

**Responses by black women to race and gender  
dynamics under South African Apartheid with special  
reference to the Black Consciousness Movement**

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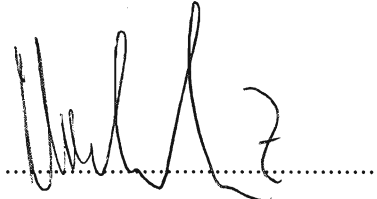
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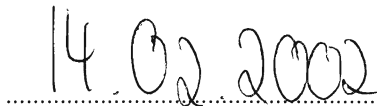
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**March 2002**

## DECLARATION

I the undersigned hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

  
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## Opsomming

Die onderdrukking van swart vroue tydens apartheid was op vier interaktiewe kragte gebaseer: ras, klas, geslag en nasionaliteit. Alhoewel dit aan hulle unieke status in die beleidsrigtings van beide feministiese en anti-apartheidsgroepe verleen het, is hulle besondere posisie nooit as sodanig aangespreek nie. Die nasionale vryheidsbeweging het vroue se rol in die stryd in patriargale terme gedefinieer en het nie voor die 1980's geslag as 'n legitieme politieke kwessie erken nie. Daar was geen amptelike beperkings wat vroue se deelname aan nasionale politiek belemmer het nie. Dit was eintlik meer die onvermoë van partye om vroue se sosiale agterstand, wat gespruit het uit hul ondergeskikte regstatus, geografiese isolasie en sosiale marginalisasie, aan te spreek wat vroue verhinder het om op dieselfde vlak as mans deel te neem. Die fokus op vroue as “significant others”, as ondersteunende moeders en eggenotes, het grootliks swart vroue se selfpersepsie en politieke bewussyn bepaal.

Die opkoms van anti-apartheidsbewegings het gepaardgegaan met die stigting van nuwe vroueorganisasies. Oënskynlik was daar nie sprake van 'n geslagstryd nie aangesien vroueprotes verstrengel was met en nie te onderskei was van ander sosio-politieke kwessies nie. Vroue se verbintenis om hulself uitsluitlik tot die konteks van nasionale bevryding te bepaal is onderstreep met die Swart Bewussynsbeweging wat 'n beroep gedoen het op swartes om hulle psigologiese en fisiese onderdrukking in oënskou te neem en om die krag van selfdefinisie te realiseer. Alhoewel vroue 'n groter assertiewe houding ingeneem het met betrekking tot hulle onderwerping as swartes het hulle die manlike aard van die taal en ideologiese siening van swart bewustheidsbewegings heeltemal geïgnoreer. Swart bewussynskrywers was geneig om die gemeenskapslewe en geslagsverhoudinge te romantiseer en om die werklike dinamika van geslagsverhoudinge tussen swartes te ignoreer. Sodoende het hulle tradisionele hiërargiese strukture versterk. As “honorary men” het vroue wat deel was van die hoogste geleedere van die swart bewussynsbewegings hulself as bevry beskou. Feministiese bewegings wat toe in die Westerse wêreld bedrywig was, is deur sowel mans as vroue verwerp. Die toetrede van vroue tot die openbare sfeer van industriële produksie en nasionale politiek het nie

noodwendig gelei tot hulle emansipasie nie. Hierdie toetrede is ook nie gemotiveer deur die begeerte om bevry te word van hulle huishoudelike gebondenheid en tradisionele geslagsverhoudinge nie. Dit was 'n *reaksie* op die wyse waarop apartheid hulle tradisionele bestendigheid verbrokkel het.

Vroueprotesbewegings het hoogs konserwatiewe kenmerke getoon in die uitvoering van verpligtinge wat tradisioneel aan hulle as vroue toegewys is en hulle het verskanste stereotipes aggressief aangewend in die wyse waarop sosiale ongeregtigheid aangepak is. Swart vroue het nie vir hulle persoonlike regte as vroue geveg nie, maar vir hulle regte as moeders. Die onvermoë van hoofstroom feminisme om die samehang van ras, klas en geslag, wat die onderdrukking van vroue in Derdewêreldgemeenskappe gevestig het, voldoende aan te spreek het gelei tot die vestiging van "womanism". Laasgenoemde het in die laat 1970's na vore gekom, in die 1980's momentum gekry en was ten nouste verbind met beide Swart Bewussyn en Swart Feminisme. Dit poog om swart vroue se sosiale status en rolle in positiewe en eksklusief swart terme te herdefinieer en daardeur dikwels stereotiepe definisies van vroulikheid te naturaliseer. Terwyl swart vroue se uitdagende betrokkenheid by wit rassisme beklemtoon word, word moederskap en vrouskap in politieke terme geïdentifiseer. Weens die inklusiewe benadering van "womanism" weerhou hulle hulle egter van noukeurig uitgewerkte teorieë en politieke programme.

## Abstract

Black women's oppression under apartheid was based on four interacting forces: race, class, gender and nationality. Although this rendered their status in both feminist and anti-apartheid policies unique, it was never addressed as such. The national liberation movement defined women's role in the struggle in male dominated terms and did not acknowledge 'gender' as a legitimate political issue until the 1980s. There were no official restrictions that impeded women's participation in national politics. It was rather the failure of parties to adequately address their social disabilities resulting from legal minority, geographical isolation and social marginalisation, that prevented women from participating on an equal level with men. The focus on women as 'significant others', as supportive mothers and wives, largely determined black women's self-perception and political consciousness. The growth of anti-apartheid movements principally went along with new formations of women's organisations. Gender struggles, however, appeared to be absent, since women's protests were indistinguishably bound up with other socio-political issues. Women's commitment to define themselves solely within the context of national liberation was highlighted in the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), which called upon blacks to examine their psychological and physical oppression and to realise the power of self-definition. Although women took a far more assertive stance toward their subjugation as blacks, they entirely ignored the masculine nature of the language and ideological outlook of Black Consciousness (BC). BC writers tended to romanticise community life and gender relations, ignoring the actual dynamics of gender relations amongst blacks, thus reinforcing traditional hierarchical structures. Women participating in the upper ranks of the BCM saw their emancipation in terms of becoming 'honorary men.' Feminist movements taking place in the Western world at that time were overtly rejected by both men and women in South Africa.

Women's entry into the public sphere of industrial production and national politics did not ineluctably lead to their emancipation. Nor had these steps been motivated by the sought for liberation from domesticity and traditional gender relations. It was a *reaction* to the way in which apartheid eroded their traditional solidity. Women's protest movements showed highly conservative features, as they affirmed obligations traditionally assigned to them as women and aggressively utilised entrenched stereotypes to tackle social injustice. Black women were not fighting for their personal rights as women but for their rights as mothers. The failure of mainstream feminism to adequately address the nexus of race, class and gender which renders women's oppression in Third World societies, led to the acceptance of womanism. The latter

emerged in the late 1970s, gained momentum in the 1980s, and was closely related to both BC and Black Feminism. It seeks to re-define black women's social status and roles in positive and exclusively black terms, thereby frequently naturalising stereotypical definitions of femininity. Emphasising black women's defiant engagement with white racism, it identifies motherhood and wifhood in political terms. Due to its inclusive approach, however, womanism restrains from elaborating definite theories and political programmes.

# Contents

	<u>Page</u>
<b>Introduction</b>	I
<b>Chapter 1: Gender theories: past and present</b>	
1.1. Feminism in the context of Third World societies	1
1.2. Reflections on black women's representation and self-presentation	6
1.3. Voices from the margins: black women's de-construction and difference debates	11
1.4. Womanism: a reactionary tendency?	14
1.5. Theory in practice: 'fragile unity' or joint separatism	21
<b>Chapter 2: Black women under Apartheid and Separate Development</b>	
2.1. The early 1950s: Institutionalising <i>Apartheid</i>	27
2.2. Black women and migrant labour	29
2.3. Women's role and status in the concept of Separate Development	33
2.3.1. Black women and the urban areas	
2.3.2. Black women in the homelands	36
2.3.3. Black women's legal and social status in transition	39
2.4. Black women and waged labour	49
2.4.1. Domestic Service	53
2.4.2. Agriculture	58
2.4.3. Industrial Employment	59
2.4.4. Professional Employment	62

### **Chapter 3: The Psychological dimensions of black women's oppression**

3.1. Women of colour – the cultural 'Other'	63
3.2. Domestic service: Deference in profession	71
3.3. Features of black women's oppression and self-repression in white-defined environments: A conceptualisation of invisible images	77
3.4. Marxism, Feminism and the context of apartheid: black-women-workers, a class of their own, a class on their own?	80

### **Chapter 4: Black Women and resistance until 1960**

4.1. Aspects of women's political emancipation within the South African society	87
4.2. Features of popular (informal) and organised (formal) resistance: An overview.	89
4.2.1. Anti-Pass Protests	94
4.2.2. Black Women and the Trade Union Movement	102
4.3. Black Women and the National Liberation Movement	105
4.3.1. Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)	105
4.3.2. The African National Congress (ANC)	107
4.3.3. The Bantu Women's League	109
4.3.4. The African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL)	111
4.3.5. The Federation of South African Women (FSAW)	115
4.3.5.1. The FSAW and black resistance in the Sharpeville aftermath	129



## **Chapter 5: The Back Consciousness Movement**

- 5.1. The background and development of Black Consciousness 134
- 5.2. An interpretation and evaluation of the BCM 140
- 5.3. The post-Soweto era: resisting the revolution from above 156

## **Chapter 6: The role of women within the BCM, 163**

- 6.1. The nexus of gender and race in BC 165
- 6.2. An interpretation of BC philosophy and terminology  
in terms of gender objectification 168
- 6.3. The female membership constitution: status, application  
and experiences 174
- 6.4. Black Consciousness as an attitude of mind and a way of life 182
- 6.5. Black Power and Feminism 185
- 6.6. The Black Women's Federation (BWF) 191
- 6.7. Black Solidarity: an ambiguous strategy 194

## **Chapter 7: Media and Literature as mediums of resistance:**

### **Black women's presentation and representation**

- 7.1. Women and the media until the late 1950s 204
- 7.2. BC and the liberal press 207
- 7.3. Literary reflections on women's roles and status within the  
'black man's' every-day struggle 209
  - 7.3.1. Mother Africa trope 216
  - 7.3.2. Socially transgressive women 219
- 7.4. Women writing within the male domain 221
- 7.5. Women's writings 226
  - 7.5.1. Semi-autobiographical writings:  
Miriam Tlali – pioneering womanism 227

7.5.2. Autobiographies	234
7.5.2.1. The trade unionist: Strikes have followed me all my life	236
7.5.2.2. The social worker: Call me woman	239
<b>Conclusion</b>	249
<b>Bibliography</b>	255

## Introduction

Black South African women living under apartheid were often referred to as ‘the oppressed of the oppressed.’<sup>1</sup> Their special discrimination was based on four interacting forces: race, class, gender and nationality. All these features were reflected and reinforced in terms of their struggle. The social disabilities they suffered motivated as well as hindered black women’s political activity. Their protest movement was in many ways a highly conservative rebellion with a great emphasis on the strength of family ideology and moral passion. Their protests, energetic and numerous as they were, rather remained on the local level and focused primarily on community issues. Their immediate motivation was the threatening impact of apartheid on the rights and status of black people and the subversion of women’s traditional role in African societies. The opposition of pass laws, for instance, focused indirectly on the usurpation by officialdom of African men’s domestic authority.<sup>2</sup> National politics were generally considered to be a man’s sphere. Neither the national liberation movement nor the Government could have dealt with a female leadership. Patriarchal attitudes were deeply entrenched on both parts, men and women, whites and blacks. Nevertheless, since the national liberation movement was operating on a mass basis, it officially recognised women as equal members and, to some extent, took their specific suppression into consideration.

Since women had no point of access to those in power, they could not expect resolutions of problems through meetings and discussions. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the manner in which black women have been pushed to the margins in historical writing as if their ‘herstories’ were merely peripheral to the male dominated world of policy and research. The fact that only eight of the 112 people included in the 1985 edition of Shelagh Gastrow’s *Who is who in South Africa* are women bears testimony to this situation.<sup>3</sup> The lack of research on black women reflects both the subordinate position they used to occupy in society, as well as the restrictions on knowledge that operated in South Africa. The historiographical invisibility of women is also a product of the historians’ own, often unconscious, bias against

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the thesis, the term ‘black’ will be applied to address ethnic groups who were or would have been discriminated against under apartheid because of their skin colour. As defined by the Black Consciousness Movement, ‘black’ includes all groups who were classified as ‘non-whites’, predominantly Indians, Africans and Coloureds. In most of the cases, however, ‘black’ refers to Africans, as they constituted the majority of the oppressed population, were entirely subjected to the apartheid policy and hence proved leading in the anti-apartheid struggle.

<sup>2</sup> See J.C. Wells: *We now demand*, p. 133; T. Lodge: *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> S. Gastrow (ed.): *Who’s Who in South Africa*, pp. 30-32, 78-80, 126-128, 162-164, 213-214, 229-230, 282-283.

women, in itself a product of the very social attitudes that reinforce and perpetuate women's subordinate position within society. It would be impossible to delineate a 'women's history' that forms a separate study from the history of society in general. The attempt to distinguish black women's 'herstory' from conventional historical writing does not intend to set women apart from black society or to dismiss black solidarity. By contrast, it approaches the context of national liberation in its actual complexity and ambiguousness. The study of history needs to be broadened in order to incorporate the female, black world as a legitimate area of research – this does not only deepen the understanding of the position of women but of the whole society.

Black political activity – or inactivity – is generally explained through investigations of structural or external factors impacting the black population: employment, wages, Bantu Education and administration as well as events on the international stage such as boycotts conducted against the apartheid state or anti-colonial wars around the world, in particular those at the South African borders. Scant attention has been given to the social conditions and attitudes, the leading personalities, the discourse of liberation philosophies and the social dynamics within the black community. There are striking similarities between racism and sexism. Both are justificatory ideologies, serving to legitimise a system of historical oppression. The incapacities and inequalities attributed to innate genetic differences include qualities such as a deficient ability of abstract thought and logical argument. All these influences determined the nature of apartheid, the policy of the liberation movement and the manner of historical writing. And it is these, rather subtle forces, which caused and perpetuated oppression in the past and will determine the disposition of the transcended South African state in the future.

Alterations in political and legislative systems do not necessarily change social notions of superiority and inferiority that previously legitimated the separation and subjugation of a group. By criticising apartheid for its racial oppression, one readily acknowledges the existence of racial differences. Brittan and Maynard define the term 'race' and its implications in common sense perceptions as follows:

*The perception of phenotypical characteristics like skin-colour, head shape, etc has dominated popular consciousness. Indeed, 'race' is given reality by the attribution of significance to the phenotype. Put differently, it is the active construction of the meaning of the phenotype that constitutes a group as a*

*'race'<sup>4</sup>... Racism in this sense is not something out there – it is present in personal and mundane circumstances.<sup>5</sup>*

Neither mainstream feminist nor black nationalist analyses prove sufficient to adequately address oppressive factors in black women's lives. The socialisation argument situates gender in an abstract symbolic world of values and expectations whose cultural gender script determines the sexual division of labour in addition to secure gender roles. But one can hardly call for the abolition of patriarchal, racial structures without showing how the latter were and are legitimised in society. The attempt to unmask the oppressor is not that easy since there exists an ambiguous relationship concerning who would benefit from this act. Apartheid was not just a matter of black and white, as patriarchy is not just a matter of women's objectification through men's sexist attitudes. Oppressive systems do not naturally generate a feeling of solidarity among the oppressed. Since the latter themselves have internalised the very structures of their oppression, they aspire to improve their status *within* the oppressive structure - instead of dismissing it. Thereby they tend to distinguish themselves from those whose social standing is deemed to be even more inferior.

Referring to the South African apartheid society, the notion of a multiracial sisterhood proves as illusionary as Marxist approaches calling for solidarity among the multiracial work force. The latter assumption entirely ignores the existence of a 'white working aristocracy' that proved far more dependent on racist structures than representatives of the South African upper middle-class and upper class. It was the white worker, not the industrialist nor the academic, whose status was threatened by social reforms that English liberalism called for. Steve Biko, the leading personality of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), gave another example of forces that proved destructive to black solidarity: blacks who adhered to the apartheid structure because they either benefited from it or defined themselves purely in terms of standard notions set by white supremacy. Perfect examples of these 'non-whites', as Biko termed them, were Bantustan elites, who cooperated with the government, or those Coloureds, who copied the Afrikaans life style in order to make up the phenotypical difference.<sup>6</sup> The very power of apartheid derived from the complexity of class, national, racial and sexual oppression. Indeed, all women are subjected to a system of sexual domination considering their status in advanced capitalist societies. Their political and social standing, however, derives predominantly from their position in the class structure. A woman's class position

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<sup>4</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> See S. Biko: The Definitions of Black Consciousness, in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, p. 48.

may provide her with mechanisms to negotiate the structure of constraints generated by patriarchy. Under apartheid, where class divisions were almost purely manifested in racial terms, cheap black domestic labour became the instrument whereby many white women were freed from physical aspects of sexual domination.<sup>7</sup> This kind of ‘female parasitism’ as Olive Schreiner termed it, can be discovered in any aspect of female interaction, cross culturally, in relation to their husbands’ class status.<sup>8</sup> Apartheid provided white women the liberation from ‘dirty women’s work.’ In the relationship between a black domestic and her employers, it is the white woman who holds the senior position and performs the ‘paternalistic’ part.<sup>9</sup> The wealth whites accumulated under racist capitalism, freed many women from the need to enter waged work. Instead, they could afford to be mainly occupied with motherhood, social gatherings and voluntary duties in religious and educational institutions.

It is usually supposed that a white middle class woman is more likely to distance herself from her gender than is a woman in a Third World or slave context.<sup>10</sup> Once a woman can recognise what constitutes her oppression, she will be in a position to overcome that oppression and to redefine her gender identity. But although apartheid provided them with mechanisms of escape from the structure of constraints generated by a patriarchal system, it have been white women themselves who consciously adhered to and perpetuated the very structures of the patriarchal, white supremacist society. In the historical context of the South African society, sexist definitions of femininity proved more coercive and restricting for women of the dominant class. Both the African and Afrikaans society view patriarchy as a means of cultural strength and traditional supremacy. In the history of the South African society, self-definition and self-defence were reinforcing each other in a mutual relationship. Afrikaner nationalism highlights this in its mystification of an Afrikaner manhood based on purity and piety. White women are the custodians of intergenerational value transmission within the family and play

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<sup>7</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> O. Schreiner: *Women and Labor*, p. 98 (as quoted in J. Cock: Maids and Madams, pp. 11-12) *Behind the phenomenon of the female parasitism has always laid another and yet larger social phenomenon ... Without slaves or subject classes to perform the crude, physical labours of life and produce superfluous wealth, the parasitism of the female would in the past have been an impossibility.*

<sup>9</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: Domestic servants, A Microcosm of “the race problem”, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> The term ‘Third World’ is defined through geographical location as well as particular socio-historical conjunctures. Geographically, the nation-states of Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, China, South Africa and Oceania constitute the parameters of the ‘non-European’, Third World. In addition, the term may refer to people who have historic links with the geographically defined Third World, although living in the U.S., Europe or Australia.

leading roles in educational and religious institutions representing Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>11</sup> Since white, upper middle-class and upper class women traditionally function as symbols for the husband's class status, feminists deem them to be reduced to 'the status of birds confined to their cages.'<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the situation of black and white women in South Africa presents a challenge to any oversimplified feminist notion of sisterhood.

The history on women's organisations has often neglected the fact that sex is neither the only nor even the dominant determinant of a women's place in society. By contrast, the problem of women undermining other women has been identified as one of the chief barriers to fundamental changes in gender relationships.<sup>13</sup> The list of South African women's organisations is considerably long. Most of them emerged around social issues and were officially committed to non-violence and non-racialism. Liberal women's organisations often search to develop links with moderate black counterparts. Apparently, South African women's organisations tended to cooperate across the colour bar which national political organisations did not. Yet, their cooperation was socially, not politically motivated. White women's ignorance towards racial patterns as political matters eventually proved their very racist attitude. Racism and totalitarianism hardly derive from a dialectically developed political consciousness but are reflections of a people's political apathy. According to Brittan and Maynard, the naturalisation of 'race' and gender is collectively cemented in the consciousness of oppressors and oppressed.<sup>14</sup> It is not questioned because it appears to be natural knowledge. What everybody knows about 'race' and 'gender' is perceived and experienced as having the equality of inevitability and universality. Racist and sexist beliefs are given the same status as scientific knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

The first three chapters of this thesis consider the ideological construction and consolidation of white masculinity as normative and the corresponding self-image colonised people internalised in terms of race and gender. This refers specifically to the role of colonial institutions and policies transforming indigenous patriarchies and consolidating hegemonic middle class cultures in metropolitan and rural areas.

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<sup>11</sup> M. Daymond: 'Seizing Meaning – Language and Ideology in the Autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini' (*Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 9, no.1, April 1993, p, 28); E. Mashinini: *Strikes Have Followed me all my Life*, p. 40; J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, pp. 1-12.

<sup>12</sup> J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, pp. 1-12.

<sup>13</sup> M. Ramphela: 'The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 222.

<sup>14</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): *Sexism, Racism and Oppression*, p. 204.

The study will attempt to discuss and evaluate the nature of black women's involvement in the national liberation struggle by referring to aspects of current black gender studies such as the state of research on black women, as well as current discussions on womanism versus feminism in the interpretation of black women's liberation from racial and gender oppression. Chapter 2 intends to identify gender dynamics within apartheid society as shaped by the contradictions of industrialisation and re-tribalisation. The analysis of physical constraints in chapter 2 is followed by an assessment of how apartheid measures might have impacted upon women psychologically. In this regard, chapter 3 interprets material oppression as mentally repressive. It also incorporates a brief reflection on women and Marxism, since Marxist theories have been prominently featured by black nationalist, white anti-apartheid and western feminist movements. Chapter 3 furthermore attempts to identify cultural reflections of a black gender consciousness. Thereafter, in Chapter 4, an evaluation of the black women's role within resistance movements until the end of the 1960s follows. Part of the consideration is how the physical and psychological aspects of women's oppression were transmitted and articulated in the political arena.

There was a silent agreement in the national liberation movement that women had to act as mediators between the past and the present, whereas men saw themselves as mediators between the present and the future. The agendas of black women's organisations continuously stressed women's integrative role within the black community. The Women's Charter of the Federation of South African Women states in this regard:

*We women do not form a society separate from men*<sup>16</sup>

The history of the national liberation movement exhibits a constant ambivalence between accepting women as equals and falling back on the need to maintain traditional gender roles. The masculinist discourse of the Black Consciousness Movement clearly reflects the sentiment that political activity is assumed to be within the male experimental domain. Established institutions either excluded women or allowed only a few token representatives. From this perspective it is often suggested that women in the national liberation movement were motivated to separate from the power hierarchies in order to establish their own place, declaring their personhood separate from traditional institutions and organisations. In order for African women to emancipate themselves from patriarchy, they have to leave the sphere of reproductive and domestic work traditionally reserved for them. They have to receive

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 182-183.



education to enter productive activities outside their homes in order to assert claims to equality of status. In South African history, however, the way of emancipation was hardly left to the African women themselves. Their entry into wage labour did not derive from aspirations of social liberation but the erosion of their social position. They were caught between a policy of industrialisation on the one hand and a policy of re-tribalisation on the other. Their political engagement did not oppose patriarchal structures but tendencies of political apathy within the black male community.

