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## Impressions and Thoughts on the Options of South African Women

### Abstract

Eighteen months after President De Klerk gave his historic speech of 2 February 1990, South Africans are beginning to show signs of believing that things are actually destined for change, and that change will be irreversible. This has brought on a frenzy of hope and doubt, of feverish excitement (as of people before a gathering storm), of joyous instability and aggressive possessiveness, as though they are afraid to lose what they've known all through the years of oppression. Visiting South Africa after many years, one soon finds oneself joining in the medley, and it is hard to pause and observe the fast changing, never-to-be-repeated history in formation. But it is precisely at this momentous time that we must pause and observe and record, for this time of transition, when we bury the past, is also the beginning of life as it shall be. This is a time of sorting out, when South Africans must resolve what it is they must discard or carry into the future.

LAURETTA NGCOBO

## Impressions and Thoughts on the Options of South African Women

Eighteen months after President De Klerk gave his historic speech of 2 February 1990, South Africans are beginning to show signs of believing that things are actually destined for change, and that change will be irreversible. This has brought on a frenzy of hope and doubt, of feverish excitement (as of people before a gathering storm), of joyous instability and aggressive possessiveness, as though they are afraid to lose what they've known all through the years of oppression. Visiting South Africa after many years, one soon finds oneself joining in the medley, and it is hard to pause and observe the fast changing, never-to-be-repeated history in formation. But it is precisely at this momentous time that we must pause and observe and record, for this time of transition, when we bury the past, is also the beginning of life as it shall be. This is a time of sorting out, when South Africans must resolve what it is they must discard or carry into the future.

The women of South Africa are busily engaged in this sorting out process. For many, over a long period of time, there has been a desire to identify themselves as South African women, to work together as such, and not as black women and white women separately, as the state for so long insisted that they must. And now that their right to the fulfilment of this aim is here, there is both euphoria and doubt. Many are anxious that the women's movement should reach its full potential as an instrument that must influence social change. On the surface, when one looks at the broad spectrum of political organisations this seems very obvious. But, under the surface, in other areas of social endeavour, it is intriguing to observe the nature of the alliances, the power relations at work in the efforts to forge new links between these oppressed groups. The effects of Apartheid socialisation play a major role in the present situation. The inability to confront issues that occur as a direct consequence of Apartheid experience and culture is compounded by class differences and the desire to paper over these legacies of history. In situations where black and white women seem to be working together in the fight against the oppression of women, the question of unequal power relations is not addressed, as it is in other situations where white women are clearly oppressing blacks.

What exists is an implied reconciliation, where there ought to be a deeper, more honest appraisal, of these historical relationships. This is particularly obvious among the educated professionals, where the emerging blacks are trying to flex their muscles. It will be observed that white women in the literary field are writing about and appraising black women's writing in the total absence of the black women themselves in the forum and debate. This was very obvious at the Oxford literature conference in March 1990, and even more so at the EACLALS conference in Lecce, Italy, in April of the same year. These conferences outside South Africa reflect the situation as it obtains inside South Africa herself. Very little serious critical attention has been directed towards the creative energy and expertise of the black female cultural producer. This applies to all facets of culture; literature, theatre and film making. This is so despite the paucity of practitioners of these art forms. One would have thought there would be a scramble to 'find' suitable candidates. Except for a few endeavours like the Theatre Workshop in Johannesburg, the African woman is often alone in prising open the artistic doors. And when, or if she does, she faces the mammoth task of shifting traditional attitudes that are still firmly embedded in our patriarchal societies. Talking of theatre, Gcina Mhlophe puts it most succinctly:

Briefly, the struggles faced by black women in theatre are, trying to find one's own voice; being able to speak up when in disagreement with the director or other actors in the cast; trying to make the best of scantily written female roles (people who do not know what it is to be an African woman writing her roles); it means struggling to find transport to the criminal infested locations after every show late at night. But above all, it means earning some kind of respect among one's male counterparts, fighting sexual harassment and being looked down upon as a cheap woman by one's own community, for that is what it still implies. Here, there still exists a tradition of all male casts and when there is a woman's role it has been played by a man dressed like a woman.

Clearly, if South African women are going to emerge stronger, equal and able to speak in their own voice, there should be a greater readiness on the part of others to create room for them and a willingness to step aside from positions of leadership which have been guaranteed by privileges in the past.

While these cross-colour, cross-gender realignments and debates are going on, and national selfhood is approaching, African women are self-consciously appraising their own position among other African women. As we try to find our true identity in the new emerging society and we construct theories by and for ourselves, we are struck by the deep diversities among the so called 'African women'. Who are 'we'? We as black women, though bound by ties of history, race, and gender, are yet so profoundly divided by education, income, family background (which is class) that our experiences, relationships, and socio-economic options are ser-

iously threatening our unity. The ending of the common political struggle is eating away the cross-class solidarity that has existed for many years, and focusing on new antagonisms.

