wrong to suggest that all, or even most, migrant women are lonely and deprived. Many thousands of them have succeeded in their new land, or even reached eminence in their fields. But the problems of the migrant woman remain: they occur because she is a migrant, and they are very largely private problems which may elude the statistician or the tables of the social scientist. And because they are not widely known or easily communicated, because the barriers of language and pride intervene, too little is done to relieve them.

If we take babies, for example, and all the high human drama of having and keeping them, we might assume that immigrant mothers, like most Australian mothers, would be pleased to have their babies in hospital. But this is often very far from being true. Even in Britain it is still the rule for healthy mothers to have their second and third babies at home, and most of them prefer it that way. Governments have persuaded them that the familiar surroundings of home, with an old-fashioned midwife pedalling to the door on her bicycle, are better than the clinical efficiency of a modern hospital. Dr. Alan Stoller, in the book he edited called New Faces: Immigration and Family Life in Australia (Cheshire, 1966), points out that some immigrant women are terrified of having babies in strange hospital.

It is not only the hospital, but the absence of family support which they have been used to at home, that frightens them. 'Proxy brides especially', says Stoller, 'can have difficulty in coping with their first children, as they often have no relatives to whom they can turn; they may require special help, as they may not be aware of pre-natal services'.

Problems like these may be overcome in time with better guidance and more information, but cultural and ethnic traditions run deep. What of the authoritarian southern European husband who forbids his wife to go out alone for pre-natal care or other guidance? What of the effect on a woman's married life and social adjustment of such customs as the chaperone and the selected mate?
Intermarriage - the marriage of one national or racial group with another - is the last and most significant step in the process of assimilation. And twenty years or more after Australia's migration scheme began in earnest, it is still significantly rare in Australia. Southern Europeans, especially, have proved reluctant to marry outside their community. Some people argue that there is nothing new or surprising about this. There are groups of British Jews, for example, who have been more than one hundred years in Australia and despite their complete absorption into Australian ways of dress, speech and custom, are still (for religious reasons) reluctant to marry into the British-Australian population. Greeks have equally strong religious reasons for marrying Greeks; also the Italians, with their ties of family loyalty and cultural tradition. But these attitudes in the migrant woman are often a result of hardship and insecurity.

The migrant woman, moreover, is more reluctant than the migrant man to intermarry. And her reluctance does not diminish quickly with time, as it does with men. It has been shown, for example, that some 5 per cent of first generation Italian men marry British-Australian girls; in the second generation, the figure is as high as 40 per cent. But among Greek and Italian girls of the second generation, the rates of intermarriage are still as low as 6 per cent and 3 per cent. The picture emerges of a shy, loyal and duteful girl, strongly influenced by the wishes of her parents and the customs of her homeland, and too poor to defy them.

Let us consider one woman's story. Anna is twenty-eight. She and her husband Miguel came to Australia from Spain seven years ago. If you asked Anna, she would not say her life in Australia was unhappy: she and Miguel are together and working for something. But she is often depressed, and for good reason: they are poor, they are often lonely, and they are bewildered still by many aspects of Australian life. For Anna, an incident like leaving her purse on the bus is a major calamity: she cannot afford to lose the few dollars it contains and she does not know how to begin to go about getting it back. She and Miguel are typical of a certain class of immigrants who work not only to support themselves but to send money to parents or relatives back home.

Anna and Miguel have a flat in Darlinghurst, Sydney, for which they pay $14. Miguel works in a factory for $41 a week. Anna does other people's housework for $1 an hour, four days a week. 'Miguel and I both work, and we save, and I send money home this Christmas to Spain - $20 to my mother, who is old, $40 to my sister, who has four children. Many Spanish people we know here have two, three, four children. The men work in the factory like Miguel. It is not enough, $41. The mother must work, and she works hard and loses humour and cannot be happy with the children. I see this many times. Miguel and I want a baby. We love a baby, but we will not have a baby unless we have good conditions. Sometimes on Saturday nights Miguel and I like to go to the pictures, but not every week, we cannot afford this every week'.