The function and bonds of black women's movements were probably not consciously known to the women except where they experienced a bond on their special part in anti-apartheid action. It may be possible to detect a nascent feminist consciousness in their gendered solidarity and occasional scorn for their more acquiescent menfolk. Men were viewed as weak and passive, enmeshed in the emasculating system of apartheid. As mentioned above, black women's activism was often a highly conservative rebellion with a great emphasis on the strength of family ideology and moral passion. The most powerful sentiment was matriarchal, captured most vividly in the phrases of Lilian Ngoyi's "My womb is shaken when they speak of Bantu Education."<sup>17</sup> The need for alterations in gender relations emerged rather indirectly in the face of direct confrontation in the political arena. Black women generally agreed upon the fact, that the South African society had to become a non-racial democracy, in order to be restructured in terms of gender relations. Today's significant focus on black women's emancipation proves this assumption true.

Any evaluation of women's anti-apartheid activism has to consider the unique perspective they gained on white society. Most black women lived either entirely isolated from white society, in the homelands, or they lead a life constrained to the white world, as domestic servants.<sup>18</sup> Hence, they served the domestic sphere of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Domestic work isolated black women from each other, locked them into a daily experience of solitary suffering. Due to this solitary confinement, it proved difficult for these women to move out in order to identify with other women, or even, national politics. Resulting from this, many are lacking confidence in their intellectual and managerial abilities, especially in the company of men. Above all, black women are isolated by their lack of time. Women's separated standing from political activity did not rise from a deliberate *exclusion*, but from the

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<sup>16</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 279.

<sup>17</sup> T. Lodge: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, p. 153 (quoted from: Bantu World (Johannesburg), 8.10. 1955).

<sup>18</sup> See A. Basu (ed.): The challenge of local Feminisms, pp. 134-141.

national movement's failure to *include* them by recognising and addressing their special disabilities directly. Women became a driving force in the apartheid struggle, but only through their own organisations. However, not even these organisations challenged traditional patterns of work division in order to overcome women's exclusion from the political sphere. Significantly, women's political activity in unions, youth and community organisations tended to avoid issues fundamental to their triple oppression as women, blacks and members of the working class.<sup>19</sup>

The multi-dimensional oppression domestic workers experience exemplifies the triple source of black women's oppression through race, class and gender discrimination.<sup>20</sup> Domestic work is the main form of employment for African women. The continuous confrontation with white wealth built on cheap black labour is an essential work experience of the domestic. Of course, it would be an over-simplification to regard domestic workers as representing a uniform group. No human being just passively, unquestionably internalises the attitudes and values of others and mechanically mirrors their behaviour. Individuals interpret and give meaning to their situation. Neither the oppressors nor the oppressed are deterministically socialised and reproduced in the simple image of their society. Yet they share certain characteristics of self-imagery which relate to their position in the social structure and culminate in the essential question: *To what extent, with whom and by which system am I exploited?* This thesis therefore intends to ask what kind of class-race, or even class-race-gender consciousness could be expected referring to the changing context of a black woman's life under apartheid. How did this self-image motivate and influence black women's participation in campaigns? Considering the causes and motivations of women's involvement in the struggle, one has to discuss aspects of oppression which, in the past, have not been considered to be significant, namely sexual relationships, the family, and personal relationships.

In order to trace the development of a political class, race or gender consciousness, it may not be sufficient to merely evaluate the context of objective oppression. It also has to be asked, in which ways and to what extent deprivation is perceived by the individual and within his/her community. Is there a true solidarity in form of a community of interests? Another question is whether the individual and his/her community have the theoretical understanding to analyse the causes of their oppression, to formulate their demands in programmes and to establish an

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<sup>19</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. V.

<sup>20</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p. 20.

alternative social structure. How do they perceive power structures? Do they feel powerful enough to politicise and realise their common demands?

The black female population is neither homogeneous, nor are their aspirations confirmed in terms of a gender or class struggle. What seems to be emerging is a common set of demands – equality with men, democracy in the family, shared responsibility for housework and child care and, most importantly, recognition that radical changes in the domestic sphere need to be advanced alongside the class struggle and the struggle for national liberation.<sup>21</sup>

The increasing access of black women to academic institutions and the current institutionalisation of gender research in various academic fields shows great potential. The enhancement of women's social status appears to be ensured by the ANC's policy granting a one-third quota of women to its national and provincial electoral lists. Due to this South Africa was placed eighth in the world in terms of the percentage of women MP's in national legislatures in 1999.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the favourable numbers still do not meet women's required presence in representative structures. Firstly, the numbers do not mirror the actual figures of women in the population. Surveys also show that female MP's participation in vote debates scarcely corresponds with the proportion of their numbers.<sup>23</sup> As MPs lack an independent power base in the form of a constituency to which they are responsible, female MP's prove particularly dependent on a party hierarchy in which male dominated upper ranks promote MP's within party structures. The lack of training, information, personal assistance and research limit women's ability to participate independently and influence the agenda-setting process.<sup>24</sup> The chief reason for female MP's failure to place 'women's issues' on the national agenda, however, results from ideological issues. Patriarchal patterns of behaviour are still deeply entrenched in the male dominated party structure. There does not seem to be a noteworthy solidarity among women MP's, either. The value attached to 'women's issues' remains considerably low and female politicians are still afraid to be identified with feminist activism.<sup>25</sup> Women continue to be the main promoters of 'women's issues' in both the academic and political spheres. The last three decades witnessed a proliferation of documented 'herstories' all over the world. In South Africa, attempts are being made to trace the history of women and gender relations from pre-colonial times to the present. Yet, the

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<sup>21</sup> See S. Bazilli (ed.): Putting women on the agenda, pp. 17-22.

<sup>22</sup> L. Vincent: A Question of Interest. Women as Opposition, in R. Southall (ed.): Opposition and Democracy in South Africa, p. 75.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 75-77.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-81.

male dominated thought pattern and the absence of links between female politicians, researchers and the broader women's movement in civil society, undermines the empowerment of women within the transition process tremendously.<sup>26</sup>

There are two sides to women's domination: one is the objective fact of their domination and the other their subjective experience of domination. Legislative systems, representing the 'objective' side, are built upon each society's understanding of justice and morality. In order to analyse the history of a liberation movement, it is obligatory to distinguish the very oppression people have been subjected to. But how can oppression be measured? First World women, on the other hand, compelled to seek eternal youth and perfect self-fulfilment in both tradition and progression, are more and more likely to end up as superwomen with broken wings, a nervous breakdown – and a broken family. Although emancipated on the surface, they too prove reluctant to reject the dominant forces of their subjection, manifested in the present conception of femininity. With regard to white women's incapability to identify with black women's racial oppression as well as the growing resentment against any kind of academic neo-colonialism, Western females have an increasingly difficult stand in fields of black research.<sup>27</sup>

Patriarchy, however defined it may be, does not exist without women's support and silent agreement. Women perceive authoritative structures of male domination not only in confrontation with men, but through the competition amongst women themselves, particularly in terms of class and age. Discussing a woman's class position appears to be difficult. One question is, whether a married woman's own occupation has to be taken into account when this implies a class location different to that of her husband. In patriarchal societies, social equilibrium is maintained at the price of women's subordination. Male authority indicates cultural strength, in both First World and Third World societies. Women feel obligated to owe men the labour, and are accountable to them. In Third World societies, hard work defines a woman's social position in positive rather than negative terms. Even Engels acknowledged this, although he still degraded native societies by terming them 'barbaric':

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* See also T. Marcus: 'The Women's Question and National Liberation in South Africa', in M. van Diepen (ed.): *The National Question in South Africa*, pp- 96-101.

<sup>27</sup> See D.E.H Russel: 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Politics of White Feminists Conducting Research on Black Women in South Africa', in S. Wilkinson and C. Kitzinger Sage (eds.): *Representing the Other, A Feminism and Psychology Reader*, Thousand Oaks, 1996.

*The division of labour between the two sexes is determined by causes entirely different from those that determine the status of women in society. Peoples, whose women have to work much harder than we would consider, often have far more real respect for women than our Europeans have for theirs. The social status of the lady of civilization, seemingly surrounded by homage and estranged from all work, is infinitively lower than that of the hard-working woman of barbarism, who was regarded among her people as a real lady (lady, frowa, Frau=mistress [Herrin]) and was such by the nature of her position.<sup>28</sup>*

The second half of the thesis addresses black women's growing resentment towards the white defined social standards by which they were viewed, and which made them view themselves as 'non-whites', belonging to 'non-people.'<sup>29</sup> Chapter 5 hence evaluates the BCM according to its original policy, focussing on the psychological liberation of black people. This chapter also features criticisms exhibited by contemporary observers towards BC as an elitist academic movement with a serious weakness in organisational structures and ineffectiveness in mobilising broad masses. Assertions that BC's revolutionary approach might have proved reactionary to the liberation of women, have only been raised in the aftermath of the BCM, and therefore constitute an individual chapter in this study. Many aspects of womanism, which can be regarded as the African counterpart to feminism, derived from the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s. The question that motivates Chapter 6 then is how black women chose agency in a movement that pressed them into a particular space of silence via a discourse, which may have proved indicative of a collective consciousness, but denied women's existence as social actors in their own right and rendered them absent. In accordance with Chapter 1, which presents a brief comparison between American black feminism and African womanism, Chapter 6 also discusses the American Black Power Movement. The focus here lies on black women's rejection of western feminism and their conscious subjugation under the principle of Black Solidarity. A discussion of Black Power and its considerable influence on the BCM is excluded from Chapter 5, in order to avoid unnecessary repetitions. The final chapter on black women's presentation in literature departs from the previous chapters in two ways. Firstly, it is not directly related to political movements but rather reflects on black people's cultural aspirations. Contradictions between women's actual living conditions and the status they occupied in black nationalist ideologies have never been an issue of political agendas. Sexist prejudices in terms of women's intellectual and theoretical understanding and their managerial and administrative capabilities have never

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<sup>28</sup> K. Marx: 'Wage Labour and Capital', in Lawrence and Wishart: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, p. 483.

<sup>29</sup> M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 14.

been a matter of open discussion among political activists. Literature hence provided the only forum in which black men and women could openly voice their reflections on gender dynamics. And, as the general introduction of chapter 7 shows, black writers and readers of the 1970s increasingly employed the media in the conveyance of their political and cultural aspirations. Yet, while male authors openly articulated their understanding of gender relations at the time of the BCM, womanist writings only emerged at the beginning of the 1980s and hence post dated the high era of BC writings. The fact that women writers retrospectively reflect on the movement does not necessarily proscribe an analysis of their writings in relation to the BCM. In its appearance as a psychological liberation movement, BC was neither time bound nor can it be evaluated in conventional, organisational terms. The magazine *Staffrider*, for instance, which has featured an extensive amount of BC writings, was founded after the official closure of the BCM. The fact that Buthelezi published the charter of the Black People's Convention (BPC) after the banning of the latter, proves that BC was still validated as a liberation movement. Women's literature based on the ideas of Black Consciousness constituted the very emergence of womanism.<sup>30</sup> Chapter 7 therefore closes the analysis of black women's reflections on oppression and resistance, which was introduced with the discussion on womanism in Chapter 1.

#### Literary sources on and by black women

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the publication of a considerable amount of literature written on and by black South African women. Black trade unionists such as Ellen Mashinini, BC activists such as Mamphela Ramphele and social workers such as Ellen Kuzwayo wrote about their involvement and experiences in the national liberation struggle. Other former activists, like Thenjiwe Mtintso (ANC) and Asha Moodley (AZAPO) continue their work in political parties and, like Fatima Meer, contribute to current discussions on women's empowerment through research and publications in political journals. *Agenda*, published since 1987, provides a forum for women from various political backgrounds to discuss social and cultural issues and to articulate notions on international and national conferences on gender policies. Chapter 1 features *Agenda* articles written by prominent political representatives such as

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<sup>30</sup> A. Buthelezi (ed.): The Black People's Convention (BPC) - South Africa: Historical background and basic documents, 1978.

Frene Ginwala, womanist academics such as Desiree Lewis and feminist academics such as Amanda Gouws. Their articles give an interesting impression of the various standpoints in the discussion on womanism versus feminism. There is still a general lack of research about the role of women in national liberation movements. Women in Southern Africa, edited and published by formerly exiled AZAPO member Christine Qunta, represents an ambitious endeavour to reconstruct African women's historical and political images. The book features articles and interviews of women involved in black nationalist struggles in different Southern African countries. The distinctive womanist approach is especially apparent in Qunta's introduction to the book, which presents an elevated reconstruction of African women's history, starting thousands of years prior to Western civilisation. Most critical writings of black academics are rather specialised, focussing on certain aspects of women's lives and political roles. Because of the limited access to academic data provided for blacks under apartheid, it has been predominantly white South Africans who conducted research on black women. Hilda Bernstein's For their triumphs and for their tears, Cheryl Walker's Women and Resistance in South Africa and Julia Well's We now demand! The History of Women's Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa still constitute some of the principle works in black gender studies. Women of Phokeng, edited by Belinda Bozolli, and Diana Russel's Lives of Courage. Women for a new South Africa present national stories or part of a national image through individual life texts. Both works are based on the idea to study the forms of consciousness black women express in their own interpretation of their histories. The trend of historicizing *through* black women emerged in the context of the rising womanist movement and the latter's emphasis on white researchers' incapability to identify with the black subjects of their studies. The coverage of women's protest in the 1950s by black magazines such as *Drum* or left-winged newspapers such as *New Age* facilitates in tracing their role in resistance movements up to the 1960s. Thereafter women protests scarcely feature prominently in the media. Articles published by and on black women in political magazines such as *Sechaba* were few and far between. The extensive amount of writings produced under the BCM were for the most part, written from a male perspective and focused on the emancipation of the black man. The optimistic approach of womanism restrains from portraying black women as historically self-perpetuating their inferior complex, in the way that BC writers like Steve Biko or N.C. Manganyi did in order to portray black men under apartheid. The endeavour of this study to assess the psychological constraints under which women might have suffered under apartheid, relies largely on works written by black American feminists such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins. Sexism, Racism and Oppression, written by Arthur Brittan

and Mary Maynard at the beginning of the 1980s, provides a comprehensive study in the interrelating forces of black women's triple oppression. Since none of these works directly relate to the South African context, they largely neglect the nationalist dimension of black women's oppression under the system of separate development, which, according to Christine Qunta, meant the addition of a fourth force to the triple oppression third world women suffer around the world. Several national surveys on women's working and living conditions throw light upon causes of black women's oppression. Such are Fatima Meer's Back-women-workers and Jacklyn Cock's study on black domestic workers, as well as Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak. In her introduction to Women of Phokeng, Belinda Bozzoli stresses that people's consciousness is formed within and against structures, rather than above and around them.<sup>31</sup> The nature of black women's oppression varied significantly, in terms of their age, geographical location and class position. Women's perceptions of repression and resistance are accordingly complex. In contrast to the studies mentioned above, Bozzoli's work does not merely feature statements of individual women in order to highlight and illustrate certain aspects of the theoretical analysis. The great amount of ideas and attitudes expressed by the women of Phokeng forms the basis of the study, from which patterns of experience are explored in order to identify features of a 'common sense', which at certain times took the form of social ideologies. Womanist academics such as Desiree Lewis and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have written extensively on black women's rejection of feminist appeals to politicise 'women's issues' by making the private public. Lewis' article on 'Women and Gender in South Africa' traces the development of black women's political consciousness and highlights the interrelation of womanism and Black Consciousness.<sup>32</sup> Ramphele's analysis of gender dynamics within the BCM does not only present the most comprehensive analysis of the black women's role in the BCM, but also reflects on the causes of women's historical invincibility.<sup>33</sup> Any of these articles retrospectively reflect upon the BCM and highlight the general lack of primary material. This thesis therefore relies partly on oral sources in the form of interviews with BC activists. The interviews were conducted and recorded by Dr. Ernest Messina in the early 1990s, and are kept at the Institute for Historical Research at UWC.

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<sup>31</sup> B. Bozzoli (ed.): Women of Phokeng. Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983, Johannesburg 1991.

<sup>32</sup> D. Lewis: 'Women and Gender in South Africa', in V. Maphai (ed.): South Africa. The Challenge of Change, Harare, 1994.

<sup>33</sup> M. Ramphele: 'The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, Cape Town, 1991.



# Chapter 1

## Gender theories: past and present

### 1.1. Feminism in the context of Third World societies

*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman<sup>1</sup>*

Simone de Beauvoir became the embodiment of pioneering feminism. She certainly proved to be transgressive in the way she looked at, questioned and challenged 'female disabilities', manifested in contemporary images of femininity. But although she acted and wrote as an agent in her own right, her work can hardly be evaluated in today's terms of feminism, due to the changing social and political context and its altering means of femininity.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, de Beauvoir demythologised femininity by considering it to be nothing more than an artificial construct, which reflects and reinforces patriarchy.<sup>3</sup>

*No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.<sup>4</sup>*

As inconsiderate as it may appear at first sight, to introduce a debate on Third World women's liberation with the statement given by a bourgeois representative of early Western inspired feminism, further reading will clarify why this statement rather emphasises black women's leading responsibility in obtaining an independent self-determination through research.

As a matter of fact, the statement implies a fact, which Western inspired feminists usually tend to ignore and the history of women's organisations generally bears out: It is not a

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<sup>1</sup> S. de Beauvoir: The Second Sex, p. 295.

<sup>2</sup> S. Bazilli (ed.): Putting women on the agenda, p. 8. During the 1980s, a discussion occurred about the leap between 'the women question' and 'gender analysis.' The word 'sex' denotes an individual as male or female, and derives from the individual's biological attributes. The word 'gender' extends these physical attributes to create an ideological construct which is based on the way that society understands those biological differences between men and women. What we recognise and experience as 'masculine' and 'feminine' is socially and culturally constructed as our 'gender', which involves a whole constellation of roles, expectations, social and sexual behaviours.

<sup>3</sup> 'A mythology is... a cultural model, expressing the way in which man wants to shape the civilisation that he himself has made.' Northrope Freyre as quoted in M. Kolawole: Womanism and African Consciousness, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> S. de Beauvoir: The Second Sex, p. 295.

woman's sex that determines her place in society but rather the way in which society has shaped people's perceptions of gender roles. Asserts Judith Butler:

*Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylisation of the body and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performance accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.<sup>5</sup>*

The context, in which Western inspired feminism has been conceptualised, can be defined through the same terms that are applied to analyse black women's oppression: gender, class, race and nationality. Nevertheless, albeit the three latter dimensions rather helped than hindered First World women to focus on gender oppression, they are usually neglected, if not entirely ignored in Western inspired feminist schools. As a result, this might lead to the assumption, that women's emancipation results directly from the country's modernisation and development. Basu, however, clarifies that a rising degree of state-control impedes the process of women's emancipation rather than a low degree of industrial development.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of comparative feminist studies focus predominantly on Western Europe and the United States, where women's movements are supposed to be more determined and articulate. Women's movements in the postcolonial world still tend to be underestimated, if not ignored. It has always been the white world which studies the ethnography of 'the Others', not 'the Others' who study the ethnography of the whites. As a result, 'white research' continues to determine the global perception of Third World societies.<sup>7</sup> Generally referred to as 'developing countries', Third World countries of the postcolonial world are envisaged to finally gain an economic, industrial and social standard similar to their former

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<sup>5</sup> J. Butler: Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, pp. 140-1.

<sup>6</sup> A. Basu (ed.): The challenge of local Feminisms, pp. 1-3.

<sup>7</sup> A. Césaire: Discourse on Colonialism, p. 54.

colonialist countries. Likewise the image of *the* Third World woman carries the authorising signature of Western humanist discourse.<sup>8</sup>

Women, coming from developing countries, are not only thought to be more oppressed but also supposed to be less capable to liberate themselves, due to their alternatively developed cultural background. Thus many women from Third World countries become alienated from feminist theories, which they consider to be a particular kind of academic neo-colonialism.<sup>9</sup> They suspect feminism to 'import' certain ideological and strategic methodologies, which neither correspond to the actual conditions of Third World countries nor leave space to local academics to develop their own concepts of women's liberation. Research and development projects, initiated by Western organisations, are often disapproved for shaping social reality to fit theory when, in fact, it should be vice versa: theory should be shaped and moulded by social reality.<sup>10</sup>

Since Western companies are the main sponsors of African research projects, fund-raising becomes a political issue as Third World scholars depend heavily on financial support. The yardsticks applied by western feminists to evaluate women's struggles, reflect the ideological hegemony of Western concepts of development and civilisation. The degree of women's emancipation is predominantly measured outside the reproductive sphere, in terms of literacy, education and occupational careers.<sup>11</sup> These fields are thought to make women rather conscious of their oppression in order to challenge it. The final conclusion radical feminism draws is that, once women's social positions are reconciled in terms of national, racial and material struggles, women ('sisters') from the post-colonial world would be free to follow their ultimate destination which is to promote solidarity across all cultural barriers in order to fight male domination.<sup>12</sup>

The perception inheres another tendency of Western inspired, especially radical Feminism, which is to assume a world-wide commonality or even universality concerning women's oppression and reaction.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, women as a *general* category occupy a subordinate position to men. The sex-based division of society means women have areas of experience in

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<sup>8</sup> C.T. Mohanty: *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> D. Nkululeko: 'The Right to Self-Determination in Research: Azania and Azanian Women', in C. Qunta (ed.): *Women in Southern Africa*, p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> E. Salo: *South African Feminism: Whose struggles, whose agenda*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> C.T. Mohanty: *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>12</sup> E. Salo: *South African Feminism*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> A. Basu (ed.): *The challenge of local Feminisms*, pp. 18-20.

common which supposedly provide the basis for a general gender consciousness. Women around the world are suffering from sexual discrimination, they all share the role of reproducers and educators of children, their main responsibility centres around the well-being of the family.<sup>14</sup> Due to their family responsibilities, women are generally less socialised to address violence as a means of political struggle.

What feminism takes for granted and thereby neglects turns out to be short-sightedness and the major constraint when it comes to explaining black women's emancipation. As a matter of fact, the main assumption of feminist theories that women's gendered identities can be separated from other identities such as class, race, nationality, religion and ethnicity in order to join women on the basis of their common sex, obstructs analytical approaches, which examine power hierarchies amongst women. Yet, as Mohanty argues:

*No-one becomes a woman purely because she is female. Ideologies of womanhood have as much to do with class and race as they have with sex.*<sup>15</sup>

No single dimension of social life - whether biological, sexual, economic, psychological, political or historical - is adequate to explain the origins and persistence of hierarchies determined by sex and gender. Different dimensions of oppression are reinforcing each other and cannot simply be summed up. There is a need to identify the dynamics in the process and manifestation of oppression. This identification would moreover clarify that Black women's oppression is indeed quantitatively and qualitatively different. According to Brittan and Maynard:

*[The] additive approach is simply unacceptable. It is untenable because of the implication that gender and 'race' simply increase the degree of oppression which is involved, with no understanding that they qualitatively change the nature of that oppression. Black women are not simply subjected to more disadvantages than their white sisters, their oppression is of a qualitatively different kind ... We would argue then that the arithmetic approach confounds the fact that it is not a question of degree but one of kind that is involved here.*<sup>16</sup>

What distinguishes Black women's liberation from Western inspired, especially radical Feminism is not only a different economic, cultural and social background but also the very way of thinking about race class and gender. Throughout the history of national liberation,

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<sup>14</sup> C. de la Rey: 'Culture, Tradition and Gender: let's talk about it' (*Agenda*, no. 13, 1992, pp. 85-86).