The master-servant relationship is a concept that has traditionally marked black-white relationships. Domestic service is the most notable form of employment which places black women and men securely in the position of 'servant'. If, and when, one black woman has worked for another, they have both tried to couch the relationship in words and deeds of sisterliness. For instance the black servant in a black house will often eat at the same table and be referred to as 'sister'. However, the present situation is threatening this new unity across class lines. There is a shift in the power base, from white madams to black madams. The dynamics attendant upon such a shift are both interesting and surprising. The black madams often fail to appreciate the business nature of the arrangement, and under the social pressures that still attend much of their own lives, will expect a 'sisterly' extension of 'understanding' on the part of the 'maid'. But often this does not mean better pay. It will be understood, of course, that black women, even educated ones, are still badly paid compared to their white counterparts, and that many of them will take on a 'maid' out of need rather than as a badge of status or affluence. This means that it is possible that overall they may be paying less than they should. And when they do pay well, it is often taken for granted that they should. On the other hand, the 'maid' resents any taking of liberties, much more than she would, if the 'madam' were white. She may be choosy about the kind of chores she is prepared to undertake. She may be more ready to show her unwillingness to extend the usual courtesies. This may also be observed where servants in hotels have to serve a black customer. The concept of courteous service has, over the years, in the mind of the servants become closely identified with white skin. Any black who expects otherwise runs a risk of being accused of pretensions.

So, as black women, we find that race and gender unite us, but class divides us. This of course, has implications for the black women's political voice. What right have the 'madams' to speak for the 'maids' as a class. It is almost traditional within feminism to grandly amalgamate the histories and experiences of different groups of women into one all encompassing middle-class paradigm. This is a posture that the South African black middle-class had better think about. Do the middle classes have the right to appropriate the experiences, the voices and the realities of traditional and working class women in South Africa? A great deal of the violence that is taking place in South Africa today is perpetrated against working class women. By this I am not saying that any one person, or group of persons, deliberately target working class women. But the social and psychological dynamics of the location environment leave working class women powerless and exposed. The traditional concept of one's home being a fortress or castle is totally absent in a typical location. There is a

vulnerability that is hard to conceptualise if one has never known a house that has no perimeter, where there are no boundaries marking an entrance to one's domain. People walk in and desecrate the home and out again without any psychological prohibition; more so, if it is the home of a powerless woman who cannot defend her rights physically. This contrasts sharply with the few homes of the middle-classes which are dotted about in the locations, where the houses have been transformed into beautiful homes with ornate fences and securely locked gates at night.

In the mindless attacks on people in crowded places like the trains, women are not spared. Even here, the women who die in such places will almost inevitably be poor working class women, because most middle-class women have, with the escalation of these attacks, resorted to their cars. There are even more disturbing trends that point to a concerted attack on old, poor women. There are many cases, too numerous to be dismissed as fortuitous, where young militants armed with their powerful guns, and bored, with little to do, will accuse some old woman of witchcraft, and as a consequence, she may be waylaid or summoned to the 'people's court' for a sentence to death. Often they are burnt to death in their sleep. There are frequent reports in the press, but there is as yet no outcry from any quarter. The present writer had the misfortune to have two old women neighbours who were butchered with AK 47's in the middle of the night, with three of their grandchildren. So far this accusation of witchcraft has been reserved for poor old women, who look the part of witches. To the writer's knowledge, there are no pretty, young or rich, educated women who have suffered in this way. Neither have any men. The exception is a couple who have had to seek the protection of the police and had the luck to get press publicity. It remains to be seen if this focus on their case will save them or not<sup>1</sup>. This information is the result of random experiences gathered during a five-month visit to one particular part of South Africa. So, it would seem reasonable to assume that the practise is quite prevalent. So far, there have been no remarkable material changes for anyone in South Africa, despite the euphoria. But there are notable changes of attitude, hope, fears and disbelief.

African women have always been very active economically, but their wages have been so low compared to other groups that it has left them the poorest group in the society. There are however, sporadic efforts to train women to run their own small business undertakings. To call their efforts 'business' may be stretching the point, for up until now women have had very few possibilities even to borrow from the banks. It must not be forgotten that the legal status of women, especially married women, remains tenuous, more that of minors than of adults, whose words therefore do not count in a court of law. Oppression lives long in the mind, long after the chains have fallen off. It remains to be seen how long it will take before the bank managers will talk to women customers as easily as they will accept black male customers. To forestall this,

women are seeking political guarantees that will open doors of development banks to women. It is all in the future. South African women remain very strong, and will go down in history as having done much to carry the nation during the trying times of oppression.

It would be erroneous at this stage to comment on what is happening on the political front, as nothing concrete has yet happened. The only obvious pointer to the times ahead has been the number of women who have been elected into the executive of the ANC on the one hand and the central committee of The Inkatha Freedom Party on the other, the two largest black political organizations. It is noteworthy that the numbers of women in both structures are significantly smaller than those of their male counterparts, although proportionately, the IFP has a higher percentage. The ANC has 9 women out of an executive of 90 and the IFP central committee has 32 women out of a total number of 116 members, a little over a quarter. These figures are a disappointing pointer to the future. But we shall wait and see.

In the state of South Africa right now nothing is, but everything is becoming. Black women should soon grow confident and find room enough to speak for themselves, so that others will no longer find it possible or necessary to speak on their behalf. They should no longer ask to be given what is theirs as a right. We all hope that the youth of South Africa, who triumphed in the years of struggle will find new roles and new forms of service to their community, and in doing so, discard their fears and their search for scapegoats. Above everything, the youth should love their people more. The possibilities for all this lie in the hands of all South African politicians, men and women of all races. This is the time for all male politicians to open the gender door a lot wider that it is today (judging from the above figures), for we need women politicians. They have a great role to play in stabilising society.

#### NOTE

1. The case under discussion was reported in the *City Press*, Johannesburg, 14 July 1991. It concerns an elderly man who has been assaulted several times, accused of witchcraft. He and his wife had been forced to leave their home and send their children away to stay with relatives; when the article appeared they were camping out in the police compound, awaiting rehousing and scared to leave the compound. The international magazine *Newsweek* also took up this problem in an article 'An Infestation of Witches', 30 September 1991.