'I do not understand Australian hospitals. My friend Maria is very unhappy with her baby - three months now and the baby won't eat. She vomit, vomit, back to hospital for analysis, blood, wee.ree. Three doctors, every week, and the baby won't eat and Maria rings me up sometimes and just cry and cry on the phone. She doesn't speak English very good; she has no family in Australia, only her husband's, and her husband very impatient, say it must be her fault, she must be bad mother. I do not understand Australian hospitals. In Spain a woman has a baby, you put, you know, cloth tight around her stomach. Not here. This worry Maria, and the nurses, so rough, so many of them all handling the baby, pick up three, four at once, hold them anyhow. My mother she has eleven babies, at home, no doctor, just woman who helps with babies. My mother she goes behind the bed and hold on to the bed, and she has eleven like that, with the women to help tie the - you know. I think when I have my baby I have him in our flat. No hospital. Doctor, yes. But no hospital. But not yet. Not until we have good conditions'.
Every Australian city has areas where migrants tend to gather. Fitzroy and Carlton in Melbourne, Leichhardt and Surry Hills in Sydney. In inner city areas like these whole groups of southern European families from the same district will tend to settle near one another, providing a network of family life and festivals, transplanted customs and friendships which can cushion the culture shock for new arrivals and provide something of the gossipy village atmosphere most missed by older migrant women. But once migrant families have saved enough to build their own homes or buy new ones, many move out to the developing suburbs like Campbelltown or Green Valley, on Sydney's fringe. In these environments, although there are many migrants, they rarely live together in pockets or groups.

Even an Australian housewife may find such suburbs lonely or inhospitable places; the migrant woman finds them infinitely more so. She is remote from her fellow immigrants; she is equally remote, because of language, from her neighbours; and if she knows no English at all this sort of isolation can become intolerable. It is saddening to discover how little an Australian family in such a suburb will know of a migrant family next door or across the street. An Australian woman may know that her neighbour is a migrant, but it will be surprising if she knows where she comes from (unless she is a Greek or an Italian), or anything else about her.

A migrant woman in these surroundings, almost certainly without a car and quite likely without a telephone, will often seek work, not for economic reasons alone, but for physical, or even silent companionship. Often she will find it hard to get a job near home. If her husband works in heavy industry she may be lucky to find any light industry nearby where she can work too. The chances are that she will have to leave her family with a neighbour or at a creche and look for work further afield. Mrs. R. is twenty-seven. Her husband works in a factory; he is a skilled machinist and with overtime they are not too badly off. His income is about $70 a week. But they have no children, and Mrs. R. could not bear her isolation. She washes and irons in a motel for a few hours in the mornings. The income from her work is about $25 a week. 'It is enough', said Mrs. R., 'to be with other people'.

It is not easy for Australians, gregarious and informal as we are, to understand what this kind of loneliness is like. We see so little of foreign countries (and, when we do, some English is usually spoken there), that it is hard for us to grasp what a 'language barrier' means. It is bad enough as a tourist, trying to read a menu in German or Greek, but imagine the plight of a migrant in a strange country whose livelihood may depend on a knowledge of English. And while a young male immigrant may steadily improve his English through contact with workmates and society, a woman at home has a much more difficult time. As we grow older we are both less able and less inclined to learn a new language quickly: psychologists have put the crucial age at around thirty-five.

Most of the studies made into the reasons migrants return to their homelands have found much greater emphasis on personal and social causes like language than on purely economic ones. Indeed, Dr. R.T. Appleyard's studies suggest that migrant women tend to feel better off in Australia than they did at home. Many British women who were without a washing machine, a refrigerator or a car in Britain, bought one for the first time in Australia. Most British migrants who go home do so for family or personal reasons. High among them is homesickness, to which women are more prone than men.