<sup>15</sup> C.T. Mohanty: *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, p.12

<sup>16</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): *Sexism, Racism and Oppression*, p. 69.

African women were referred to as associates of male activists. The terms ‘mother’, ‘wife’ and ‘woman’ were interchangeably, even synonymously, used. Looking from a feminist perspective, black women’s agency as individuals in their own right was continuously neglected, if not consciously denied, by constantly referring to their role responsibilities within the community and extended family. National struggles go along principally with the social emancipation of women. The majority of black women, however, hold on to their cultural tradition and view their political emancipation as women not happening *within* but in the *aftermath* of the struggle for national liberation. As Ruth Mompati remarked:

*If we say that our first priority is the emancipation of women, we will become free as members of an oppressed community. We feel that in order to get our independence as women, the prerequisite is for us to be part of the war for national liberation.*<sup>17</sup>

The subordination of gender and class struggles also responded to the ‘Two stage revolution’ thesis of the Charterist tradition, which prioritised the national liberation to socialist revolution.<sup>18</sup> African women rejected feminist approaches advocating to directly transfer the social emancipation into the political sphere, in order to prevent women from being pushed back into traditional reproductive spheres as soon as the liberation struggle succeeds and their support is no longer needed, as for instance happened in Mozambique. Frelimo<sup>19</sup> showed a very innovative stand towards the emancipation of women when it needed their assistance in the national liberation struggle. In the aftermath of the national liberation, it still maintains the rhetoric of women’s emancipation and exhibits a direct continuation from the war to the post-war period. In practice, however, Frelimo’s support to the women in their struggle for changes in gender relations has disappeared.<sup>20</sup> Black South African women proved silent or, according to Hassim, have been silenced, on those issues that are thought to be more substantive in terms of feminist policies:

*[W]omen’s reproductive rights, their right to control their bodies, their concern about children and childcare have been regarded as ‘soft’ political issues. They have been defined as primarily moral, rather than political issues. This has effectively led to the deligitimation of women’s concerns in the political sphere.*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ruth Mompati as quoted in D.E.H. Russel: Lives of Courage. Women for a new South Africa, p. 116.

<sup>18</sup> C. Hendricks and D. Lewis: ‘Voices from the margins’ (Agenda, no. 20, 1994, p. 68).

<sup>19</sup> In the 1960s, FRELIMO established the women’s fighting unit. The unit also send delegates to the annual FRELIMO congresses. (Sechaba, vol.2, no. 12, December 1968, p.7).

<sup>20</sup> S. Anfred: ‘Lessons from Mozambique’ (Agenda, no. 10, 1991, pp. 45-47).

<sup>21</sup> Hassim, S.: ‘Where have all the women gone? Gender politics in South African debates’ (Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa, University of Natal, 30.1.–2.2.1991, Paper no. 36, p. 6).

Feminists used to criticise black women's anti-apartheid activism for its apparent inability to re-examine traditional roles in order to openly challenge patriarchal attitudes and the principal male dominance on the political stage.<sup>22</sup> Black women were viewed as agents of gender socialisation acting on behalf of the prevailing norms of society, upholding women's oppression. Resulting from the marginalization of feminist issues, women withdrew into 'safe spaces.' Although the formation of national women's organisations indicated the recognition and institutionalisation of gender issues on an official level, they served the top-down mobilisation of women rather than representing grassroots organisations giving voice to the majority of women living on the margins. Women's grassroots groups remained disempowered. Members of women's organisations, who considered the reconstruction of society, had to work on an individual basis and hardly found audience in the political arena.

## 1.2. Reflections on black women's representation and self-presentation

Until the 1980s, most research on black women has been conducted by white academics, beyond the national borders. Among them was a considerable number of exiled South Africans, whose writings are still leading in the history of anti-apartheid writings – just to mention Hilda Bernstein's For their triumphs and for their tears. In her book Lives of Courage. Women for a new South Africa, Diana Russell intended to give every woman the opportunity to edit the version of her interview before it was published. Eventually, only two out of the 60 women made their consent conditional on seeing the written interview. Significantly, Thoko Mpumlwana- the only BC activist interviewed by Russell – was one of the latter. She spoke to Russell in order to support the liberation movement. But unlike the other 58 interview partners, she seemed to lack the 'natural solidarity' with a female white scholar. Eventually, her interview could not be included, since the critical remarks she wanted to make failed to reach Russell in time.<sup>23</sup>

Black women who wrote about their sisters' conditions at home were few and far between. *Sechaba* provided a forum by which women could give views on their status and roles from very different perspectives: as trade unionists, national political activists, exiled black

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<sup>22</sup> E. Salo: South African Feminism, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> D.E.H. Russel: Lives of Courage, p. 92.

nationalists or white communists. *Sechaba's* annual issue for national women's day featured articles on various aspects of black women's lives: their roles as 'significant associates', political widows and political activists as well as their working and living conditions in the homelands and urban areas, as industrial workers or domestic servants. Trying to encourage women to view themselves as a part of the national struggle, these annual dedications portrayed black women in rather conventional terms. The introduction to the 1969 issue, titled 'August 9 - Day of our women militants', for instance, repeatedly rejects any special definitions of 'women's roles' and pays tribute to the complexity of women's tasks and roles in the struggle.

*Our women and children are victims of apartheid – and so are our men. Our women have formed their own organisations when issues ... have demanded it, but our's is not a feminist movement.*<sup>24</sup>

The article 'Women's Liberation. The true proletariat of Africa are the women', written by 'Eve' and published by *Sechaba* in 1970 gives a very different view.<sup>25</sup> Although the article features pictures of African women protesters, it pays little attention to the combined impact of national and racial oppression in South Africa. Instead, it focuses on the question of class and gender, interpreting both in standard Marxist terms. According to 'Eve', women's liberation can only be realised in a truly socialist society. The mere incorporation of women into the capitalist workforce would, unlike what Engels and Marx had supposed, not reduce but increase women's oppression. Evaluating the oppression of white middle-class and Third World women in exactly the same terms, 'Eve' concludes that African women's oppression does not differ in quality but quantity. African women are portrayed as the most oppressed of all those oppressed, proletarianized in their proletarian homes. With regards to her attendance of a women's conference in London, 'Eve' commemorates her experience of women's sisterhood across ethnic boundaries. Concluding that women have to liberate themselves from 'Freudian' inferiority complexes and join their men in a socialist revolution movement, 'Eve' prioritises class over gender, yet entirely neglects aspects of colonisation and racial oppression. Because of the ignorance towards that which racial prejudice generates, its writer is very likely a white woman.

Especially notable is the article, 'Women's Liberation: A Black South African Women's View' published by Zanele Dhlamini in *Sechaba* in 1972. The article gains its special

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<sup>24</sup> 'August 9 – Day of our women militants' (*Sechaba*, vol.3, no. 8, August 1969, p. 3).

<sup>25</sup> Eve: 'Women's Liberation. The true proletariat of Africa are the women' (*Sechaba*, vol.4, no.6, June 1970, pp. 15-17).

significance from the fact that the author is not only familiar with Western inspired feminist theories, but apparently feels obliged to present an evaluation of Black women's movements within the context of Western inspired feminism:

*Against this background [Western feminism] I wish to examine the condition of the Black women in South Africa, who live under the policies of Apartheid and also to look at the important role, I think, they have to play in the liberation of all South Africans.*<sup>26</sup>

Dhlamini is aware of the fact, that her ideas prove innovative in a twofold way: in view of the national struggle, her claims might appear too radical, as she calls for a gender revolution *within* the national revolution in order to empower women to participate on an equal basis with men.<sup>27</sup> In terms of Western inspired feminism, however, her ideas may have hardly proved sufficient at all, as Dhlamini calls for black women's emancipation without suggesting any direct confrontation in terms of traditional gender roles. Notably, Dhlamini does not really oppose standard or mainstream concepts of academic feminism, as she wrote the article in a time, when feminist class analyses were still blossoming and groundbreaking .

*At the risk of being counter-revolutionary in terms of present-day Women's liberation analysis, (viz. the core of the contradictions in society is sex exploitation of female by males rather than Marxian class contradictions) I would argue that female oppression via Black males is the least of the Black women's burdens.*<sup>28</sup>

After writing at length about white women's emancipation in the Western world, she continues drawing on South African history, ultimately challenging the myth of multiracial or multicultural sisterhood. She thus remarks quite cynically that a 'system which discriminates against its own kith and kin is not about to act 'lady bountiful' towards those it regards as less than human.'<sup>29</sup> Dhlamini also refers to the white women's 'colour-blind' suffrage movements in the 1930s, which eventually served as an agent in downgrading the quantitative value of the black people's vote.<sup>30</sup> She illustrates white women as birds confined to their cages, deliberately unaware of the oppression they exert on their 'black sisters':

*With their limitations, South African White women have been put on a pedestal. A pedestal based on false and mythical bourgeois standards: that they are fragile,*

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<sup>26</sup> Z. Dhlamini: 'Women's Liberation: A Black South African Woman's View' (*Sechaba*, vol.6, no.9, September 1972, p.5).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*



*decorative, weak (feminine) and incapable of the simplest work that Black women perform daily for both their masters and for themselves. The White man feed the illusion with minor 'gentlemanly' tasks of door opening and cigarette lighting. With black domestic service cheaply available for their household and various family responsibilities, White women have theoretically all the leisure in the world. They go out to earn pin money and to avoid boredom at home.*<sup>31</sup>

Dhlamini applies the concept of 'triple' oppression in order to analyse black women's position in the South African context. Speaking about sexism, however, she hardly draws on patriarchal attitudes inherent in the African tradition. She relates the significance of Black women's oppression entirely to the (male) coloniser, who

*tends to presume his own sexual prejudices into the law he imposes onto the Blacks: Some of which never were under customary law, e.g. depriving women of property rights and installing younger males as guardians of their older widowed or single female relatives.*<sup>32</sup>

Although Dhlamini does not state her commitment to the Black Consciousness Movement directly, her political attitude is definitely influenced by it. Focussing on the principle of Black Solidarity, she ignores the existence of ethnical, economic or gender differences within 'the black community.' According to Dhlamini, Coloured, Indian and African women would suffer under the same conditions. The statistics Dhlamini refers to in order to show the distribution of income along colour lines only distinguish between 'black' and 'white' women.<sup>33</sup> She thereby ignores the existence of an economic hierarchy within the black community, as Coloureds and Indians 'benefited' from the system of work reservation, or rather, have been 'less suppressed.' Dhlamini's identification of African, Indian and Coloured women is however more than debatable: The two latter were neither included in the pass system, nor forced into homeland areas, nor found at the very bottom of the social pyramid. Coloured women, although descending from a very patriarchal background, were not subjected as much to male domination as Indian and especially African women, whom the state regarded as 'perpetual minors' throughout their lives. Furthermore, Dhlamini agrees with the BC notion that oppressive systems subjugate those in power, and request that the white oppressor, realises the limits repression and oppression exert on themselves while serving apartheid through the domination of others.

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<sup>31</sup> Z. Dhlamini: 'Women's Liberation: A Black South African Woman's View' (*Sechaba*, vol.6, no.9, September 1972, p.7).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

Although Dhlamini generally approves feminist reform programmes, she clearly distinguishes them as a privilege of First World societies, where women

*want communal day care for their children, unrestricted abortion and birth control plus equal sharing of home duties like raising babies with their menfolk ... because technology and bottle feeding make this possible. These are legitimate demands reflecting their experience within their society today.*<sup>34</sup>

In accordance with black American feminists, Dhlamini asserts that racial oppression even resolved the problem of gender antagonism, since black people's daily survival 'naturally' answered what feminist ask for.<sup>35</sup>

*Black people had to deal with each other, as people, in much more real terms rather than play games of Ladies and Gentlemen ... It is no exaggeration to say that through the common experience of racist and capitalist exploitation over the years Black women and Black men in South Africa have achieved what Angela Davis called a deformed kind of equality.*<sup>36</sup>

Dhlamini's article shows that black women's rejection of feminism was not merely due to an 'underdeveloped' gender consciousness. They rejected it because it proved entirely inadequate to the conditions they faced daily. Both, black and white women supposed 'the Other' of having a rather ignorant lifestyle. Yet, these ideological differences proved hardly relevant as long as women's organisations did not enter the political arena but stayed within mere social cooperation. The scarcity of political information also caused misunderstandings. Eventually then, men became the predominant selectors and evaluators of underground literature in terms of its 'relevance for the struggle.' The quest for solidarity among blacks, being the ultimate force against white superiority, provided hardly any space for identification with white women's liberation movements. As Asha Moodley recalls:

*News of feminist struggles in Western countries that filtered through sounded alien – burning one's bra to declare one's liberation as a woman did not connect psychically ...we [blacks] were all people under siege. As women we identified with this – the national liberation struggle was our struggle. In this concept we accepted Black Consciousness – "Black man" we interpreted as inclusive of Black women, Black youth, everyone who comprised the Black Community.*<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Z. Dhlamini: 'Women's Liberation: A Black South African Woman's View' (*Sechaba*, vol.6, no.9, September 1972, p. 7).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. See also G. Joseph: 'The Incompatible Marriage à Trois: Marxism, Feminism and Racism', in L. Sargent: *Women and Revolution. A Discussion of the unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, p. 94.

<sup>36</sup> Z. Dhlamini: 'Women's Liberation' (*Sechaba*, vol.6, no.9, September 1972, p. 7).

### 1.3. Voices from the margins: black women's de-construction and difference debates

Until the mid-1980s, the amount of research conducted by black South African women remained significantly small. Furthermore, black women researchers' access data for publications often bore names of white academics only. It was the mainstream canon which granted black women visibility or credibility in the first place.<sup>38</sup> It was only in the 1980s - with the first gender conference organised by the ANC in 1987, the IDASA (Institute for a Democratic Alternative South Africa) hosted conference in Harare in 1989 and the Malibongwe conference in 1990 - that gender concerns found audience in the political arena.<sup>39</sup> Since the beginning of the 1990s, South African gender politics became increasingly challenged by the fundamental question of representation: who speaks for whom? And how should contemporary feminism reconcile the pressures for diversity and difference with those for integration and communality?<sup>40</sup> Much discussion derived from that question when asked at the conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa in Durban in January 1991.<sup>41</sup> The 1992 Nigerian Conference on Women in Africa and Africans in the Diaspora was especially dominated by controversy about whether white women should present papers about black women. Reviewers of these conferences articulated nuances of conflicting outlooks in various issues of *Agenda*. The uncompromising terms exhibited in these articles give evidence of black women's resentment considering their status as *objects* of research or marginalized voices in global systems of knowledge.<sup>42</sup> These sentiments can be located within the movement of 'second-wave feminism' - a response to the Western inspired feminism of the 1970s, whose focus on white, middle-class women drove many black women towards more radical nationalist discourses.<sup>43</sup> It succeeded the American movement of Black Feminism which had been motivated by both, black women's dissatisfaction with

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<sup>37</sup> Asha Moodley as quoted in A. Basu (ed.): The challenge of local Feminisms, p. 138.

<sup>38</sup> C. Hendricks and D. Lewis: 'Voices from the margins' (Agenda, no. 20, 1994, p. 70).

<sup>39</sup> S. Bazilli (ed.): Putting women on the agenda, pp.2-3.

<sup>40</sup> M. Kolawole: Womanism and African Consciousness, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> See for instance Desiree Lewis' comment on the first conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa, held in 1991 at Natal University, Durban. D. Lewis: 'The Politics of Feminism in South Africa' (Staffrider, vol.10, no.3, 1992). Lewis criticises the patronising, racially prejudiced attitudes of white women who assumed leading positions for themselves while silencing black women in discussions.

<sup>42</sup> C.T. Mohanty: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> L. Sargent: 'Introduction', in L. Sargent (ed.): Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism, p. XIII.

white women's dominance in American feminist politics as well as the masculine discourse of the Black Power Movement.<sup>44</sup> Black American feminists as bell hooks and Barbara Smith recall:

*We were unable to usurp leadership positions within the [feminist] movement so that we could spread an authentic message of the feminist revolution. We could not even get a hearing at women's groups because they were organised and controlled by white women<sup>45</sup>... Black men didn't say anything about how poverty, unequal pay, no childcare, violence of every kind including battering, rape, and sterilization abuse, translated into 'liberation.'*<sup>46</sup>

Black feminist theory is supposed to provide the basis for black women's expression, consciousness-raising and a general form of emotional and psychological empowerment. It implies a constructive as well as a deconstructive classification. In the first place, it derives its meaning from the deconstruction and decentralisation of 'mainstream, Western middle-class feminism.' Its conceptualisation is based on the essentialist idea that black women automatically have insight into black experiences by virtue of their socio-economic cultural and/or biological heritage. With regard to the South African context Hendricks and Lewis write:

*In South Africa, 'defining and naming' has usually meant black women questioning their representation by white feminists, white monopolisation of academic research and financial resources and the domination of whites and feminist politics. Many feminists initially dismissed these critiques as emotional, racist, primordial and therefore politically and academically suspect.*<sup>47</sup>

Third World women's writings on women's emancipation focus on a collection of ideas: the simultaneous nature of oppression, the experience of social and political marginality, the crucial role of hegemonic state structures in circumscribing white/black women's daily lives and survival struggles, the significance of memory and writing in the creation of oppositional agency as well as the differences, and contradictions internal to Third World women's organisations and communities. Furthermore, they stress the complex interrelation between feminist, antiracist and nationalist struggles. Dabi Nkululeko was one of the first South Africans who argued for black women's need to determine their own liberation on the institutional level instead of merely organising within the male-dominated sections of society.

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<sup>44</sup> First formulated by American critics such as Barbara Smith (1986), Deborah McDowell (1986) and Michele Wallace (1990), developed mainly in literary criticism, black feminist theory was linked to the upsurge in fiction-writing by African-American women.

<sup>45</sup> b. hooks: *Ain't I a Woman. Black Women and Feminism*, p. 189.

<sup>46</sup> B. Smith: *Home Girls. A Black Feminist Anthology*, p. XXVI.

<sup>47</sup> C. Hendricks and D. Lewis: 'Voices from the margins' (*Agenda*, no. 20, 1994, p. 62).

Most importantly, however, Nkululeko emphasised the right of black women's self-determination in the production of knowledge and liberation, to attain their own theoretical understanding of women's emancipation in a self-sufficient, self-reflective process. A process independent from seemingly more progressive, yet patronising First World feminism.<sup>48</sup> According to this, knowledge derives its power from authenticity, not progressiveness.

In order to reconstruct the feminist movement from black women's perspective, second-wave feminism implies the deconstruction of the multiracial 'imagined community' of women around the world.<sup>49</sup> The focus on deconstruction provides the re-conceptualisation of both feminist theory and practice. Its main objective is to analyse the way black women are 'discursively silenced and textually constructed as inferior or dependent.'<sup>50</sup> 'Deconstruction' can be defined as a movement within post-structuralism, undertaking a radical investigation of power structures within totalising systems of knowledge.

*Racial discourse is at the basis of the knowledge/power dialectic in South Africa and the white interpreter has – wittingly or unwittingly – redefined her authority and often dictated the terms of debates, while black subordination has been confirmed in self-defining processes of white knowledge production.<sup>51</sup>*

Black feminism conceptualised the theory of 'knowledge of power' in order to explain how dominant groups define their subjectivity by projecting it upon dependent inferior marginal groups. Deconstruction thereby reveals that representation and interpretation imply a power relationship in which white power is actively reproduced in the white interpreter's Western-centric knowledge about blacks. Black people's inferiority on the other hand is confirmed by their status as the objects of knowledge or as mere contributors to the white centre's canonical traditions.<sup>52</sup>

The dominance of the representor depends on the projected inferiority of the represented.<sup>53</sup> By concentrating on the psychological motivations of dominant groups, deconstruction shows

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<sup>48</sup> D. Nkululeko: 'The Right to Self-Determination in Research', in C. Qunta (ed.): Women in Southern Africa, p. 88, 91, 104.

<sup>49</sup> C.T. Mohanty: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism, pp. 4-7. Mohanty invokes the term 'imagined community' as referring to Third World women's movements. She thereby does not define Third World women as a coherent interest group, but rejects the political notion of a universal, multiracial feminism based on gender.

<sup>50</sup> C. Hendricks and D. Lewis: 'Voices from the margins' (Agenda, no. 20, 1994, p. 62).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> C. Hendricks and D. Lewis: 'Voices from the margins' (Agenda, no. 20, 1994, p. 70).

how identities are constructed. The process of unmasking power relations among women is supposed to give black and Third World women the possibility to take part in a political and intellectual process confronting issues of power in a global, eclectic and multi-cultural way.

#### 1.4. Womanism: a reactionary tendency?

Despite the striking parallels between American black feminism and its African counterpart, black South African academics rather identify with the notion of ‘womanism’, elaborated by the Nigerian critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in 1985. According to Ogunyemi, womanism recognises the combined impact of racism, neocolonialism, nationalism, economic instability and psychic disorientation on black lives. It corresponds to a positivist, integrative approach, highlighting a dynamism of wholeness and self-healing, presented in the ideal of a black unity, where every person has a modicum of power to be a ‘sister’, ‘brother’, ‘mother’ or ‘father.’<sup>54</sup>

*Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates Black roots, the ideals of Black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the sexual power tussle as with the world power structures that subjugate Blacks.*<sup>55</sup>

Womanism concerns itself with the ethics of survival rather than with the ethics of living.<sup>56</sup> In terms of gender oppression, it hardly ever takes the form of protest literature. Madness, which prominently features in feminist novels as the ultimate breakdown due to sexual oppression, becomes a temporary aberration preceding spiritual growth and the woman’s reintegration into black society.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, this ‘temporary aberration’ results not as much from woman’s realisation of her sexual subjection as from the dehumanisation caused by racism and poverty. While feminism is meant to be exclusively female, womanism aspires to integrate men into an exclusively black movement. Since feminism and womanism contradict themselves in the very nature of their separatist approaches, a crucial disunity occurred in the global picture of women’s movements.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> C.O. Ogunyemi: ‘Womansim: The dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English’ (Signs, vol. 11, no.1, 1985, pp. 71-72).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>56</sup> C.O. Ogunyemi: ‘Womansim: The dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English’ (Signs, vol. 11, no.1, 1985, p. 79).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

There are a variety of reasons for Third World women's rejection of the term 'feminism.' Albeit already stated, it needs to be re-emphasised that, to many African women, 'feminism' bears an over-close association with Western women's movements. Some African women maintain that by accepting feminism or black feminism one faces the danger of parroting as opposed to speaking out creatively.<sup>59</sup> Womanism, by contrast, is supposed to apply specifically to women from the postcolonial world, who did not only suffer from racial, class and gender oppression but (unlike black Americans) were also denied their national identity. In order to act as the custodian of a house of resistance, African womanism incorporated customary institutions such as polygamy and lobola. Whether done in a positive or in a critical way, this illustration of black women's lives might prove alienating to black American feminists.

As it is still blossoming and seeking to include women from all parts of the colonised population, womanism has not yet elaborated definite concepts of gender policies. Although womanism appears like a theory its formative stages, it creates what feminism falls short of: womanism gives black women a wider space to elaborate their own policy, philosophy and historical view. From this point of view, one can understand African womanism to centre in the need for positive gender re-definition within an African cultural context.<sup>60</sup>

South African women's negative response to black feminism is also due to the criticism black American feminists exhibited when Third World societies proved reluctant to join the emerging Western inspired black feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Commenting on the patriarchal power structure of anti-colonialist movements, Black feminist critics, like Barbara Smith, interpreted Third World women's rejection to view sexual identity as the all-determining 'rationale for power relationships as well as for all other levels of human identity and action' as a matter of self-denial in the process of social reconstruction.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast, Kolawole defines womanism as black (especially African) women's totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval and self-assertion in positive cultural ways. She refers to Alice Walker's definitions of both feminism and womanism, which draws attention to some silent ambiguities.

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<sup>58</sup> C.O. Ogunyemi: 'Womansim: The dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English' (*Signs*, vol. 11, no.1, 1985, p. 71).

<sup>59</sup> M. Kolawole: *Womanism and African Consciousness*, p. 8.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>61</sup> B. Smith: *Home Girls*, pp. XXV-XXVI.

*Feminism is the political theory that struggles to free all women: women of colour, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women – as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.*<sup>62</sup>

Although Walker's definition of womanism maintains the faux-pas of assuming universality it focuses on the black perspective. Centring around the psychological, existential and mystical meanings of strong black womanhood, Walker's definition of womanism implies both maturity and the readiness to fight for change. Walker derives the term 'womanist' from black people's saying 'acting womanish', implying 'outrageous, audacious courageous or willful behaviour.' 'Womanish' is meant to be the opposite of 'girlish... frivolous, irresponsible behaviour.'<sup>63</sup>

*A Black feminist or feminist of color ... to know more and in greater detail than is considered 'good' for one [She is] [r]esponsible. In charge. Serious... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male or female... Womanism is to feminism as purple to lavender.*<sup>64</sup>

Whereas Walker seeks to give feminism a black perspective, Ogunyemi integrates feminism into Black Nationalism. Since womanism centres on African women's position in colonised societies, it principally subordinates gender and class hierarchies in favour of racial solidarity.

*The intelligent black woman writer, conscious of black impotence in the context of white patriarchal culture, empowers the black man. She believes in him; hence her books end in integrative images of the male and female worlds. Given this commitment, she can hardly become a strong ally of the white feminist until the political and economic fortunes of the black race improve.*<sup>65</sup>

An increasing number of African academics dismiss the kind of black global solidarity which Walker stresses. They argue for a re-definition and re-inscription of African womanism, they emphasise the importance of nationality and view the Afro-American emphasis on common African experiences as patronising. According to Clenora Hudson-Weems womanism has to be identified as deriving from African values and can only be interpreted within the distinct African context.

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<sup>62</sup> Alice Walker as quoted in M. Kolawole: *Womanism and African Consciousness*, p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> A. Walker: *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens*, pp. XI-XII.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* p. XI.

<sup>65</sup> C.O. Ogunyemi: 'Womansim: The dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English' (*Signs*, vol. 11, no.1, 1985, pp. 68-9).



*Neither an outgrowth nor an addendum to feminism, Africana Womanism is not Black feminism, or Walker's womanism that some Africana women have come to embrace. Africana Womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of African women.*<sup>66</sup>

Womanism seeks to reconstruct anti-imperialist knowledge systems, which give Third World, black and colonised subjects a positive and independent sense of identity.<sup>67</sup> The feminist notion of 'woman', as an analytical category, established prior to any analysis of how women are materially and historically constituted in terms of social relationships, and constructed to include the connotation of women as powerless exploited victims of patriarchy and not as 'material subjects of their own history', is overtly rejected.<sup>68</sup> As womanism redefines African women's role as nurturers and transmitters of customs within black community systems in positive terms, it views African women's preservation of traditional family structures as a deliberate act of social agency. Womanism thereby responds to bell hooks' notion that to name oneself a victim means acting in complicity with an oppressive structure, thereby deliberately subjugating one's self-responsible agency.<sup>69</sup>

African women writers concentrate on the reconstructing of pre-colonial history as a period, frequently characterised by matrilineal relationships, providing women with considerable political and social power.<sup>70</sup> The perspectives of African feminists prove generally similar to those of Africanists who seek to construct a pre-colonial Africa, free from all forms of oppression. It serves as a strategy to create a past that subverts the coloniser's view of the cultural and biological inferiority of black people. The tendency to romanticise and mystify African identity is especially evident in the writings of Afro-American feminists and Africans in the diaspora, where affirmative systems serve a particular mentally decolonising function.<sup>71</sup> Yet, romanticising the past creates a sense of national unity that leads to the subordination of gender struggles, as well.<sup>72</sup> The tendency to deny traditional patriarchy in African pre-colonialist societies proves especially problematic as traditions are thought to be

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<sup>66</sup> C. Hudson-Weems as quoted in M. Kolawole: *Womanism and African Consciousness*, p. 25.

<sup>67</sup> C. Hendricks and D. Lewis: 'Voices from the margins' (*Agenda*, no. 20, 1994, p. 68).

<sup>68</sup> E. Salo: *South African Feminism*, p. 6

<sup>69</sup> b. hooks: *Killing Rage*, p. 58.

<sup>70</sup> C. Hendricks and D. Lewis: 'Voices from the margins' (*Agenda*, no. 20, 1994, p. 68).

<sup>71</sup> M. Kolawole: *Womanism and African Consciousness*, pp. 181-192.

<sup>72</sup> See C. Qunta: 'Outstanding African women: 1500BC-1900AD', in C. Qunta (ed.): *Women in Southern Africa*, pp. 23-64; 'African Women's Mobilisation – The History and the Myth,' in M. Kolawole: *Womanism and African Consciousness*, pp. 43-71.

preserved in order to outline the envisaged transcended society. The political value of feminism is thus determined through its psychological function, that being the resurgence of a true self-image and self-consciousness. The creation of a gendered consciousness determines the way women's claims for citizenship are constituted. It is assumed that once one is conscious, one has to continue the effort towards societal transformation in all its dimensions.

The notion of womanism also implies the need to reassess earlier feminist pronouncements concerning motherhood as the basis of gender oppression. In African tradition, a woman is not regarded as an adult until she has a child. Life without children can be very cruel. Sometimes women are not accepted into their husband's families until they have children.<sup>73</sup> They must also fight against traditional attitudes that deny them their right to participate in any form of organisation outside the home. Calls for active mothering have featured prominently in the history of South African black women's organisations. The ideology of black nationalism identified 'mothering' principally with assertiveness, calling it 'a potentially liberating role where women, empowered by daily struggles or through their other identities, can challenge their oppression under patriarchy.'<sup>74</sup> It can be argued that African women operated as agents in their own right when they decided to act predominantly within their traditional space as wives, mothers and daughters. It also has to be considered, that Western inspired concepts of power relations prove insufficient for the evaluation of women's position within black families, since the family provides an essential force of resistance against racism. Both the extended African family and the matriarchal family acquire a qualitatively different meaning from the term of motherhood than Western conventions based on the norm of the nuclear family do. Furthermore, it proves impossible to draw a clear distinction between private and political spheres due to the impact of poverty which requires a quick circulation of resources, and the African tradition of community life coupled with apartheid forces which seek the dismissal of black family life as a space of physical and psychological regeneration. 'Being politically active' meant to be involved in community issues, to raise children to later revolutionaries, to reconcile the family's identity between the white and black world – in many cases it simply meant to survive. In this respect, feminist considerations of wives as mere auxiliaries have neglected the role of

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<sup>73</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 168.

<sup>74</sup> C. Hendricks and D. Lewis: 'Voices from the margins' (Agenda, no. 20, 1994, p. 67).

‘political widows’ who became the spokesperson of the imprisoned, killed or banned husbands.<sup>75</sup>

The womanist negation of feminist, middle-class bias enhanced a re-evaluation of black culture that proved in many ways diametrical to Western notions of power relations. Miriam Tlali, one of the first black South African women writers, assumes that Western women focus on their powerlessness whereas Africans prove conscious of their motherist power.<sup>76</sup> Brittan and Maynard point out that black ethnic redefinition is largely measured and still defined by white stereotypes, since it directly responds to the assumptions of white society.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, this redefinition acknowledges the validity of stereotypes to some extent, giving it a positive value and thereby challenging white society by mirroring its own prejudices.

The debate on womanism clarifies that a clear definition of womanism has not been established yet. Certainly, considering the diversity of economic, political, social, religious, ethnical and racial interests among the black population, there cannot be one paramount concept of black women’s liberation and emancipation but it constrains womanism to justify itself *ex negativo*: it centres on black women’s negation of Western inspired feminism. This is notwithstanding the fact, that the overwhelming majority of Western women do not identify with the stereotyping of feminists as bra-burning, frustrated menhaters, either.<sup>78</sup>

Ironically, womanists tend to focus on very radical definitions of feminism, criticising the latter for generalisations and ignorance towards the complexity of black women’s conditions. They thereby ignore the manifold divergences of feminist theories centring on the notion of women’s social equity. It appears as a paradox that feminism is considered to be ‘white-minded’ and ‘narrow’ while Marxism, from verifiably white origins, is legitimately embraced by Third World male politicians, without them having their identity credentials questioned.<sup>79</sup> Both feminism and womanism leave space for a variety of interpretations. The principle political agenda of feminism is the empowerment of women. In this regard, feminism neither presents an issue for white women, nor does it contradict womanism,

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<sup>75</sup> See: M. Ramphele: ‘Political Widowhood in South Africa: The embodiment of ambiguity Empowerment and the Politics of Space’ (*Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Science*, 1991, pp. 104-115). ‘August 9 – Day of our women militants’ (*Sechaba*, vol.3, no. 8, August 1969, p. 11).

<sup>76</sup> Interview by C. Lockett with M. Tlali, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): *Between the Lines*, p. 74.

<sup>77</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): *Sexism, Racism and Oppression*, p. 105.

<sup>78</sup> R. Kadalie: ‘The F-word’ (*Agenda*, no. 25; 1995, p. 73).

<sup>79</sup> B. Smith: *Home Girls*, p. XXIX.

although many men in Third World societies would like to see this done.<sup>80</sup> How this empowerment has to be achieved, is a question each woman has to answer herself in the context of her national history.<sup>81</sup> As both theories leave considerable space for individual interpretation, neither womanism nor feminism constitute 'isms' in the common sense. As Abena Busia, a Ghanaian scholar, states:

*Feminism is an ideological praxis that gives us a series of multiple strategies (of reading, of analysis) and what those strategies have in common is that the woman matters.*<sup>82</sup>

Because of its tendency to personalise and individualise, womanism does not identify itself as a political movement. This implies a principle difficulty in the evaluation of womanism and its rejection of feminism for the political empowerment of black women. Referring to the fact that womanism, unlike feminism, is divorced from a political tradition and the sense of a political movement, bell hooks advocates black woman not to neglect feminism, but to reclaim the term and re-work it in a way which directly relates to the lives of black women.<sup>83</sup>

The conceptualisations of black feminism, womanism and Third World or African feminism indicate that black women's process of emancipation eventually reached the level of self-affirmation in the spheres of academic research and politics. The South African history of black women's liberation is a story of re-defining and re-naming. In the 1970s, black women questioned their representation by white liberals in multiracial politics. They struggled alongside their men, supporting them in the elaboration of a new definition of blackness implying the liberation of the black *man*. During the 1980s, African women came more and more into contact with feminist literature, especially black feminist literature from the USA. They now faced two forces which were liberating and patronising at the same time: Western inspired feminism and patriarchal nationalism. Black women are hence marginalized in feminist politics as a consequence of race, and they are marginalized in anti-colonial politics as a consequence of their gender. The consequences of this multiple marginality are fairly predictable – there is simply silence of and about black women.

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<sup>80</sup> K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own: An Analysis of the Silences of History*, In *Search of Herstory*, unpublished MA Thesis p. 24.

<sup>81</sup> b. hooks: 'Talking B(l)ack' (*Fuse*, vol. 13 , no. 4, 1990, p.22.)

<sup>82</sup> M. Kolawole: *Womanism and African Consciousness*, p. 8.

<sup>83</sup> b. hooks: 'Talking B(l)ack' (*Fuse*, vol. 13 , no. 4, 1990, p.22).

### 1.5. Theory in practice: 'fragile unity' or joint separatism

This criticism of left-wing South African politics and research first emerged in the 1970s when neo-marxist revisionism and non-racial politics drowned out the emerging radical theories of race propounded in the Black Consciousness Movement and elsewhere. The urgency of race as an analytical focus re-emerged in the 1990s with the rising number of black academics developing alternative approaches. The latter specifically call for the abolition of entrenched white dominance in key positions. In their post-structuralist analysis of race and colonialism, they prove being highly critical toward both liberal and Euro-centric Marxist concepts.<sup>84</sup>

There has never been a clearly defined role and position of black women within the national liberation movement. The continuous dismissal and re-evaluation of identified targets determined the process of self-reflection significantly. Ideologies and political developments are part of an ongoing social dialogue. Even the most revolutionary ideology consists of elements drawn from previous radical interpretations.<sup>85</sup> Because of the manifold contradictory forces, there developed a great sensitivity towards power relations and the very significance of individual experiences. There is a broad understanding that the political meaning of blackness is not homogenous, but influenced by people's positions on the ladder of class and economic privilege. As mentioned above, reconstruction reveals that representation and interpretation always imply power relationships. This also refers to power relations apparent in black women's research, where black middle-class feminists speak for black working class women, black American feminists speak on behalf of Third World women and lesbian women feel patronised by heterosexual women. The majority of African women definitely needs to have the major stake in issues of women's liberation. However, due to the lack of time and financial resources available, participation in organisational activity remained a largely ignored constituency. Initially, black feminism and womanism claimed black women's solidarity on the basis of their differences towards Western inspired feminism. But if *differences are not equal*, and inequalities always imply power relations, then what is the political definition of blackness, of black solidarity - and who speaks for whom?<sup>86</sup> In the current process of elaborating national gender policies, white South African women feel

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<sup>84</sup> C. Hendricks and D. Lewis: 'Voices from the margins' (*Agenda*, no. 20, 1994, p. 62).

<sup>85</sup> C.R.D. Halisi: 'Biko and Black Consciousness Philosophy: An Interpretation', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 15.

<sup>86</sup> A. Moodley: 'Unravelling the Strands' (*Agenda*, no. 19, 1993, p. 17).

outcast. Social manifestations of black separatism, which in many cases merely reflect the necessity to temporarily escape from white domination, are quickly mistaken as symptoms of anti-white racism.<sup>87</sup> Acknowledging that in South Africa, most studies on women have been conducted by researchers who have failed to reflect on their own role as active participants in the construction of the research process, Holland Muter writes:<sup>88</sup>

*(P)art of the problem with stopping here is that it assumes that racism exists external to ourselves, and does not take account of the various ways that we have been socially constructed within a racially unequal society, and perhaps see the world from a white standpoint.<sup>89</sup>*

Many feminists initially dismissed womanist critiques as emotional, racist, primordial and therefore politically and academically suspect.<sup>90</sup> As did Holland-Muter, a rising number of white South African feminists became conscious of the fact that they unproblematically inherited 'colour blind' feminist theories and

*have interpreted black women's rejection of feminism in South Africa as a sign of backwardness and inability to confront the subordination as women. It is this attitude which is ethnocentric and arrogant!<sup>91</sup>*

Holland-Muter disagrees with the notion of a common sisterhood and claims the need for white women to let go off the need for non-racialism and embrace the challenge of racial difference. Arguing for the construction of a feminism based on women's differences, she opposes Frene's Ginwala's concept of 'fragile unity', based on white and black women's commonalities: 'This political strategy did not problematise the differing power relations and tensions between women but rather perpetuated the inequalities and problems between women.'<sup>92</sup>

From 1994, the struggle for women's equality was no longer conducted solely by the women's movements but became increasingly institutionalised within government structures. A national machinery is thus now being created, incorporating the national, regional and local level. As South African women then begun to structure their relationships with the state, they had to re-define those relations with institutions which determined the policy of gender

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<sup>87</sup> b. hooks: Killing Rage, p. 155.

<sup>88</sup> C. de la Rey: 'Culture, Tradition and Gender: let's talk about it' (Agenda, no. 13, 1992, p.80).

<sup>89</sup> S. Holland-Muter: 'Opening Pandora's box: reflections on 'whiteness' in the South African women's movement' (Agenda, Nr. 25, 1995, p. 58).

<sup>90</sup> D. Lewis: 'Women and Gender in South Africa', in V. Maphai (ed.): South Africa. The Challenge of Change, p. 159.

<sup>91</sup> S. Holland-Muter: 'Opening Pandora's box' (Agenda, Nr. 25, 1995, p. 57).

equality.<sup>93</sup> Thereby, ideological patterns have to be translated into practical, strategic approaches. Any political strategy that regards the state as a lever for progressive social change necessarily pursues a reformist course. In South Africa, reform goes along with transformation and reconstruction. A large part of the state's support of gender oppression or sexual inequality exists at the level of ideology. But ideology has a material base and the ideology of white male supremacy has a tangible impact on shaping the everyday practices and circumstances of women's lives, primarily determined by women's race or class.<sup>94</sup> As law incorporates the domestic, economic, religious or moral customs and values of a community, it functions primarily as means of social control, entrenching these values in the interest of the society's dominant class.<sup>95</sup> In liberal democratic societies, differences are often not incorporated into the definition of liberalism. The institutionalisation of gender on a high national level bears the danger that women will expect their emancipation to be handed down to them and that women's struggle will be reduced to a small group of intellectual activists whose work does not include, reflect or reach the majority of women.

In liberal societies, citizens who are 'naturally' holding equal rights actually lack the power to defeat asymmetric power relations in order to utilise their rights. The ultimate objective is therefore not a 'women's rights feminism', which only addresses the notion of equality, but a 'women's emancipation feminism', which envisages the transformation of society as a whole rather than focussing only on the improvement of the relative status of women.<sup>96</sup>

*Extending formal equality rights to all people provides them with equal treatment and equal opportunities regardless of their previous disadvantage. The latter often confines them to positions of powerlessness and an inability to utilise their rights and opportunities. Substantive equality, however, takes into account the social and economic conditions of people.<sup>97</sup>*

There can never be the embodiment of 'unified feminism', nor is this the goal.<sup>98</sup> Obviously, the experience of patriarchal power relations impacts differently on different women, depending on their social location – as did apartheid.<sup>99</sup> The lack of a 'feminist consensus' on

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> See A. Gouws: 'The rise of the femocrat?' (*Agenda*, no. 30, 1996, pp. 31-35, p. 41).

<sup>94</sup> S. Bazilli (ed.): *Putting women on the agenda*, p. 13.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15

<sup>96</sup> S. Bazilli (ed.): *Putting women on the agenda*, p. 13.

<sup>97</sup> A. Gouws: 'Beyond equality and difference: the politics of women's citizenship' (*Agenda*, no. 40, 1999, p. 54).

<sup>98</sup> S. Bazilli (ed.): *Putting women on the agenda*, p. 21.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

the interpretation of the concept of equality and difference obstructs the installation of crucial gender questions such as: women and work, women and the economy, issues of maternity benefits, protective legislation, equal pay, recognition of unpaid labour, agricultural and domestic sectors, health and safety regulations, working conditions, participation of women in trade unions as well as definitions of women's economic activity in general. The law may concede a 'right' to decent health care, safe abortions, legal representation, a clean environment, or a living wage; but if the coffers of the state and capital refuse to fund the administration of these policies as 'rights', then the right becomes nothing more than the 'plight' it used to be.<sup>100</sup> Women's positions in the arena of reproductive rights prove to be specifically ambiguous. Black women's understanding of abortion rights proves ambivalent, since their 'reproductive matters' used to be mediated by a coercive, racist state and its systems of population control and sterilisation abuse.<sup>101</sup> There is an urgent need to focus on narrow laws that affect particularly black women, such as the administration of welfare benefits or the private law of maintenance as well as the question of land re-distribution. Attention has to focus on laws that appear gender neutral and non-racial but have a disproportionate impact on black women. Dialectic questions reveal the need to convey legislative regulations through the perspective of the people which are predominantly affected. Unnamed experience remains unrecognised and inchoate.<sup>102</sup> Languages reflect and reinforce sexist attitudes in a process of 'constant re-enactment' which perpetuates social attitudes as invisible forces.

*Women's oppression exists not only in the material, practical organisation of economic, social, medical and political structures, but also in the very foundations of logos, reasoning and articulation – in the subtle linguistic procedures and in the logical process through which meaning itself is produced.*<sup>103</sup>

It is therefore important to give both black and white women the space to evaluate their gender interests through their own yardsticks before translating it into the broader women's movement and, eventually, the national political arena.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, womanism challenges

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>101</sup> C.T. Mohanty: *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, p. 12.

<sup>102</sup> J. Penelope: *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers' Tongues*, p. XXXIII.

<sup>103</sup> S. Felman: 'Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy', in C. Belsey and J Moore (eds.): *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, pp. 117-132.

<sup>104</sup> D. Nkululeko: 'The Right to Self-Determination in Research', in C. Qunta (ed.): *Women in Southern Africa*, p. 91.



white woman to realise features of racial discrimination within multiracial women's organisations. Holland-Muter writes in this regard:

*There is an unspoken assumption that we will conduct our meetings in English and that they will happen in the city centres. How many of us can speak an African language? ...The difference is that black people do not have a choice to enter into a 'white' world, neither do they have a choice about whether or not they need to speak English....I am not advocating a few sessions of inward navel-gazing for white women to beat ourselves about our guilt or to offer various defences of our position. Rather what we need to put on the table is the various ways in which we need to interrogate our positions and explore organisationally and theoretically how it is possible to deal with these contradictions and tensions.<sup>105</sup>*

Contradictions and tensions among women of different colour become specifically evident in terms of family-policy. Social security, maintenance laws and family law are based on a specific conception of 'the family'. The conceptualisation of 'the family' is also an intrinsic part of the various forms of nationalism in South Africa.<sup>106</sup> The degree to which South African women's claims to citizenship is constituted through motherhood refers to the social and political implications of motherhood as means of anti-apartheid resistance. The slogan 'A Woman's Place is in the Struggle' (aside from yet again telling women where their place should be) was usually followed by the slogan, 'Mother of the Nation', implying that women can be in the struggle, but as wives and mothers.<sup>107</sup> In its propaganda, the state appeals to black and white women as the 'natural peacemakers' in society.<sup>108</sup> Motherhood became a political status and a vehicle through which women became incorporated into the political order. As Amanda Gouws states, women as mothers nurture the next generation of citizens, but motherhood does not make women equal citizens. (As nurturing generations of black activists did not provide them with an equal standing in the national movement.) Eventually, the values of care, nurturing and responsiveness are not incorporated in the values of citizenship.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> S. Holland-Muter: 'Opening Pandora's box' (*Agenda*, Nr. 25, 1995, pp. 60-61).

<sup>106</sup> S. Bazilli (ed.): *Putting women on the agenda*, p. 11.