In a paper prepared for a committee of the Immigration Advisory Council on social patterns of immigration, Mrs. W.H. Cullen dealt with the experiences of migrants in hostels, who proposed going back to their homelands. Among British people she found that immaturity and consequent homesickness among wives persuaded many people to go back. Among Europeans, the main difficulties were language, recognition of professional qualifications and the problem of making friends with intellectual equals.
Who can tell what a statistician's phrase like 'personal factors' or 'emotional difficulties' conceals? It may mean that a migrant woman is regularly snubbed by her neighbours; that the family in the flat next door won't let their children play with the Germans; that a Greek Orthodox family in an outer city suburb has to travel too far afield to go to church; that an Italian mother, who minds all her sisters' children while the family works, has fallen ill; that a Yugoslav couple, who coped happily in the friendlier surroundings of a country town, have been moved to an unfamiliar suburb; that a local creche is full, and cannot take a Polish mother's children while she goes to work every day.

The Polish woman is indeed the most likely of all migrant women to seek a job of her own. Dr. C.A. Price has given 1961 figures to show that 18 per cent of Polish women in Australia between fifteen and sixty-four are working. Greeks, Germans, Maltese, British and Italians are close behind. But only 32 per cent of Australian women between these ages were then in the workforce. IT IS undoubtedly true that both married and single migrant women are under greater pressure than Australian women, economically and emotionally, to find a job.

All these pressures, of hardship, dislocation and loneliness, combine in the migrant woman to produce a high incidence of mental breakdown. Oddly enough, this does not usually occur when she arrives in Australia, but six or seven years later, when her family has grown up, or has gone to school, or has married, and she is left alone. She may have seen her family ties with her children loosening for some time, as they began to forsake old customs of respect for parental authority and home-centred activities for the freedoms they see Australian-born teenagers enjoying; and there may well have been bitter family rows about this.

The victim is usually a woman in middle age. She has had few opportunities to mix with other people. If she knows little English, and is therefore lonelier than ever, her chances of breakdown are higher, and those of a quick recovery are less. Experiences in wartime or in refugee camps are important, too, particularly among women from eastern Europe whose sufferings were harsher than most. J. Krupinski and Alan Stoller report that, in a recent Victorian survey, 14 per cent of women migrant mental patients showed no trace of assimilation and an entire lack of knowledge of English, though they had been in Australia for at least seven years. Among southern European women this proportion reached almost 24 per cent. 'This means in effect', they wrote, 'that almost one quarter of southern European female patients, residing in this country for more than seven years, still did not speak any English'.

It would be a pity - it would also be misleading - to end on too gloomy a note. It cannot be stressed too often that most migrant women appear to live happily in Australia, and if they find it hard to settle down happily at first, the fault is as much that of native Australians as it is theirs. If I have written mainly of those who are in need of more sympathy, more tolerance and more help, I have not forgotten that many migrant women have achieved distinction in business and professional life. But they are still exceptional, and more important, they are still thought of as exceptional; and it is on the basis of such conventions that we determine our priorities for community aid and social reform.

Despite the excellent work of such bodies as the Good Neighbour Council, a great deal needs to be done for migrant women: the migrant hostels, often her first experience of Australian life, need to be improved; greater efforts must be made to teach her English (and Australians might respond by learning something of the main languages of the new settlers); she needs more help with housing, with employment, with health, welfare, education and family counselling.
I began by describing the 'woman in black'. The popular impression of the migrant woman today is a different one. She wears a housefrock, she may be blonde or brunette, she is middle-aged and does all the shopping at the supermarket, not because it is cheaper (it is not), but because she never has to ask for things in English. She prefers the radio to television because it offers more music. She reads a foreign paper. She sends her mother some money at Christmas. Her monthly cheque for child endowment pays an instalment on the furniture. She works at night as a cleaner, and catches the first train home in the morning. And, all too often, she dreams of the past.