<sup>107</sup> Mamphela Ramphele as quoted in H. Zille: 'Life in Transition: An interview with Mamphela Ramphele' (*Leadership*, 6(5), 1987, pp.65-7.)

<sup>108</sup> F. Ginwala: 'Women in South Africa Today' (Paper presented at *Malibongwe Conference*, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 2).

<sup>109</sup> A. Gouws: 'Beyond equality and difference: the politics of women's citizenship' (*Agenda*, no. 40, 1999, p.55).

*[M]otherism' is not enough to sustain a political identity. Through using motherhood as political status, the private sphere is reinscribed into citizenship.<sup>110</sup>*

According to Julia Wells, a proposed theory such as motherism is useful as a tool for explaining events and to a limited extent for making reasonable projections into the future. Applied too rigidly, it can lose its usefulness and become a distraction rather than a help.<sup>111</sup> Many black academics argue that the access to power and citizenship requires the reconstruction of patterns that distinguished gender roles within the struggle. The tendency to identify the 'ism' of feminism as inevitably 'men-hating' or even '-castrating' is evident in both Western and African societies. Yet, most women of both cultures agree to the principle of gender equality – however this equality is understood.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Black women under Apartheid and Separate Development**

#### **2.1. The early 1950s: Institutionalising *Apartheid***

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* p. 58.

<sup>111</sup> J.C. Wells: *We now demand! The History of Women's Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa*, p. 27.

The victory of the National Party (NP) in 1948 changed the history of South Africa significantly. Under the banner of 'apartheid', the NP soon departed from the segregationist, 'benevolent paternalist' policy, which the United Party had pursued from 1934 to 1948. Although apartheid aspired a far more rigid separation of blacks and whites in almost all aspects of social, political and economic life, it did not dismiss but rather amplified and altered already existing legislative means of racial separation. Until the 1970s, the initial idea of social division shifted gradually towards a policy termed 'separate development' which equated ethnicity with nationality and claimed the need to divide colour groups politically, geographically and, eventually, nationally.

The ultimate aim of 'social apartheid', initiated by the NP in 1948, was the preservation and safeguarding of white people's racial identity. The population was divided into defined racial categories that first served to separate whites from 'non-whites', but soon determined inter-racial divisions among 'non-whites', as well. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, which made marriages between whites and blacks illegal, was extended to all people of colour with the 1950 amendment to the Immorality Act of 1927. Cornerstones in the legislative implementation of apartheid were the Population Registration Act of 1950, which officially classified the population into whites, Coloureds and Africans, and the amendment to the Urban Areas Act, which enhanced the implementation of residential separation in the same year.<sup>112</sup> The implementation of the act also included the removal of Coloureds and Indians from urban centres.<sup>113</sup> The Native Resettlement Act of 1954 enabled the government to remove Africans from areas that were not covered by the Urban Areas Act. The so-called 'petty' apartheid, which legitimised the inequality of amenities exclusively reserved for people of different ethnic groups, was officially implemented with the Separate Amenities Act of 1953. Economic differences in the form of social security provided for people of different colour, were enhanced with the 1949 amendment of the 1946 Unemployment Insurance Act, which excluded Africans of low income groups as well as all seasonal and migratory workers. The policy of labour reservation for all people other than African, already initiated with the Native Building Workers Act of 1951, was officially implemented with the 1956 Industrial Conciliation Act. In order to prevent inter-racial competition in the job market, Africans were obliged to perform skilled work only in areas allocated for this

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<sup>112</sup> For an historical evaluation of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act, which had been set up in 1923 and underwent major amendments in 1930, 1937, 1944, 1952, 1957, 1964 and 1972, see: T. Davenport: South Africa. A Modern History, pp. 340-352.

purpose. The 1953 Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act neither declared African trade unions illegal, nor did it recognised them as legal. Yet, Africans were excluded from the term ‘employee’, as previously defined by the 1937 Conciliation Act, and thereby prohibited from participation in trade union work. Furthermore, they were prohibited to participate in strikes. The 1953 Native Labour Act also made separate machinery for Africans compulsory. The 1950s witnessed the establishment of a white political monopoly of power. The Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 outlined the abolition of the system of white parliamentary representation for Indians (established in 1946) and Africans (previously provided by the Native Representative Council, set up in 1936). Verwoerd’s Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act of 1959 rounded off the NP’s Bantu Authorities’ system by defining eight Bantu Homelands. The act also outlined intentions to eventually ‘grant’ these homelands independence.<sup>114</sup> Total white monopoly of parliamentary power was obtained in 1956, when Coloureds were registered on a separate voters roll and were restricted to electing four white representatives to parliament.<sup>115</sup> The 1950s Suppression of Communism Act, which included almost any kind of anti-apartheid action in its definition of ‘communism’, gave the Minister of Justice the power to ban any person or organisation opposing the NP’s policy. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1953 prescribed heavy penalties for civil disobedience.

The Bantu Education Act of 1953 changed women’s stance to the state significantly, since it destructed the most common means of social mobility for the next generation. It transferred direct control of education from the provinces to the Native Affairs Department. Missionary schools, which used to provide the only means for Africans to obtain higher education, had to be registered and received no subsidy. Black schools were staffed by government-trained teachers and had to use official syllabuses which were based on the ideology of apartheid and supposed to enhance the pupils’ identification with rural culture.<sup>116</sup> Because of the mass-exodus of qualified and competent teachers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, teachers were compelled to work in double shifts for minimum wages with overcrowded classes.<sup>117</sup> By 1975, the percentage of secondary and high school African teachers with university degrees had dropped from 36.3 in 1961 to 0.37.<sup>118</sup> School committees and Student Representative

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<sup>113</sup> N. Worden: The Making of Modern South Africa, p. 96.

<sup>114</sup> T. Davenport: South Africa, p. 333.

<sup>115</sup> N. Worden: The Making of Modern South Africa, p. 97.

<sup>116</sup> See also L. Thompson: The Political Mythology of Apartheid, pp. 46-54.

<sup>117</sup> N.J. Diseko: ‘The Origins and Development of the South African Student’s Movement (SASM): 1968-1976’ (Journal of Southern African Studies, vol.18, no.1, p. 42).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

Councils, which could have constituted an effective means for channelling students' grievances to school authorities, were largely composed of representatives appointed by governmental authorities.

## 2.2. Black women and migrant labour

According to the policy of 'separate development', South Africa was not one but ten separate nations: there was the 'white-defined' nation of South African citizens from a white, originally European background and eight (later extended to ten) 'Bantu nations', constituted as the 'homelands' of the African population and largely determined on the basis of language and culture. 'Separate development' was proclaimed to be a policy of differentiation on the grounds of nationhood, granting each ethnic group the self-determination and preservation of its ethnic identity - within the borders of the homelands. The Bantustan policy was a policy of Balkanisation. On the surface, this policy appeared to be fundamentally different from that of former colonial periods, since it did not call for the destruction but preservation of customary unions among the 'black nations.'<sup>119</sup>

Apartheid proved to be a flexible and sophisticated mechanism for sustained economic growth and modernisation. The state held a great degree of centralised control over the production and distribution of the black labour force. The 'white homeland' enclosed all the cities and major towns, the areas of industrial development, all the mines and ports, the main rail and road networks. The Africans, 70 per cent of the population, had to develop their homelands on 13 per cent of the land. These areas were lacking urban centres, industries, infrastructures, important exploitable mining deposits and sea ports. Most of the homeland areas, eroded and over-farmed, proved unable to support the population assigned to them. According to Wolpe, the rate of surplus value and hence the rate of capital accumulation depended above all upon the maintenance of the pre-capitalist relations of production in the reserve economy which provided a portion of the means of reproduction of the migrant labour force.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Journal of Southern African Studies, vol.1, no.1, October 1974, p. 20).

<sup>119</sup> See H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, pp. 8-10.

<sup>120</sup> H. Wolpe: 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power: from segregation to apartheid' (Economy and Society, vol.1, no. 4, November 1972, p. 432).

The industrial growth of 'white South Africa' relied heavily on the black labour force. The contradiction between geographical separation and economic integration was resolved by a spreading pattern of migrant labour, operated through the application of pass laws as well as the uprooting and removal of people. The 'Grand Design of Apartheid'<sup>121</sup> manifested the very intention of the National government to turn the entire black labour force into a permanent system of foreign migrant labour.<sup>122</sup> No matter, how long a family lived and worked in the city; the implementation of the 'Grand Design' sought to turn all black workers into migratory workers, into temporary residents in European areas, into 'temporary sojourners' – the official term applied to black workers, permitted to stay in white areas only as long as they could be usefully employed by whites.<sup>123</sup> These 'temporary sojourners' were an integral part of the country's economy. Many of them had never visited their 'homeland', which was officially supposed to be their permanent residence, a site which presumed to provide Africans with basic economic needs as well as social, political and cultural freedom. The Native Affairs Department described its policy to the Institute of Race Relations in the mid 1950s as follows:

*Dependants of poorly paid workers in urban areas will be much better off financially if they remain in the reserves or take up residence in a rural village where they are at least in the position to grow their own mealies, vegetables, etc. The bread winner can be accommodated either on his employers property or in a hostel...and remit as much of his monthly earnings as he is able to, through the Native Commissioner, to his dependants. In this manner he will at least save a pound or two pounds a month in rent.<sup>124</sup>*

Black people were regarded as units of labour, who could be manipulated at will.<sup>125</sup> Being a 'foreign labour force' in 'white South Africa', the black worker was neither granted rights of domicile nor citizenship and was thus never entitled to claim political rights.<sup>126</sup> Even if husband and wife were fortunate enough to work and live in the same urban area, they were not necessarily able to live a real family life. According to Francis Wilson, the migrant labour

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<sup>121</sup> In more recent studies D.B. Posel questioned the thesis of a 'Grand Design' and suggested that apartheid was much more pragmatic than a 'Grand Design' suggests.

<sup>122</sup> M. Legassick: 'Legislation, Ideology and Economy in Post – 1948 South Africa' (Journal of Southern African Studies, vol.1, no.1, October 1974, p. 29).

<sup>123</sup> M. Wilson: Migrant Labour in South Africa. Paper for the Abe-Bailey Institute of International Studies Seminar, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1971, p. 18; E. Kuzwayo: Call Me Woman, p. 7.

<sup>124</sup> This way the Native Affairs Department described its policy to the Institute of Race Relations in the mid 1950s. As quoted by M. Legassick: 'Legislation, Ideology and Economy in Post – 1948 South Africa' (Journal of Southern African Studies, vol.1, no.1, October 1974, p. 20).

<sup>125</sup> H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p. 13.

<sup>126</sup> M. Legassick: 'Legislation, Ideology and Economy in Post – 1948 South Africa' (Journal of Southern African Studies, vol.1, no.1, October 1974, p. 27).

system was based on the premise that human beings could be broken into two parts: a 'labour unit' working in town, separated from the other part, a man with a family.<sup>127</sup>

Everybody, who did not belong to the black urban working class, had to be resettled in 'his' homeland. The latter in fact served a threefold function: In the first place, it had to supply the 'white-defined' South Africa with cheap black labour. Secondly, it served as a kind of 'dumping ground' for those the state considered to be non-productive, 'unnecessary dependants' such as wives, children, disabled and old people as well as professional Africans such as doctors, attorneys and industrialists.<sup>128</sup> Thirdly, the political aspirations of Africans should be channelled into the Bantustans. *His* 'homeland' was the place where the African *man* was supposed to develop *his* cultural and political identity. Yet, through arbitrary acts such as the deposition of traditional chiefs in order to replace them with more pliant nominees, the government was continuously devaluing the tribal structures it claimed to retain. The government's contemptuous manipulation of tribal institutions to suit its own needs seriously damaged the status customary institutions used to have in the eyes of the local people.<sup>129</sup>

The realisation of the 'Grand Design' of apartheid meant the destruction of urban communities and family units in order to establish a concept which viewed African men and women as nothing but single parts of a huge black work force. Black people were not supposed to 'occupy' urban areas in order to lead a life but to work for cash. People were removed on a large scale, former townships were destroyed or resettled.<sup>130</sup> Every African who could not qualify for residential rights and thus failed to qualify for a house as well, stayed as a migrant worker in a hostel or was entirely dismissed.<sup>131</sup> The new housing concept introduced by the government further reflected its view on migrant workers being 'single work units.' It started to build mammoth hostels which were supposed to accommodate thousands of workers.<sup>132</sup> The hostels appeared prison-like: many had built-in police charge offices and electronically operated doors in order to prohibit movements by the residents. A survey conducted by Ramphela and Boonzaier in 1987/88 reported an average bed occupancy

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<sup>127</sup> F. Wilson: Migrant Labour in South Africa, p. 188.

<sup>128</sup> M. Legassick: 'Legislation, Ideology and Economy in Post – 1948 South Africa' (Journal of Southern African Studies, vol.1, no.1, October 1974, p. 27).

<sup>129</sup> 'Zeerust: the women's battle' (Drum, May 1958).

<sup>130</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid: The Fight for Freedom in South Africa, 1920-1975, p. 79.

<sup>131</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Oberym, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 12.

<sup>132</sup> F. Wilson: Migrant Labour in South Africa, pp. 40-43, pp. 178-178.

of 2,8 persons; a person to working toilet ratio of 133:1 and a person to tap ratio of 117:1.<sup>133</sup> According to Wilson's survey from 1972, bedrooms were furnished with up to 40 double-decker iron beds. The kitchens provided no space to sit and eat.<sup>134</sup> These living conditions created an atmosphere of depression, apathy, brutality, severe sexual harassment, alcoholism and fear. A woman could be locked up in the punishment cell for the slightest offence. The ruling power was usually concentrated in the hands of elderly male convenors called *izibonda*, as their role closely resembled that of men in rural areas who were employed by the government authorities to control local villages.<sup>135</sup>

Because of the scarcity of jobs and houses, employment and municipal accommodation was usually dependent upon the operation of 'homeboy' and kinship networks. Unlike men, women migrants usually did not enter towns as part of such networks.<sup>136</sup> Due to the discriminative housing policy of the government, access to accommodation for many women came solely via relationships with male bed holders. Their economic dependence on male bed-holders led to harsh competition among women. This was exaggerated through the dominance of patriarchal attitudes among Africans. Ramphele and Boonzaier estimated that 71 per cent of the males and only 18 per cent of the women enjoyed regular incomes.<sup>137</sup> Poor and uneducated migrant workers were rather likely to accept economic shortages than allowing their wives to enter waged work. This attitude was chiefly derived from an opinion opposing the economic independence of women. Moreover it was feared that physically damaging labour could interfere with women's fertility.<sup>138</sup> The majority of men living in hostels adhered to the common stereotypes of women's social roles, the idea that women do not think rationally, the double standards of sexual morality and the sexual division of labour. 'Feminine' deferential behaviour and physical attractiveness, measured predominantly on white standards, became a matter of survival for many women.<sup>139</sup> Women were acutely aware of the fragility of men's egos and the need to make these men feel like 'masters of their own domains.' Most women recognised that they were more likely to get what they wanted out of

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<sup>133</sup> M. Ramphele and E. Boonzaier: 'The Position of African Women: Race and Gender in South Africa', in: E. Boonzaier and J. Sharp (eds.): South African Keywords, p. 157.

<sup>134</sup> F. Wilson: Migrant Labour in South Africa, p. 42.

<sup>135</sup> M. Ramphele and E. Boonzaier: 'The Position of African Women: Race and Gender in South Africa', in: E. Boonzaier and J. Sharp (eds.): South African Keywords, p. 157.

<sup>136</sup> E. Preston-Whyte: 'Women Migrants and Marriage', in E.J. Krige and J.L. Comaroff (ed.): Essays on African Marriage in South Africa, p. 159.

<sup>137</sup> M. Ramphele and E. Boonzaier: 'The Position of African Women: Race and Gender in South Africa', in: E. Boonzaier and J. Sharp (eds.): South African Keywords, p. 157.

<sup>138</sup> P. Mayer: Townsmen or tribesmen, p. 212.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., pp. 160-163.



a marriage if they seemed to possess the ‘traditional’ female virtues of modesty and deference.

In order to keep ‘unproductive appendages’ out of the cities, the government sought to reduce secondary schools in the urban areas so that parents had to send their children into the homelands if they wanted them to receive school education above the primary level.<sup>140</sup> Children could only stay with their parents if the latter had registered the child’s birth in that area. Since the registration of African births has not been compulsory, many illiterate mothers neglected the provision of the documents which would ultimately govern the children’s lives.<sup>141</sup>

### 2.3. Women’s role and status in the concept of Separate Development

#### 2.3.1. Black women and the urban areas

In order to prevent women from ‘immigrating’ into cities as an ‘adjunct’ to the procreative capacity of the Bantu population, husbands were periodically allowed to visit their families in the homelands. Beyond his annual leave of two weeks, however, the migrant worker lived in cheap hostels in the cities, separated from his family in the homeland. According to Section 10 (1) of the Black (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1949, ‘unqualified’ Africans were only allowed to stay for 72 hours in ‘white’ urban areas.<sup>142</sup> Wives of men, who were qualified under Section 10 to live in urban areas, could apply for permission to live with their husbands in the townships. It was rarely granted. If a wife of an urban worker did not manage to find a job in town, she had to stay in the reserve, waiting for her husband to visit her during his annual leave. A woman from an urban area seeking to obtain employment had to qualify under Section 10(1)(a)(b) or (c) of the Urban Areas Act in the first place. Once she found work, she had to have her service contract registered. The details of her employment had to

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<sup>140</sup> See T. Lodge: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, pp. 116-118.

<sup>141</sup> F. Meer: ‘Women in Apartheid Society’, in D. Mermelstein (ed.): The Anti-Apartheid Reader, p. 238.

<sup>142</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 12.

be written into her reference book, and then signed by her employer on a regular basis.<sup>143</sup> Female work seekers from rural areas were in a rather difficult position. Firstly, they had to register as work seekers at the labour office in their homeland area and *wait* for a requisition for workers to come through the labour bureau. Once work was available, they could migrate to the urban area on a contract worker basis and with a Section 10(1)(d) qualification written into their reference books.<sup>144</sup> According to the Urban Areas Act, permission to do so was subject to the availability of accommodation. Considering the difficulties a woman faced when seeking legal residence in an urban area, it was in fact her relation to a man that proved most important to gain permission for residence. Obligatory as of 1960, an African woman's reference book required information about her male guardian or husband, whereas a man's reference book included information only on him.<sup>145</sup> If a woman decided to leave or divorce her husband, she ran the risk of losing both her accommodation and the right of residence in an urban area. The number of single women who managed to stay in urban areas was accordingly small.<sup>146</sup>

Women often failed to qualify for Section 10 for not staying continuously in one place. It was, for instance, common practice that women went to their parents' home for the period of pregnancy and child bearing. A woman, who qualified to live in an urban area under Section 10, immediately lost such right, if she married a man living in the reserves. Unmarried women were often granted residence in the urban area where their parents lived. They did, however, immediately lose their right of residence, if they married a man from another urban area – although they did not automatically gain the right to live with their husband. If an African woman failed to qualify for her husband's urban area, she had to go 'back' to 'her homeland' – a place she had probably never been to before.<sup>147</sup> Women who became

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<sup>143</sup> S. Duncan: 'Women under Apartheid - African women and the pass laws' (NUSAS Law Directive, Law Students Council. Law in South Africa: Lifting the Veil, Cape Town Law Conference, July 1981, pp. 55-57).

<sup>144</sup> J. Yawitch: Tightening the noose: African women and influx control in South Africa 1950-1980, p.6. In practice, however, the local rural labour bureau did not recruit women to work in urban areas, since the 'reserve army' of female labour in urban areas was usually thought to be large enough to serve urban labour needs, without women from rural areas having to migrate.

<sup>145</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, p. 9; J. Simons: 'South Africa's family and marriage law reformed: towards one system for all South Africans' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 282). The amendment of the Bantu Labour Act in 1964 increased the restrictions on rural women's mobility to urban areas. An unqualified woman who wished to take up employment in an urban area had to be given the prior consent of her guardian if she was under 21 years of age. Furthermore, she required a certificate of approval from the commissioner of her home district, a permit from the urban labour office and a certificate from the municipality that housing was available for her. The permission to work had to be endorsed in her reference book and her contract of service had to be registered.

<sup>146</sup> H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p. 26.

<sup>147</sup> S. Duncan: 'Women under Apartheid' (NUSAS Law Directive, Law Students Council. Law in South Africa: Lifting the Veil, Cape Town Law Conference, July 1981, p. 58). It was only in 1980 that wives and children

widowed, divorced, separated or deserted, usually lost their right of residence as well. State housing, apart from hostels, was only available to families. In 1968, state allocation of family housing was restricted to men who qualified under Section 10(1)(a) and (b) of the Urban Areas Act and whose wives also qualified to be in urban areas. Women have been denied Section 10 (1) c rights if their husbands were not occupying family accommodation but living in hostels, on employers' premises or in unauthorised accommodation.<sup>148</sup> An African woman was only given Section 10 (1) (b) rights if she had been employed continuously for more than 10 years by one employer or could prove 15 years of continued, legal residence in this area.<sup>149</sup> Since a widowed woman was not entitled to keep the tenancy of her former husband's house, she faced immediate eviction after his death. As most of the hostels and compound accommodations were reserved for men, a widowed wife had hardly any chance to stay in the urban area. Even if she managed to receive a lodger's permit, her children and dependants would have been sent away to the reserves. If a woman decided to leave her husband, she had to depart from her children as well. Since 1978, however, African women could buy houses in their own right or rent them if they had dependants to support.<sup>150</sup> The permission to live in an urban area depended on the black person's work permission as well as the existing labour contract. Each feature could easily fall victim to the arbitrary bureaucracy. If a worker was suspected of being politically active or participating in trade unions, he/she could be immediately expelled from the urban area he/she lived in.<sup>151</sup> Women who were between 15 and 60 years old, who were living in urban areas and were frequently unemployed had to avoid every activity which could make them fall within the definition of an 'idle Bantu' in Section 29 of the Urban Areas Act. Between the two extremes of those women living and working legally in urban areas and those trapped in the Bantustans, there have been other groups of women in situations not as starkly defined, such as women living in commuter townships. Women in squatter communities may often have had the right to work in urban areas, but unemployment and lack of accommodation forced them into situations where their access to work became increasingly tenuous.<sup>152</sup>

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were granted the right to live with their husband or father without having to endure the bureaucratic problems outlined above.

<sup>148</sup> J. Yawitch: Tightening the noose, p.10.

<sup>149</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 12.

<sup>150</sup> J. Yawitch: Tightening the noose, p.10. The state initiated a housing policy that emphasised buying houses and self-help housing rather than the provision of state-owned rented accommodation, which would have been an affordable alternative for women.

<sup>151</sup> H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p. 27.

<sup>152</sup> J. Yawitch: Tightening the noose, p. 12.

### 2.3.2. Black women in the homelands

The system of migrant labour exerted a powerful force on the 'superfluous appendages' - the families of the black workers.<sup>153</sup> Many of the millions of African women who were 'resettled' in the homelands, had been born and lived in urban areas all their lives. Resettled in the reserves, the wife of a migrant worker was virtually living the life of a widow among all the other 'unproductive labour units.'

African women living in the reserves, were suffering disabilities in almost every facet of their existence. Resettled on land which neither then nor in the future would be desired or needed by the whites, they were literally thrown away.<sup>154</sup> Unlike their men, African women had hardly any possibilities to escape the extreme poverty and hopelessness of the reserves. There was no money for mobility and no means of earning it. There were no natural features to enhance the value of the land, hardly any infrastructure, telephones, doctors, schools, social and other amenities.<sup>155</sup> The activity of the women was often weakened by malnutrition. Tuberculosis and many other diseases usually associated with malnutrition and poverty were and still are wide spread. In any case, there was nowhere else African women could have legally gone to.

Since it was illegal for the majority of African women to live with their husbands, there was a growing number of female headed households in the homelands. As a result, the number of marriages were increasingly deteriorating. As survey conducted in Durban in 1984 showed that while the majority of white, Indian and Coloured women (over 60 per cent) were

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<sup>153</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, p. 80. In the 1970s, 'superfluous appendages' became an official term for the migrant workers' dependents. This new classification reflected the increasingly rigorous procedures of removals and influx control. The government even sought to restrict women's migration to the African towns in the reserves near the border industries, unless one parent had a factory job.

<sup>154</sup> By the 1940s, any semblance of a genuine subsistence economy had already collapsed. In 1949, a survey on the Keiskammahoek District of the Ciskei stated: 'The dependence of the villagers upon the earnings of their emigrant workers is so great that it would probably be more accurate to say that the economy of the district rests firstly upon the fact that it is a reservoir of labour for the mines and industries of the Union, and secondly upon the subsistence farming of those who remain behind.' Keiskammahoek Rural Survey, vol. II, pp. 4-5 as quoted in C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 69.

<sup>155</sup> In 1949 the Keiskammahoek Rural Survey reported: 'By the time a woman has passed the reproductive years, she has born, on the average, 7 children which means that at any given time, 1 in 5 of the youngest and strongest of the female workers is pregnant and as many have suckling infants. Before the normal housekeeping tasks of cooking, washing and cleaning even begin, the women have usually long distances to go to fetch water in buckets from the rivers; wood is collected and carried in large bundles from the forest; and then the mealies must be stamped and grounded, preparatory to their cooking. The trading stations are sometimes miles away.' Keiskammahoek Rural Survey, vol. II, p. 140 as quoted in C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 146.

married, the majority of African women (58 per cent) was divorced.<sup>156</sup> The migrant labour system aggravated and created a social chaos within the black communities: illegitimacy, bigamy, prostitution and alcoholism, breakdown of parental authority, malnutrition, tuberculosis and venereal diseases were the results of a policy that claimed to provide every group the preservation of its ethnic identity.<sup>157</sup>

The wife of the migrant worker was relying on the money of her husband. Many migrant workers, however, had to supply their parents or other dependants as well. Due to the geographical distance to his wife and the male dominated African culture, many workers expected their wives in the homelands to be faithful, while they themselves founded new relationships or even families in the towns. Accordingly, there was a rising number of unwanted, illegitimate children without any attendants. In 1978, half of the births in the Ciskei were illegitimate.<sup>158</sup> Most mothers had five to seven children to care for. The infanticide rate was accordingly high.<sup>159</sup> Since patriarchal patterns were still deeply entrenched, the migrant worker, although living far and for long periods away from home, remained the official head of the family.

*Men are gone. But even although they control local politics and society. It is difficult to learn to make decisions, especially with men in the background, coming home and leaving again.... At times we cannot make decisions alone – our plans get frustrated, fields are left unploughed.*<sup>160</sup>

Due to the lack of sufficient land, women suffered from the land hunger endemic in the reserves. Since the local authorities often refused to allocate land to females, unmarried women with family obligations were usually last to be allocated land.<sup>161</sup> In fact, only a widow with children had a real chance to receive land – although it was usually only half of that allocated to a man.<sup>162</sup> The administration justified the minimal allocations given to women with the argument that women worked less productively than men, albeit women who did

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<sup>156</sup> F. Meer (ed.): Black-Woman-Worker, p. 96.

<sup>157</sup> F. Wilson: Migrant Labour in South Africa, pp. 175-190; M. Wilson: Reaction to Conquest, pp. 20-22.

<sup>158</sup> J. Shapiro: 'Political and Economic organisation of women in South Africa – the limitations of a notion of 'sisterhood' as a basis for solidarity' (Africa Perspective, no. 15, Autumn 1980, p. 12).

<sup>159</sup> Statistics see H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p. 29.

<sup>160</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Oberyem, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p.196.

<sup>161</sup> P. Mayer: Townsmen or tribesmen, p. 234; C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 13.

<sup>162</sup> Natal Organisation of Women: 'The Nature of women's oppression in South Africa today' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1 -18.1.1990, p. 2).

most of the work in the fields.<sup>163</sup> The administration argued that the land needed to be provided for men with families. Yet, in many reserves there were more female than male headed families. Although widows paid the same taxes as men, they did not gain the right to change their place of residence. Considering the minimal amount of land (often not more than 2 acres) a women received, most women struggled badly to pay the quitrent and local tax and to buy food and clothing for themselves and their children. Infant mortality was known to be extremely high in the reserves, malnutrition being one of the most frequent causes.<sup>164</sup> Women in the reserves were also supposed to feed government work crews and fill dipping tanks without pay or reimbursement.<sup>165</sup> Betterment schemes destroyed traditional patterns of settlement and threatened women's already tenuous access to land.<sup>166</sup> Cattle culling was seen as another attack on more than an economic asset. Cattle had a social function and a symbolic value far beyond monetary terms. It was a prestigious symbol of the family's social status and relationships with other kin and neighbouring groups. The scarcity of land led to an increasing competition between men and women. It was a kind of competition that resulted from the apartheid policy and would never had taken place within the traditional tribal community.<sup>167</sup> African women, on the bottom of the social scale, were caught between industrialisation and re-tribalisation.

### 2.3.3. Black women's legal and social status in transition

The concept of apartheid and separate development proclaimed the sovereignty and independent development of every ethnic group. In practice, however, this idealistic intention

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<sup>163</sup> H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p.22.

<sup>164</sup> J. Simons: 'South Africa's family and marriage law reformed' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 221.) According to Simons, most statistics have been estimated since the Government did not continuously keep mortality or morbidity statistics for Africans as it did for all other sections of the population.

<sup>165</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, p. 69. During 1963, in the 'Natal Women's Revolt', lead by the ANCWL representative Dorothy Nyembe, rural women refused to fill and then destroyed the tanks.

<sup>166</sup> M. Hunter: Reaction to Conquest. Effects of Contact with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa, pp. 67-68.

never materialised and the policy eventually degenerated into a perfect system of neo-colonialist exploitation. This was especially manifested in the twofold law system operating in South Africa: the common (Roman- Dutch) law and customary (tribal) law.

Initially, both law systems had very backward notions about women. Female South Africans occupied junior legal positions, always standing under the guardianship of their nearest male relative. They could not hold public office, nor were they allowed to obtain professional qualifications without the consent of the husband. Since she was said to have no *locus standi* (the right to be heard in court or other legislative proceedings), a women could not be sued without her husband's authorisation.<sup>168</sup> Hence, she was not supposed to institute any legal proceedings other than the divorce of her husband. In customary law, as well as in the initial common law system, all marriages were automatically 'in community of property.'<sup>169</sup> Thereby, the couple possessed (and owed) everything in equal-half shares, everything became the joint liability. Yet, women could neither enter into contracts in their own right nor could they acquire or dispose property without the assistance of their husband.

During the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, few legislative amendments were designed to ameliorate white women's rights and legal capacity. The most important alterations have been the implementation of the 1953 Matrimonial Affairs Act and the 1984 New Matrimonial Property Act.<sup>170</sup> Through the execution of an 'ante nuptial' contract, all variable consequences of a common law marriage were excluded. Thereby white women could own and deal with property in their own right and gained full legal capacity. But whereas white women's social emancipation had been acknowledged by the law system applied to them, African women remained bound by a complex interlacing of tribal and common law. The insistence of apartheid on the preservation of the indigenous culture lead to contradictions and disabilities which made the system of customary law rather destructive than supportive for African communities. In fact, the government made a parody of traditional institutions when it tried to maintain tribal structures and laws in an advanced industrialised state. In this regard, the Federation of South African Women (FSAW) stated in its preamble:

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<sup>167</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 234.

<sup>168</sup> S. Samuel: 'Women married in customary law. No longer permanent minors' (Agenda, no. 40, 1999, p. 24). See also B. Mabandla: 'Women and Law in South Africa' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 8.

<sup>169</sup> M. Horrel: A brief guide to 'Some Laws Affecting African Women', p. 1.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, pp.10-11; C. Qunta (ed.): Women in Southern Africa, pp. 81-82. The 1984 Matrimonial Property Act abolished the male material power within marriages. Common law African marriages, however, were largely excluded from the Act.

*We recognise that the women are treated as minors by these marriage and property laws because of ancient and reverted traditions and customs. Customs which had their origins in the antiquity of the people no doubt served purpose of great value in bygone times.<sup>171</sup>*

Customary law, institutionalised by whites and imposed on blacks, has been full of contradictions. These were caused by the misinterpretations of colonialist governments when they tried to restore former social systems of customs and laws. Institutions as a money economy or enforced limitations of cattle grazing proved alien to traditional African societies. Common law terms such as ownership, contract and status reflect an individualism which proved foreign to traditional African cultures where property, decision-making as well as the right to act rested with the family rather than with the individual. The unwritten law of tribal societies wanted women to exercise their property rights through their sons. This system had already been reduced in the early colonial period, when magistrates' courts and the Appeal Court introduced 'native law' regulations that were alleged to free African women from economic disabilities.<sup>172</sup> The retention of the system of chiefs is another example for the superficial restoration of traditional structures in order to establish apartheid theory and administration. In traditional African societies, chiefs governed with a council of tribal elders, a method that was traditionally patriarchal since it excluded women and younger men. Yet, it was not wholly undemocratic. Under apartheid, chiefs became civil servants appointed by and entirely dependent on the National Government. Since the council of elders no longer existed, chiefs did nothing but to carry out the law and order laid down by the National Government.<sup>173</sup> In short, the colonialist governments kept the form but removed the content of the traditional law system.

In African societies, marriage is both an avenue to adulthood as well as an important social and kinship obligation. In rural areas, the position of an ageing unmarried women is supposed to be anomalous. She is a burden to her family and, in particular, to her brothers after her fathers death. The traditional African household constituted an integral whole in which each family member held a special position according to his/her sex, age and status. The laborious work had to be done for the joint family headed by the father. The African family is traditionally dominated by the *umnumzana*, the patriarchal head holding the rights to negotiate the lobola for his daughter. Historically, he is also legitimated to exercise

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<sup>171</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 280.

<sup>172</sup> M. Wilson: 'Xhosa Marriage in Historical Perspective', in E.J. Krige and J.L. Comaroff (eds.): Essays on African Marriage in South Africa, pp. 144-145.



polygamy. Holding the most responsible position, the husband and father managed everything that was produced and acquired by his family.<sup>174</sup>

*The woman knows that she is not equal to her husband. She addresses the husband as 'father' and by doing so the children also get a good example of how to behave. A woman refrains from exchanging words with a man, and if she does, this reflects bad upbringing on her part.*<sup>175</sup>

African women have always occupied minor positions in the basic unit of the tribal society - the patriarchal, extended family.<sup>176</sup> Their clearly defined economic position, however, had given them a kind of social independence and authority that was unknown to contemporary Western society. They had political control over areas of activity such as farming, marketing, trading or household and family affairs. African women hence possessed means of production, or, as Africans have long believed, even controlled some aspects of the supernatural to exert power. Women's solidarity groups, based on kinship, age, culture or economic production tasks, played a critical role in providing formal relationships for women in the community as well as endowing them with a psychological sense of self-esteem. Some of them attained a high degree of independence if they became diviners, herbalists or even chieftainesses. The fact that colonial powers by-passed female leaders when they manipulated tribal systems, shows that they might not have even known that women leaders existed. Meeting with a leadership that was solely male, they concluded that women's subordination was total.<sup>177</sup> Lacking a place in the chief's council, African women used to control and exert power by working through men. This happened either unofficially, through covert support, or officially through an elective, appointive or inherited office-holder of women's affairs.<sup>178</sup> A woman's status derived from her father's or husband's social standing. Women were seen as an economic asset who might own and transmit property, even although they could not inherit it.<sup>179</sup> In community life of African societies, there was no law of contract or ownership that distinguished between the capacity of men and women. In this

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<sup>173</sup> T. Lodge: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, pp. 272-3; M. Hunter: Reaction to Conquest, p. 552-553.

<sup>174</sup> E. Preston-Whyte: 'Women Migrants and Marriage', in E.J. Krige and J.L. Comaroff (ed.): Essays on African Marriage in South Africa, p. 163.

<sup>175</sup> Inkatha's Ubuntu-Botho: Good Citizenship as quoted in S. Samuel: 'Women married in customary law' (Agenda, no. 40, 1999, p. 25).

<sup>176</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 13.

<sup>177</sup> J. O'Barr: 'African women in politics', in M.J. Hay and S. Stichter (ed.): African Women. South of the Sahara, p. 144.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., pp. 141-145.

<sup>179</sup> M. Hunter: Reaction to Conquest, pp. 117-121.

regard, African societies were not only ante-capitalist, but also anti-capitalist.<sup>180</sup> Women were not supposed to contend with men for power, since the distinctive male and female roles were not competitive. Moreover, there was no crucial division in women's productive and reproductive work. As soon as babies were born, they were taken along to the field. In most African communities, domestic services have traditionally been female institutions. This, however, did not include waged work, performed outside the extended family. Before industrialisation, activities such as keeping animals, making clothes, preparing food and growing vegetables had economic value since they were performed to satisfy household needs. This kind of work was indistinguishable from women's other household and productive chores.<sup>181</sup>

In African societies, reproductive work takes place within the community. As women share reproductive functions within the extended family, children call every elderly female family member 'mother.' In customary Bantu societies, the institution of marriage implies a system of personal relations that proves entirely different from Western understanding. The word 'marriage' is not directly translatable into Zulu, since its indigenous meaning is not that of a contractual union between the spouses as in the case of the English term. A Zulu woman 'goes on a long journey' (*enda*), this action being known as *umendo*.<sup>182</sup> It is meant to be a transition to the status of adulthood. Traditionally, consent of the bride was not essential to a legal marriage as her father or legal guardian consented on her behalf. Love marriages were generally disapproved of.<sup>183</sup> The man receives his bride to his patrilineal home, where she is expected to be productive and to continue the descent line of her husband's patrilineage. The rituals performed during the wedding ceremonies indicate what is meant by 'going a long journey', transcending from maidenhood to motherhood and becoming gradually integrated into another descent group. Most of the rituals are connected to the mother-in-law, from whom the bride is going to take over eventually. On her wedding, the bride enters a system of rules of over-respect and avoidance which are gradually lifted as her marriage and motherhood proceed. All avoidances are eventually lifted when she reaches her menopause. Yet, it is only when she dies that a Zulu woman becomes entirely integrated into her

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<sup>180</sup> A. Césaire: Discourse on Colonialism, p. 23.

<sup>181</sup> See A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p.124.

<sup>182</sup> H. Ngubane: 'Marriage, Affinity and the Ancestral Realm: Zulu marriage in female perspective', in E.J. Krige and J.L. Comaroff (ed.): Essays on African Marriage in South Africa, p. 84.

<sup>183</sup> M. Wilson: 'Xhosa Marriage in Historical Perspective', in E.J. Krige and J.L. Comaroff (eds.): Essays on African Marriage in South Africa, p. 137.

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<sup>93</sup> She was nevertheles  
Women's incomes w  
Where similar restrict  
with other rights or  
s in their attempts to  
choose to marry accor  
y) law. Whereas most  
v, marriage by tribal l

inism, p. 15; E. Mashinini:  
ibesmen, p. 213, p. 237.  
nphs and for their tears, p.  
ainst Apartheid, p. 8.  
nphs and for their tears, p.

husbands descent group.<sup>184</sup> In all customary Bantu societies, a young wife  
system of patriarchal control predominantly through relations with elderly  
In the traditional Xhosa society, a young wife is expected to spend sev  
homestead of her mother-in-law, where she receives teaching in terms of do  
process of socialisation into a domestic role includes a severe training in  
attitudes towards older members of the extended family, in particular the  
case of a polygamous marriage, the young wife might live under the super  
co-wife.<sup>186</sup>

As authority structures were not simply established on gender specific feat  
as mothers-in-law and senior wives occupied high positions, which gave t  
power contributing to the oppression of other women.<sup>187</sup> Anthropological s  
research on pre-colonial Pondoland women reveal that certain categories o  
the mother of the chief, his first wife or sisters exerted considerable power c  
women.<sup>188</sup> These women would rather resist any change to the traditional  
women, such as the junior wives and daughters-in-law, were merely more th  
senior women. They had to do their mother-in-law's bidding in the early y  
The special stance of respect was also exhibited by wearing headscarves and  
Young wives were rather likely to welcome any change undermining th  
power. Younger women tended towards smaller family units as well as join  
and marital fidelity. Men, by contrast, rather favoured to live in very traditi  
an extended family, exempt from household responsibilities and polyg  
Preston-Whyte's research on migrant women in Durban shows, that n  
migrated had previously occupied less powerful statuses in the rural

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<sup>184</sup> H. Ngubane: 'Marriage, Affinity and the Ancestral Realm: Zulu marriage in female  
Krige and J.L. Comaroff (ed.): Essays on African Marriage in South Africa, pp. 84-8  
woman is alive, she continues to participate as a daughter in her natal group, wher  
sacrifice. When she dies, her spirit joins the ancestral realm as a member of her husban  
Zulu saying 'going on a long journey' is meant in the very sense: at the end of her ma  
integrated into her husband's descent group and it is in this capacity that she will becom

<sup>185</sup> P. Mayer: Townsmen or tribesmen, pp. 234-235.

<sup>186</sup> M. Wilson: 'Xhosa Marriage in Historical Perspective', in E.J. Krige and J.L. Comar  
African Marriage in South Africa, p. 139; C. White: "'Close to Home in Johanne  
Township Households' (Agenda, no. 11, 1991, p. 86).

<sup>187</sup> M. Ramphele: A Life, p. 14.

<sup>188</sup> M. Hunter: Reaction to Conquest, pp. 18-19, pp. 36-41.

<sup>189</sup> E. Preston-Whyte: 'Women Migrants and Marriage', in E.J. Krige and J.L. Comar  
African Marriage in South Africa, pp. 161-164.

women married under common law were however excluded from the legal alterations introduced to improve South African women's legal capacities within the marriage.<sup>196</sup>

The present Western picture of independent, sovereign women does not fit into patriarchal communities where family units remained self-sufficient. In order to emancipate African women from customary patriarchy, they would have to leave the sphere of reproductive and domestic work traditionally reserved for them. They have to receive education to enter productive activities outside their homes in order to assert claims to equality of status. In South African history, however, the process of economic and political emancipation was hardly left to the African women themselves.<sup>197</sup> Their entry into waged labour did not derive from aspirations of social liberation but from the effects of the erosion of their social position.<sup>198</sup> In fact, there was a militant preference for maintaining as much freedom as possible to work within their own households or in informal sector activities instead of entering wage labour.<sup>199</sup> As already mentioned, African women were caught between a policy of industrialisation on the one hand and a policy of re-tribalisation on the other. The concept of separate development 'removed' them into their 'homelands', rendered them single parents. The numbers of divorced, widowed and unmarried women continually rose, forcing these women to dually become mother and wage earner. Yet, thanks to customary law, they were still under the tutelage of a male guardian. Looking from a wider perspective, however, the patriarchal power of the husband shifted to the apartheid state.

Indeed, the process of re-tribalisation did not serve the African women. On the contrary, they had to conform to a specious version of African custom and tradition imposed on them. According to her legal status as a perpetual minor, the African woman had to cope with and bear the biggest burden of forced removals: she lived amongst the most dispossessed, the children, the disabled and old people, without any job opportunity, on overcrowded land and had to cope with the trauma of the systematic break-up of family life.

This thesis does not intend to proclaim the pre-capitalist African society as the Golden Age in African women's social history. Tribal communities were discriminative against women and

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<sup>196</sup> C. Qunta (ed.): *Women in Southern Africa*, pp. 81-83.

<sup>197</sup> E. Mashinini: *Strikes Have Followed me all my Life*, p. 14.

<sup>198</sup> L. Guma: 'Women, Wage Labour and National Liberation', in R. Cohen, Y. Muthien and A. Zegeye (eds.): *Repression and Resistance: Insider Accounts of Apartheid*, p. 274

<sup>199</sup> J.C. Wells: *We now demand! The History of Women's Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa*, p. 9.

domestic violence against women used to be a common feature.<sup>200</sup> But the Western image of the static patriarchal tribal society has existed largely due to the oppressive framework of apartheid. As long as they maintained their sovereignty, tribal communities officially recognised alterations in gender relationships. Obsolete conventions that prohibited women from participating effectively in society eventually proved impeding for the entire community. It was hence up to the women to call for the removal of traditional, patriarchal customs where initial meaning had been lost. Pre-capitalist African communities witnessed changes in terms of gender relations. Yet, these social alterations were never supposed to challenge the patriarchal character of tribal communities. Class or gender struggles, as they challenged Western culture, did not take place. It nevertheless has to be acknowledged that sovereign tribal societies provided the potential for any social alteration suiting a natural changing context. There is continuous discussion as to whether certain institutions of customary marriage still prove valid and practicable or should be abolished in favour of common law institutions. It was only in 1988, that customary marriages were officially recognised by the court while polygamy became outlawed. Significantly, the 1998 Recognition of Customary Marriages Act recognises both monogamous and polygamous marriages.<sup>201</sup> After much consultation, the South African Law Commission concluded that the law does not provide a suitable strategy for challenging polygamy. It would be unrealistic to assume that a woman, who descends from a patriarchal cultural setting without having any obvious alternatives, should defy the community on the question of polygamy because of outlawing legislation.<sup>202</sup> Instead, legislative provisions were included conferring equal rights of citizenship on women within these marriages.<sup>203</sup> A significant change was the fact that the consent of *both* spouses has to be regarded as the main requirement of a valid customary marriage.<sup>204</sup>

The preservation of traditional, customary institutions was (and still is) seen as an insurgent force against the destructive power of the white supremacist, industrial society. In contrast to that, many feminists argue that traditional institutions prove rather oppressive than protective for women. A major subject of discussion proves to be the institution of lobola, by which customary marriages are validated. Traditionally, lobola was supposed to make up the loss of

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<sup>200</sup> M. Hunter: Reaction to Conquest, p. 41.

<sup>201</sup> C. Murray: 'Is polygamy wrong?' (Agenda, no. 22, 1994, p. 37). In today's South African society, polygamy is practised by a very small number of people.

<sup>202</sup> S. Samuel: 'Women married in customary law' (Agenda, no. 40, 1999, p. 26).

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

the daughter's work force when she transcended to her family-in-law. By his material dedication, the new son-in-law expressed gratitude for and showed appreciation of the educational efforts of his parents-in-law in raising his bride.<sup>205</sup> The price paid for the bride was measured in terms of her educational, social and economic background. Lobola symbolises the transfer of control over a woman who moves from one patriarchal family structure to the other. In the industrialised society, lobola plays a rather symbolic role in creating and maintaining relationships across society.<sup>206</sup> In rural areas however, where a subsistence economy has been maintained, lobola still serves as compensation for the loss of a worker. Several aspects of lobola are supposed to provide protection for the married woman. According to the African tradition, a woman would be given as a gift, neither valued nor respected, if the institution of lobola was missing.<sup>207</sup> Many African women remain deeply attached to this institution, claiming that it dignifies them. Others state that they felt disgraced by being treated in the same way as property.<sup>208</sup> Lobola is widely criticised as deriving from a patriarchal ideology that does no longer serve the practical needs of women in today's society.<sup>209</sup> The question is how such a valued customary institution can be maintained, while elaborating legislative means that protect women from certain retrogressive, oppressive aspects that the institution of lobola entails. The traditional way in which lobola used to be practised, essentially curtailed the independence and freedom of women. Whereas an African man had the right to repudiate his marriage unilaterally simply by forfeiting his lobola rights, an African women had no equivalent rights.<sup>210</sup> Through lobola, the husband could claim the children as his own, if the marriage broke up. The claims remained valid until the cattle was returned.<sup>211</sup> The African wife neither had the right to negotiate the bridewealth, nor could she tender its return. A woman could hardly leave her husband without giving up her children. In traditional terms, lobola was a 'child-price' rather than a 'bride-price.' It was never the mother of the bride who negotiated and received lobola. Even if the mother was unmarried and raised the daughter on her own, the biological father could claim for bride price.

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<sup>205</sup> M. Hunter: Reaction to Conquest, p. 190-193.

<sup>206</sup> M. de Haas: 'Is there anything more to say about Lobolo?' (African Studies, vol. 466, no.1, 1987, p. 44).

<sup>207</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 102; C. White: 'Close to Home in Johannesburg' (Agenda, no. 11, 1991, p. 85).

<sup>208</sup> S. Samuel: 'Women married in customary law' (Agenda, no. 40, 1999, p. 27)

<sup>209</sup> See Interview by C. Lockett with Bessie Head in C. MacKenzie; C. Clayton (eds.): Between the Lines, p. 16.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>211</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p.102.

Otherwise it was her official guardian who received the lobola.<sup>212</sup> Laws affecting domestic relations varied from province to province. According to the Natal Code, the most reactionary and repressive codification of tribal law, the custody of the children could never be given to the divorced, separated or widowed mothers.<sup>213</sup> The divorced woman was clearly treated as a perpetual minor, supposed to live under strict control in the kraal of her guardian.<sup>214</sup> Widowed women fell under the control of a designated brother-in-law who assumed the responsibility of his late brother, which often even included fathering children from him.<sup>215</sup> In most of the other homelands, however, divorced women were deemed to have reached their maturity.<sup>216</sup>

According to a survey conducted among rural and urban Africans in 1991, urban women and rural men showed the least support for the continuation of this institution. The main argument against lobola was its increasing commercialisation and rising costs.<sup>217</sup> It is nevertheless often argued that these customary institutions have never been as needed as in today's African urban and rural communities. They provide cultural education, control sexual relations and reduce the destructive forces going along with industrialisation and proletarianisation. The recognition of the parental authority also serves the reestablishment of fundamental family structures. The altering way in which lobola is proceeded reflects the difficulties a society faces when transgressing from tribalism to urbanisation, communalism to individualism. Due to the changing social context, lobola can be easily misused by the bride's parents.<sup>218</sup> As Lydia Kompe, a black trade unionist, states:

*Our parents were not keen to see us educated but very keen to see us married ... Now there's this money business. People are demanding thousands and thousands. Before it was just cows, goats, chicken. Because people had them, it wasn't actually a very serious thing to fork them out<sup>219</sup>*

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<sup>212</sup> Natal Organisation of Women: 'The Nature of women's oppression in South Africa today' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 17).

<sup>213</sup> H.J. Simons: 'The Customary Societies' (Paper presented at UCT, 14. 9. 1992, p. 26) According to Simons, the Natal Code of Law of 1891 stereotyped a concept of feminine inferiority unknown to the tribal society. The oppression of women in Natal was hence more severe than in other provinces.

<sup>214</sup> M. Horrel: A brief guide to 'Some Laws Affecting African Women', p. 7.

<sup>215</sup> M. Hunter: Reaction to Conquest, p. 211.

<sup>216</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 18.

<sup>217</sup> C. Walker: Attitudes to Lobola, (Agenda, no. 13, 1992) p. 58.

<sup>218</sup> M. de Haas: 'Is there anything more to say about Lobolo?' (African Studies, vol. 466, no.1, 1987, p. 35). According to the Natal Code, the price paid as lobola was not supposed to exceed the amount of ten head of cattle for the woman's father, plus one head for her mother. Yet, in most of the cases the negotiations took place on an individual basis.

<sup>219</sup> Lydia Kompe as quoted in J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Oberyim, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 97.

The institution of lobola reflects the high expectations on the daughter-in-law in the extended African family. Family duties of young African women have always been demanding. Due to the proletarianization of black urban communities, however, women's occupational fields have grown to an extent, which forces them to neglect domestic responsibilities.<sup>220</sup> Many women refer the high rate of marital violence to the male desire of domination and its legitimation through the institution of lobola. Financial compensation for violence against women is still common. If a woman returns to her family, the husband has to apologise formally and pay additionally for her to return to the marital home. If an unmarried woman is being raped, the rapist has to pay the compensation for her 'devaluation' (customary damages) caused by the destruction of her virginity. He thereby restores the family's reputation and compensates the reduction of her bride-price.

#### 2.4. Black women and waged labour

Through their unpaid, reproductive labour, African women were indirectly exploited in terms of subsidising the migrant labour system. When they entered waged labour, however, they directly experienced their material exploitation as the actual form of their oppression. It is generally argued that waged labour has an enormous effect on women's class consciousness. They become aware of the fact that their labour creates a profit for the capitalist society. However, according to Guma:

*Wage labour does not lead ineluctably to emancipation, but it does open up to women new sites and new forms of struggles – arenas no doubt full of drawbacks and contradictions, but also providing transformatory possibilities.*<sup>221</sup>

It is commonly argued that waged labour has the effect of intensifying the oppression of women because they have to work in a so-called 'double shift.'<sup>222</sup> In most of the township households of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, shared housework was virtually unheard of.

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>221</sup> L. Guma: 'Women, Wage Labour and National Liberation', in R.Cohen, Y. Muthien and A. Zegeye (eds.): Repression and Resistance: Insider Accounts of Apartheid, pp. 274-275.

<sup>222</sup> L. Guma: 'Women, Wage Labour and National Liberation', in R.Cohen, Y. Muthien and A. Zegeye (eds.): Repression and Resistance: Insider Accounts of Apartheid, p. 281).



According to surveys of working women in the retail and clothing trades, 43 per cent of the married women received no economic support from their husbands, either.<sup>223</sup>

Full-time motherhood is impossible for African women compelled to support their dependants. Most African mothers had to go back to work when their children were less than three months old.<sup>224</sup> Due to the inadequacy of crèches and the negligence of African child-care arrangements by the state, working African women bear a heavy burden if they take sole responsibility for domestic work and child care. Although inevitably to provide the basic means of family living, the black society failed to sanction black women's status as wage earners. According to Meer's survey, a third of the interviewed women believed that they had fallen in the esteem of the community because of their work. Many felt obliged to ask the husband for permission if they wanted to seek work, join an organisation or go out in general.<sup>225</sup> Women workers in the factories generally lack 'a natural' feeling of solidarity cross colour lines. Neither does the majority of them exhibit a political consciousness based on working class solidarity. Women workers associate their social standing with their community and their family in the first place. Their waged labour is only seen as a kind of supplementary work with which they hardly identify. According to Yawitch, this notion was shared by the employers, as well:

*Employers often see women's economic involvement as secondary to the reproductive labour they do at home. In these terms it becomes no more than a stop-gap between having children. Consequently women's wages are lower than those of men, on the assumption that they are secondary partners in a nuclear marriage and dependent on their husband's earnings for survival.*<sup>226</sup>

Nevertheless, it is this double shift that forces women to become aware of their social oppression at both home and work. The burden would otherwise remain hidden if the wife is confined to the home. Being occupied by both motherhood and waged labour reinforces a dialectical process of both class and gender attentiveness. The process of applying for a work permit, exemplified black women's status as perpetual minors. In order to register as an urban worker, a woman had to produce the permission of both the local magistrate in the Bantustans and her husband or 'guardian.'<sup>227</sup> It was mainly in the occupational sphere that

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<sup>223</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): *Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak*, p. 138.

<sup>224</sup> J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, p. 9.

<sup>225</sup> F. Meer (ed.): *Black-Woman-Worker*, pp. 164-174.

<sup>226</sup> J. Yawitch: *Tightening the noose*, p. 15.

<sup>227</sup> F. Meer (ed.): *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 113.

African women were confronted with discriminative attitudes exhibited by both their black colleagues and white employers.<sup>228</sup> In addition to their generally disadvantaged position in the labouring process, women were exploited by the management's maintenance of gender oppression, as a means of enforcing industrial discipline. Male supervisors were given the 'marginal capacity' to permit small favours as permission to go to the bathroom or the 'privilege' of sitting down.<sup>229</sup> In terms of household duties, the urban environment ultimately undermines and questions the traditional labour division between the sexes. Whereas the wife's occupational field grew in the urban environment through the 'double shift', the husband's domestic sphere was reduced.<sup>230</sup> In addition, the prevailing idea of African manhood has always resisted any association and identification with 'feminine', domestic issues.<sup>231</sup>

The post war period saw the growth of massive and structural unemployment in South Africa. The structural location of African women in economic sectors was declining. The rapid mechanisation meant on the other hand, that a surplus working population of women was developing at a rapid rate. Women's employment opportunities were enhanced through the economic boom of the 1960s. The increase was especially dramatic between 1973 and 1981 when there was a 51.7 per cent upsurge in the number of black women employed.<sup>232</sup> These women were generally employed in service and agricultural sectors – the least skilled, lowest paid and most insecure jobs. African women were always the ones on the bottom of the social scale concerning wages, employment, land, job and social security.

They usually found employment in jobs out of which white and coloured women have moved and for which African men were considered less suitable or more expensive, as for instance in manufacturing. Due to the system of job reservation, African women were usually excluded from jobs commonly filled by women elsewhere such as clerical work, shop assistance and skilled trading. Jobs in public services, banks, building societies, mining houses and other administrative or secretarial jobs were mainly occupied by white and, since the late 1970s, by coloured women. The legal income opportunities for African women in the

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<sup>228</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 108.

<sup>229</sup> I. Berger: 'Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry 1900-1980' (Agenda, no. 18, 1993, pp. 547-565).

<sup>230</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 106.

<sup>231</sup> C. White: 'Close to Home in Johannesburg' (Agenda, no. 11, 1991, p. 82).

informal sector ranged from productive self-help activities to distribution activities such as hawking, to services such as child minder, hairdresser and herbalists.<sup>233</sup> Many women were forced to work in illegal fields as prostitutes or shebeen queens. Women in the reserves, who cultivated their own plots, were classified as non-economically active house-wives.<sup>234</sup> They could hardly go into the towns in order to look for a job, since pass laws and influx control sought to keep them in the Bantustans. Many women were the only bread-winner and had hardly any other employment opportunities than farming. Due to the lack of secondary industries, poorly educated women had hardly any possibilities of getting into waged work - apart from domestic service or farm labour. Many had to leave their families to seek employment as seasonal workers on white farms, or to find work in small-scale craft or textile production on the outskirts of the reserves.<sup>235</sup> If a woman left her family in the reserve to earn money in the urban areas, she ran the risk of losing her right to cultivate her holding. Moreover, women had household responsibilities they could not discard. Hence, the vast majority of women living in the reserves had to stay unemployed.<sup>236</sup> They lived from their meagre subsistence cultivation and relied on the money sent by their men working in town.<sup>237</sup> Only a very few African women managed to enter professions as lawyers, university teachers or librarians. The main field of occupation for higher educated African women was teaching and nursing.

#### 2.4.1. Domestic service

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<sup>232</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 7. More than half of the women employed in the service field, work in jobs such as office and shop cleaning, laundry work, cooking, domestic work and municipal services.

<sup>233</sup> P. Mayer: Townsmen or tribesmen, pp. 247-249.

<sup>234</sup> J. Yawitch: Tightening the noose, p. 35. With reference to an article published in The Star (23/2/1984) quoting the Central Statistical Services as estimating African female unemployment to be 13 per cent as opposed to 10 per cent for men, Yawitch criticises official statistics because of their general tendency to underestimation. Firstly, many women are categorised as 'not economically active housewives' or 'peasants' rather than as unemployed. Secondly, these statistics are not likely to include the so-called 'independent' Bantustans.

<sup>235</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, pp. 26, 44.

<sup>236</sup> J. Yawitch: Tightening the noose, p. 5. Since unemployed women were exempt from compulsory registration at the regional and local labour bureau, most unemployed women were not listed as such. This had the effect of masking the extent of African female unemployment. Unemployed men from rural areas had to register by law as work seekers, whilst those with urban qualification generally did so in order to claim Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) benefits.

<sup>237</sup> H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p. 23.

*There is no class less open to democratic ideas than a contented servant class.*<sup>238</sup>

Even outside the reserves, women's domestic role was still paramount in their economic employment and lifestyle.<sup>239</sup> In 1960, almost 60 percent of all African women workers and 41.6 percent of Coloureds were in domestic service.<sup>240</sup> From a very young age, African girls were prepared for the domestic service within their families. This training did not only include physical but also psychological features of the domestic's work performance. Children in general and young girls in particular occupy subordinate positions in the extended African family. The obedient attitude they were taught within the patriarchal family became an essential feature of the domestic service performed in the white family.<sup>241</sup> The picture of the conforming, dutiful and submissive black domestic employed in a white household conditioned the social relations between blacks and whites significantly. The majority of domestics were 'maids of all work', many of them life-cycle servants.

There is no other field of employment where the relationship between employer and employee is this intimate and private. The nanny might be highly respected, in some ways she might even take the place of the mother. Many domestics are employed in order to fulfil psychological needs beyond the domestic work involved. In cases of elderly, lonely living women, domestics may have to dilute the isolation of the white housewife.<sup>242</sup> Surveys showed that the personal relationships between maids and madams were actually not as warm, close and supportive as many whites believed them to be. Although being claimed to be 'one of the family', most of the employees were conscious of the fact, that they would always remain the servant, lacking the right to lead a private life with their own family, lacking a secure legal status - human rights.<sup>243</sup> Social mobility between employees and employers was very restricted in terms of formally prescribed social distance. The domestic's work was often monotonous drudgery, carried on for immensely long hours with very little help from machinery. Domestics were often not allowed to use the vacuum cleaner or other

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<sup>238</sup> William Clarke as quoted in J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, p. 85.

<sup>239</sup> J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, p. 11.

<sup>240</sup> F. Meer (ed.): *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 61. In 1980, 42 per cent African women and 32 percent of all the Coloured women were employed as domestics.

<sup>241</sup> B. Grant: 'Domestic workers: employers or servants?' (*Agenda*, no. 35, 1997, pp. 61-63).

<sup>242</sup> J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, pp. 11, 115.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54. In the interviews Cock conducted, domestics frequently stated that: 'The children are rude. They don't count us as people. They think we belong to their parents.'

electronic household items.<sup>244</sup> Due to the highly privatised nature of their work, domestics were usually standing under close supervision.

Employers could use a variety of means by which to construct domestic authority and to solicit the deference behaviour they desired in their domestic employees. Physical markers such as uniforms reflected the deference relationship and externalised the servant's positioning in the social order.<sup>245</sup> Techniques of linguistic deference included addressing domestics by their first names, calling them 'girls', while requiring to be called 'Master', 'Baas', 'Sir' or 'Madam.' This may have been even extended to the small children of the employer's family.<sup>246</sup> Usually referred to by their first name, the African surnames of domestics have often been unknown to their employers. There has also been the common practice to address the domestic by a different, English name, symbolising her break with her traditional social roles and cultural identity. Conversation may be conducted in a special tone of voice. Many employers tended to address their servants in broken English at a slower pace, in a tone pitched much higher than usual.<sup>247</sup> The depersonalisation was characteristic for the coloniser's stereotyped conception of the colonised. Employers routinely questioned domestics about their lifestyle – questions they would have hesitated to ask members of their own social circle.<sup>248</sup> Gifts such as used clothing and other household items highlighted the economic inequality separating domestic and employer. Most waged work relationships are impersonal and involve a clear separation between workplace and home, in both temporal and local terms. The domestic servant, by contrast, frequently works irregular hours, she receives part of her payment in kind and is often accommodated at the work place. Under apartheid, 'live-in' servants were virtually denied all forms of communal recreation in the white area they stayed. This fact added significantly to their isolation in their employers' homes.<sup>249</sup> The use of space was another device in structuring deference behaviour. 'Being part of the family' seldom meant sharing any household facilities. Toilet and washing facilities were minimal, usually separated in the back garden. Nevertheless, to have a room of one's own, regardless of its size, proved to be a luxury for many domestics who could thereby flee from the violence and insecurity of the townships.<sup>250</sup> Domestics were confined to

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<sup>244</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 56.

<sup>245</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: Domestic servants, p. 16.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>248</sup> P. Collins: Black Feminist Thought, p. 57.

<sup>249</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: Domestic servants, p. 34.

<sup>250</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 36.

one part of the house, usually the kitchen, and were expected to make themselves invisible if met in other parts of the house.<sup>251</sup> The way domestics were (and still are) supposed to make themselves invisible while their employers had a conversation around them, mirrors the ambiguous combination of intimacy and aloofness within a unique relationship. Their treatment as confidants was in fact a particular behaviour, which reinforced the notion of domestics as outsiders.

Unlike black workers from other occupational spheres, domestic servants were situated in a legal vacuum within this coercive structure, lacking any laws stipulating minimum wages, hours of work or conditions of service. Excluded from the entire South African industrial law system, they could benefit neither from the Unemployment Insurance Fund nor from the Workmen's Compensation Act.<sup>252</sup> The 1956 Industrial Conciliation Act and the 1957 Wages Act, which authorised statutory boards to fix minimum wages, applied neither to domestic nor to farm workers – the two largest categories of African women wage earners.<sup>253</sup> Resulting from this, domestics lacked pension rights, had no right to collective bargaining, maternity benefits or paid sick leave and were extremely vulnerable to instant dismissal by their employers. In order to bind domestic workers to their employers and to impose an embargo on the entry of unskilled African women into 'white' urban areas, they were subjected to the same registration system as all African labourers.<sup>254</sup> The employment of a domestic from other urban or rural areas, required the employer to make an application to the local administrative board, proving that no African local labour was available.<sup>255</sup> If a domestic lost her job, she had to expect being forcibly removed into her 'homeland.' Many domestics had family dependants they needed to provide for. Due to their dependency on their highly exploitative jobs, domestics were least likely to organise for better working conditions or confront their employers in demanding better pay – actions representing the struggle for institutional transformation.<sup>256</sup> There was little sense of common purpose or even common

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<sup>251</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 54.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., pp. 6, 20, 63.

<sup>253</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: Domestic servants, p. 48.

<sup>254</sup> J. Yawitch: Tightening the noose, p. 12. It had been rather easy for women to work illegally as domestic workers, until a R500 fine for illegal employment of domestic workers was introduced in 1979.

<sup>255</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 5.

<sup>256</sup> Domestic workers have been regarded as an endemically powerless group for a long time. In 1982, the South African Domestic Workers Association was formed (SADWA). A number of organisations were set up throughout the country to address domestic workers' problems, for instance the Domestic Workers and Employers Project (DWEPE-Johannesburg) and the South African Domestic Workers Association (SADWA – Johannesburg). Both sought to model themselves on trade unions. The Domestic Workers Association (DWA- Cape Town), intended to make 'better maids' by upgrading their skills. All organisations asked for minimum wages, while some demanded the establishment of standard contracts.

injustice in an occupation that was so rigidly authoritarian and hierarchical structured.<sup>257</sup> Since there were no laws which set out hours of work, minimum wages, time of leave or terms of contract, these arrangements were to be laid down by the employer. The low wages domestics received used to be compromised by the provision of food. The ‘servant’s rations’, usually consisted of leftovers, or even inferior food, which the employer considered unsuitable for the family’s consumption.<sup>258</sup> Highly appreciated used to be those domestics who most successfully played the role of the obedient servant. Many young girls eventually internalised this deference behaviour they had to perform. Some servants clearly welcomed a highly ‘paternalistic madam’ – as the latter tended to be more generous in giving presents, if not in paying wages. In the context of apartheid, employers with paternalistic attitudes may have provided a sense of security in the form of white protection for a servant who believed in the racial hierarchy.<sup>259</sup> In contrast to psychological violence, physical violence used to be a far less common feature.<sup>260</sup> Black maids were nevertheless very vulnerable to sexual harassment, due to their economic dependence on their employers, their isolated position within the family and their lack of experience with male, white authorities. The rate of ‘immorality’ – illicit sexual intercourse between the white master and his black maid – was assumed to be very high.<sup>261</sup> Cases of sexual harassment of black girls by white men contributed to images of black women as fair game for *all* men. Considering the moral degeneration that went along with the increasing impoverishment and ‘mental emasculation’ of the black man, black women also faced increasing danger of being assailed by those who were actually supposed to be their protectors.

Black women working as domestic servants in white urban areas were not permitted to have their babies or children living with them in their servants’ accommodations. Until the 1970s, white employers would often permit their servant to keep a baby in her room until it was at least three years old. Since 1973, however, it was illegal for white employers to accept an ‘illegal’ child in their house. Whites who employed African women as servants had to sign a document stating that they would dismiss the servant if the latter brought dependants into

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<sup>257</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p.65.

<sup>258</sup> ‘August 9 – Day of our women militants’ (Sechaba, vol.3, no. 8, August 1969, p. 10).

<sup>259</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: Domestic servants, p. 21.

<sup>260</sup> P. Collins: Black Feminist Thought, p. 54.

<sup>261</sup> B. Higgs: ‘Sex and Race’ (Sechaba, vol. 4, no. 6, June 1970, p. 3, p. 8). According to Barry Higgs, in 1969 ‘there were 5,000 trials under the Immorality Act in South Africa.’ He estimates that one in every 200 white males came up in court for sexual ‘offence’. In most of the cases, the African or Coloured girl was much younger than the man. Rape of black women by white men was statistically far more frequent than rape of

their premises.<sup>262</sup> Thereafter, it was not only the black couple but also the white employer who was found guilty, if a black domestic was 'caught' while meeting her husband illegally.<sup>263</sup> Domestic workers had to leave their children in the homeland and lost their jobs if they became pregnant. This exemplifies how the state saw black people: as working units. As all members of the working class, domestic workers could easily fall victim to economic regression.

Black women's role as domestic servants within white families did not only reflect but also reinforce their inferior position in the wider society. At the same time, however, it perpetuated the process of white women's emancipation. Cheap black domestic labour became an instrument whereby many white women could free themselves from the physical aspects of their domestication.<sup>264</sup> They could take up outside employment and gained more time for social and political activities.

Even under apartheid, the social structure of the black population never truly corresponded with the image of the supposedly monolithic 'black community.' Members of the African, Coloured and Indian middle and upper-middle class distinguished themselves significantly from the black working population through both, their material and educational background as well as attitudes of superiority. Domestic workers were employed in black households as well. Unaffected by race domination (with Coloured and Indian households as an exception) but potentially increased by class differences, the status and domination of domestic workers in black households might have been very different. Whether their work was performed as isolated and deferential as in white households, is a question little research has been conducted on until now.<sup>265</sup>

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white women by black men. Blacks convicted of raping a white woman could be sentenced to death. No white man has ever been executed for raping a black woman.

<sup>262</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, p.9.

<sup>263</sup> H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p. 35.

<sup>264</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 11.

<sup>265</sup> C. White: "Close to Home in Johannesburg" (Agenda, no. 11, 1991, p. 83).



## 2.4.2. Agriculture

The second largest area of black women's employment was (and still is) agriculture.<sup>266</sup> Many women farm workers were migrants, employed on a daily or seasonal basis. Since more and more men migrated to the urban centres, women have been gradually taking over traditional 'men's farm work.'<sup>267</sup> Historically, female farm workers occupied a rather reproductive function. They had to rear and care for the present and future generation of farm workers. Female members of a labour tenant's family did hence not participate regularly in farm labour, but rather on a casual or part-time basis. This, again, made them more vulnerable in terms of job security and financial earnings. Like domestics, farm workers were excluded from the major industrial acts and worked without any legal security. If a woman was deserted by her husband or became widowed, and her children were too young to work, she could be easily dismissed from the farm. The exclusion of farm workers from industrial and welfare legislation was also due to the fact, that the Nationalist Party used to be heavily supported by farmers.<sup>268</sup>

Most farm workers were (and still are) paid partly in cash and partly in kind.<sup>269</sup> Women used to be paid much less than men for the same work. The work conditions and the payment depended solely on the farmer.<sup>270</sup> Physical and verbal assaults on farm workers by their farmer bosses was not uncommon. In cases of farm machinery accidents and poisoning by agricultural chemicals, farmers could easily discourage claims for compensation.<sup>271</sup> Instead of receiving paid sick leave, farm workers had to pay for their medical treatment and were frequently financially fined for the missed work time. This was notwithstanding the fact, that many diseases were related to the harsh working conditions and the chemicals utilised. Pesticide poisoning and disease related to the care of livestock was (and still is) widespread.<sup>272</sup> Farmers often preferred women farm workers with children, since working children did not have to be paid extra. Due to their incorporation into the system of influx

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<sup>266</sup> H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p. 15.

<sup>267</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 59.

<sup>268</sup> H.J.Simons: 'South Africa's family and marriage law reformed' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 4).

<sup>269</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 60.

<sup>270</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 40.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid, pp. 61-62.

<sup>272</sup> R. Simons: 'Women in urban and rural areas' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 4).

control, rural women's mobility was rigidly restricted. Their chances to receive permission to work and reside in urban areas was minimal. When a farm worker had a stamp in her pass to do farm work, she was confined to farm work for the rest of her life.<sup>273</sup> The poverty of rural women workers forced a growing number of them to work illegally in urban centres for an absolute meagre wage. As a result, there was a growing competition among urban women workers who felt threatened by the high number of rural women entering urban areas illegally. The latter were willing to accept lower wages and longer working hours – the combined effect of what they were used to and their illegal situation in town. Urban women domestic workers complained openly about rural farm women spoiling the local domestic labour market because 'They will work from morning till night for R20 a month.'<sup>274</sup>

### 2.4.3. Industrial Employment

Although rather insignificant in terms of the number of African women employed, employment in the industrial sector was of far reaching significance in the emancipation and politicisation of black women. Sex-typing of manufacturing jobs remained a visible fact. The food and clothing industries were the most important areas of female employment.<sup>275</sup> There were several reasons for the low employment of women in the South African industrial sector. Firstly, the rising national industry was characterised by the development of heavy industry which demanded male labour. Furthermore, the South African industry has drawn cheap labour resources from the whole under-developed sub-continent. Economic expansion did therefore not necessarily draw on female work force.

Until the 1940s, African and Asian women were hardly represented in manufacturing. It was the white Afrikaner women who formed the bulk of the female industrial labour force and

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<sup>273</sup> S. Duncan: 'Women under Apartheid' (NUSAS Law Directive, Law Students Council. Law in South Africa: Lifting the Veil, Cape Town Law Conference, July 1981, p. 59).

<sup>274</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 20.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., p. 7. J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Oberym, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 23. Assumptions concerning sex-typing job categories of women often ignore external influences. Most coloured women were employed in the clothing industry, because the latter was primarily located in the Western Cape, where the Coloured Labour Preference Policy used to prevent African workers from finding employment in certain work categories.

who dominated earlier trade unions, such as the Garment Worker's Union.<sup>276</sup> As the industry expanded and upward job mobility took place along colour lines, an increasing number of black women became proletarianized and drawn into the labour force. White women tended to move up into clerical and administrative work, leaving black women on the factory floor. The sexual hierarchy between male and female workers was maintained and so was the colour hierarchy. Black female fabric workers used to be the most exploited and proletarianized employees within the South African apartheid industry. They occupied the most dirty, lowest paid jobs in the industry with long working hours, no job security, pension rights or statutory protection.<sup>277</sup> Since many women were staying illegally in their employment area, they could hardly challenge low wages or working conditions. The way women were treated in industry directly contradicted the popular stereotypes of women as the fair and weaker sex, needing a male guardian and protector. Coming from the reserves, most of the new female recruits to industry proved to be unsophisticated newcomers to city life and were hence at the mercy of their employers. In their work performance, women workers were expected to behave deferential. As Mashinini, a popular black trade unionist recalls:

*Of course we had separate facilities. Canteen toilets, changing rooms – all these were separated according to sex and according to colour. We had to address the whites as 'sir' and 'madam', while they always called us by our first names, or, if we were being shouted at, we were called 'maid' and 'Kaffir.' Yet, as women [working in the garment industry] we were in the majority – perhaps 70 per cent of the workforce ... You just accepted that that was the order of the day when you spoke to the white boss – standing, in uniform, hands behind your back, completely deferential.*<sup>278</sup>

In contrast to domestics they had more scope to lead a private life. If they were fortunate, they were allowed to settle with their children in the urban area. A considerable number of female factory workers used their private time to participate in trade union work. However the scope for private activities was very limited. Due to the long working days there was hardly any time left for the family.

In times of economic recession, black women were the first ones to be dismissed from their jobs. Moreover, they could immediately lose their job for political activities. Nevertheless, feelings of solidarity among women factory workers of different colours remained generally low. The women would unite on the factory floor for specific goals but that rarely resulted in

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<sup>276</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, pp.16, 61-65.

<sup>277</sup> L. Guma: 'Women, Wage Labour and National Liberation', in R.Cohen, Y. Muthien and A. Zegeye (eds.): *Repression and Resistance: Insider Accounts of Apartheid*, p. 276.

<sup>278</sup> E. Mashinini: *Strikes Have Followed me all my Life*, pp. 21-26.

long lasting political group dynamism. There was also not a common sense of class consciousness. Ambitions to change conditions at the work place were low. According to Meer, the lack of political and social solidarity was mainly due to the fact that women did not identify with their waged work but usually sought employment to preserve the family and the family values.<sup>279</sup>

Two Commissions of inquiry were appointed in 1977: The Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation, generally known as the Wiehahn Commission, focused on legislation which was administered by the Departments of Labour and Mines. The Commission of Inquiry, known as the Riekert Commission, concentrated on apartheid laws that fell outside the ambit of the Departments of Labour and Mines. The 1979 report of the Wiehahn Commission recommended the official recognition of black trade unions, equal wages for whites and blacks as well as the abolishment of job reservation. The Wiehahn Commission was sensitive to the special conditions of women and the discrimination that existed against them in industrial employment. It advocated legislation to eliminate all discrimination on grounds of sex and gender and recommended that pregnant women should be given light work, that they should be allowed paid maternity leave at 60 per cent of their wage and be guaranteed their jobs on return. The government rejected the recommendations regarding maternity leave on the grounds that they would result in production losses and overtime work.<sup>280</sup> The recommendation of multiracial trade unions, however, was successfully implemented with the 1981 Labour Relations Amendment Act. The government's attempt to increase the influx control on migrant workers, as recommended in the report of the Riekert Commission, eventually failed. The Abolition of Influx Control Act was passed in 1986.<sup>281</sup>

Women were often preferred by employers, as they tended to stick to their jobs, whereas men would rather 'job-hopped' or 'drifted.' They were prepared to work for lower wages, were more loyal to the management and less likely to drink or have drug habits.<sup>282</sup> Birth control was a facility widely available to women workers at the work place. In many factories, the employers appeared to be more concerned about controlling the fertility of their female employees than about their health. According to Meer's survey, conducted in 1984, more than 60 percent of the interviewed women reported the existence of these services at their factories. They were either given the Pill or Depo Provera injections. The government had

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<sup>279</sup> F. Meer (ed.): Black-Woman-Worker, pp. 76-80; pp. 256-257.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid, pp. 75, 137.

<sup>281</sup> B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies (eds.): South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, pp. 467-469.

been engaged in birth control programmes since 1974. Its policy reflected apartheid assumptions regarding white people's duty to provide moral education for blacks. This also exemplified racial prejudices in terms of black people's genetic constitution. Administered contraceptives as Depo Provera were very strong because African women were supposed to be strong and very fertile. Because of its many side-effects, Depo Provera was banned in Europe and the United States. It is known to cause infertility and cancer of the cervix. Under apartheid, these treatments were often enforced upon women. In many cases, employees were even subjected to in-house birth control measures as a precondition to employment.<sup>283</sup>

#### 2.4.4. Professional Employment

The fourth category of black women's employment was the one of 'professional and technical' occupations. These occupations were in many ways extensions of women's maternal roles. The following features of black women's employment were apparent: sex-typing of jobs, lower status and less specialised work.<sup>284</sup> Most of the black women employed in that field worked as teachers or nurses. These were the only occupations where African women sometimes even outnumbered African men or white women. Women working in these professions were regarded as the 'black community's elite.' The 1957 Nursing Amendment Act introduced racial segregation in terms of wages and job advancement. Thereafter, black nurses were excluded from the South African Nursing Council, which controlled the standard and nature of the training and discipline of nurses and midwives.<sup>285</sup>

Only a tiny percentage of African women managed to become doctors, university teachers or librarians.<sup>286</sup> It was the convergence of racial and sexual domination that created the particular dimension of black women's oppression. While almost all women occupied a kind of sex-typed employment, white women were concentrated in positions that were better paid and more specialised.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> F. Meer (ed.): Black-Woman-Worker, p. 226.

<sup>283</sup> Natal Organisation of Women: 'The Nature of women's oppression in South Africa today' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 14).

<sup>284</sup> H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p. 16.

<sup>285</sup> P. Bonner, P. Delius and D. Posel (eds.): Apartheid's Genesis 1935-1962, pp. 143-345.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid, p. 17. The ranking of white women's occupational categories was firstly, professional and technical, secondly, clerical, thirdly, service, then industry. Black women, however, were mainly employed in service and, less numerously, in agriculture and industry.

## Chapter 3

### The psychological dimensions of black women's oppression

#### 3.1. Women of colour – the cultural 'Other'

*Oppression can be discovered in the minute of everyday life*<sup>288</sup>

While being an African women in the South African society generally provides the experimental base for a womanist consciousness, the same conditions suppress its articulations. There is a seamless web of economic, political and ideological features functioning as a highly effective system of social control. Hidden behind the image of socialisation, there is a powerful normative and ideological commitment to a vision of the 'normal' – the status quo.

*The mechanism of rationalisation is used to deny the humanity of the victim, or at least, to belittle it, and thus provides a justification for untoward actions. The real motive for actions - greed – is not acknowledged.*<sup>289</sup>

Everything that differs from the status quo has to be reduced, or repressed, in order to suit the standard notions defining a homogenous picture of civilisation. Repression, viewed as the price paid for civilised attitudes, can be conceived as a form of oppression, acting to contain natural feelings. Culture thereby appears to be the enemy of desire.<sup>290</sup> According to Manganyi, a person learns to comply with the ethical demands presented to him by the collective.<sup>291</sup> Colonised people identify themselves to a large extent with the light world of moral values and Christian conventions. At the same time they seek to do their best to rid themselves of the so called 'anti-values' by technique of suppression and repression. In order to elaborate a self image of 'godlike' purity, the coloniser seeks to project the negative, 'un-godlike' features of his human existence upon those standing at the bottom of the racial scale. Césaire remarked in this regard:

*[C]olonization ... dehumanises even the most civilised man ... the coloniser, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an*

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<sup>288</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p. 4.

<sup>289</sup> C.D.T. Sibisi: 'The Psychology of Liberation', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 132.

<sup>290</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, pp. 25-27.

<sup>291</sup> N. Manganyi: Being-Black-In-The-World, pp.30, 100.

*animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends to objectively transform himself into an animal*<sup>292</sup>

The black man, devaluated and depersonalised through racial determinants which are associated with his very being, seeks to empower himself through the projection of 'anti-values' on those subordinate to him - the black woman. The images imposed upon black women are thus largely determined by negative self-images, which are inherent within the male society. As they become 'common knowledge', male reflections on women and their femininity eventually become the very determinants of the way they see themselves and lead their lives.

A Marxist assessment of the culture/nature dichotomy argues that history can be seen as one in which human beings constantly objectify the natural world in order to control and exploit it.<sup>293</sup> Children are taught to see the group, class, gender and culture they belong to as natural formations which stand in a natural relationship to other groups. The naturalisation of 'race' and 'gender' is collectively cemented in the consciousness of oppressors and oppressed. In the history of the South African society, self-definition and self-defence were reinforcing each other in a mutual relationship. According to Manganyi, a totalitarian environment tends to develop mystical imperatives, supposed to represent a god given, universal and superior purpose of civilisation. A major criterion related to this kind of mystical manipulation would be the demand for purity.<sup>294</sup> Afrikaner nationalism highlights this consideration in its mystification of an Afrikaner manhood, based on purity and piety.

*The history of the Afrikaner reveals a determination and a definiteness of purpose which make one feel that Afrikanerdom is not the work of man but a creation of God. We have a Divine right to be Afrikaners. Our history is the highest work of art of the architect of the centuries.*<sup>295</sup>

There are striking similarities between racism and sexism. Both are justificatory ideologies, serving to legitimise a system of domination, defining the oppressed in terms of irresponsible, child-like, incompetent and passive attitudes. The incapacities and inequalities attributed to innate genetic difference include qualities such as a deficient ability for abstract thought and logical argument.<sup>296</sup> Throughout the history of colonisation, African culture was

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<sup>292</sup> A. Césaire: Discourse on Colonialism, pp. 19-20.

<sup>293</sup> F. Johnstone: Class, Race and Gold. A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa, pp. 7-10.

<sup>294</sup> N. Manganyi: Being-Black-In-The-World, p. 26.

<sup>295</sup> Dr. D.F. Malan, as quoted in: B. Bunting: The Rise of the African Reich, p. 7.

<sup>296</sup> F. Johnstone: Class, Race and Gold, p. 7.

associated with barbarism, backwardness and irrationality. The literature produced under apartheid hardly ever characterised the colonised African population in an individual manner, but entitled African men and women only to drown in an anonymous collective. Referring to this Johnstone wrote:

[It is not] *human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonising man into a class-room monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production.*

The nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African women proved fundamental to the ideological justification of their race, class, national and gender oppression.<sup>297</sup> Certain assumed qualities attached to black women developed into symbols and stereotypes, which then served as key instruments of power in order to maintain the interlocking systems of black women's inferior position. Every society designs controlling images of 'the Other', in order to make racism, sexism and poverty appear as natural, normal and inevitable parts of everyday life. Since they are not viewed as being able to truly integrate themselves into elaborate structures of civilisation and religion, 'the Others' are supposed to threaten the 'normal', or even 'god given', social order. Yet, they are simultaneously essential for its survival since their standing at the periphery of society defines the very character of the social order.<sup>298</sup> The status of African women as outsiders or strangers in the 'normal' (white-defined) South African society became a point from which other groups defined their normality. It was not only the white men and women who utilised the picture of African femininity as a point of reference, but also Coloureds, Indians and African men.

Racial, class and gender discrimination are most successful when its victims are forced to define themselves in terms of their 'otherness', manifested mainly through phenomenology. Their 'lived experience' is mediated and worked upon by social and cultural powers which define the victim's sense of body reality.<sup>299</sup> Their social reality is hence subverted by 'objective' forces; they are experiencing their body in the way it is 'racialised' or 'gendered' by the society they are living in.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> See K. Moodley: 'The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 8.

<sup>298</sup> P. Collins: Black Feminist Thought, p. 68.

<sup>299</sup> J. Prinsloo: 'Cheer the beloved country? Some thoughts on gendered representations, nationalism and the media' (Agenda, no. 40, 1999, pp. 45-47).



According to Brittan and Maynard:

*The perception of phenotypical characteristics like skin-colour, head shape, etc has dominated popular consciousness. Indeed, 'race' is given reality by the attribution of significance to the phenotype. Put differently, it is the active construction of the meaning of the phenotype that constitutes a group as a 'race'.<sup>301</sup>*

Educational and religious institutions, the media, advertising and government agencies are essential sites for transmitting ideologies objectifying black women as 'the Other'; the other race, the other gender. Coloured and Asian women experienced much of the same oppression as African women. They, too, were subjected to the colour bar in terms of jobs and education, to resettlement and to restrictions in movement. The impact was not quite as severe because there were nor reserves and tribal homelands to which they were supposed to belong to. On the scale of the apartheid race hierarchy, Indians and Coloureds were a step above Africans. Belonging to minority groups, Indians and Coloureds were better able too look out for each other, to obtain better education and receive higher incomes. Patriarchal domination is generally more intense among African and Indian women than among Coloureds. An Indian woman, particularly of the middle-class, was traditionally supposed to remain secluded at home, her mind confined to domestic chores, her contacts with the outside restricted to places of worship, weddings and funerals.<sup>302</sup> Among all South African ethnic groups, it is the Indian men in particular who regarded the outside as dangerous to women. 'The outside' was supposed to distort women in various ways, exposing them to sexual harassment and thereby debasing them. Historically, the idea of Indian girls working outside the family business was disapproved of, even within very poor families. The short history of the Progressive Women's Union is a perfect example in this regard. The Union was set up by Amina Cachalia, who later became one of the most prominent women of the Federation of South African Women (FSAW). Established in 1952, the Union was supposed to incite a self-help society among Indian women in Johannesburg. It envisaged teaching young Indian girls marketable skills such as typing, dress making and literacy so that they could achieve greater social and economic independence. The organisation was not politically, but socially

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<sup>300</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p. 23.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>302</sup> Gandhi held that 'men and women are equal in status, but are not identical, man is supreme in the outward activities of a married couple, home life is entirely the sphere of women. The care of the children and the upkeep of the household are quite enough to fully engage all her energy. In a well ordered society the additional burden of maintaining the family ought not to fall on her. The man should look to the maintenance of the family, the women to household managements, the two thus supplementing and complementing each others labours'. M. Gandhi as quoted in F. Meer (ed.): Black-Woman-Worker, p. 14.

involved and did not envisage any radical rearrangements of gender roles. It nevertheless challenged the assumption that a women's place was solely in the home. Indian men regarded the organisation as an intrusive force, diminishing the supremacy of the home and family. As a result, the Progressive Women's Union was short lived.<sup>303</sup>

Obviously, there have been severe problems in mobilising Indian women politically. Many of them remained isolated, poorly educated and almost totally dependent on the network of their families for both social and economic support. The significantly traditional attitude of Indian men is related to the fact that the Indian family survived in its traditional mould to a far greater extent than the Coloured and African family. In patriarchal societies, social equilibrium is maintained at the price of women's subordination. The fact that Indian patriarchies have been more supportive and therefore more in control of the household also explains why Indian women used to be less gainfully employed than African and Coloured women.<sup>304</sup> Until 1970, the illiteracy rate was highest among Indian women. Nevertheless, Indian women had the highest percentage of matriculates and female professionals.<sup>305</sup> Although Indian religions are male dominated, they do not doctrinally restrict women. As all religions, they leave space for individual interpretation. This space was especially utilised by higher educated, wealthy Indian families. As Indians constituted an ethnic minority in the liberation movement, the considerable number of Indian women in leading positions is especially noteworthy.<sup>306</sup> The position of a Coloured woman has been rather different. Whilst socialised at the crossroads of African and European cultures, the value system she was required to emulate and absorb was distinctively European. Afrikaner politicians emphasised the close relationship between whites and Coloureds, which was supposed to prevent the latter from identifying with 'the natives.' As Hertzog termed it in a speech in 1925, Coloureds 'owed' their origin, their language and civilisation to Afrikaners and should hence be treated on an equal economic, industrial and political level.<sup>307</sup> Apartheid however, defined

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<sup>303</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, pp. 111-112.

<sup>304</sup> F. Meer (ed.): Black-Woman-Worker, p. 202.

<sup>305</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, pp. 109. In 1946, there were 5 black women medical practitioners, physicians, surgeons, radiologists, of whom 4 were Indians.

<sup>306</sup> Interview with F. Meer, in C. Villa-Vicencio: The Spirit of Hope. Conversations on Religion, Politics and Values, p. 176.

<sup>307</sup> Prime Minister Hertzog stated in 1925 that 'Coloureds' belonged to a 'section of the community closely allied to the white population...fundamentally different from the natives. He owes his origin to us and knows no other civilisation than that of the European...even speaks the language of the European as his mother-tongue...Cape Coloured people must be treated on an equality with Europeans – economically, industrially and politically. As quoted in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like. A Selection of his writings, p 7.

the differences between Coloureds and whites more distinctively, for in 1962 Dr. Verwoerd declared:

*One must distinguish between citizenship of a country and what the components of a homogenous nation are. There is no doubt that the Coloureds are citizens of this country. There is just as little doubt that they are not part of this homogeneous entity that can be described as 'the nation.'*<sup>308</sup>

Many Coloureds sought to reconcile their darker appearance through a 'white' life-style. They sought salvation with the oppressor rather than solidarity with the oppressed and tended to evaluate themselves in terms of white standards, particularly with regard to their pigmentation.<sup>309</sup> Daughters were often expected to marry the lightest-skinned man available, regardless of his other qualities.<sup>310</sup> Coloured women are generally subjected to more extreme levels of European patriarchy than whites.

It is only in the home that the oppressed, exploited male worker experiences a sense of possession and can exercise authority. Likewise men in white-collar jobs and men with a secondary school education are usually less patriarchal than blue-collar workers and workers with primary to nil educational achievement. Women are generally more religious than men, the lower classes generally more so than the upper. According to many scriptural traditions, women's subordination is not simply natural but divinely ordered; it is eternal and fixed. The Judeo-Christian tradition makes it in addition deserved. The woman is seen as the original sinner and the source of sin, and sin is identified with her pro-creational sexual facilities tempting men.<sup>311</sup> As Christianity has always played a crucial part in the Westernisation of African societies, images transferred by Christian tradition definitely impacted upon African women of whom many worked in clerical services.

There have been images of the savage and negative beliefs about 'blackness' in European thought and culture long before European powers embarked on their colonial enterprises. The history of colonisation can generally be seen as the history of objectification, deriving from material deprivation and cultural 'otherness.'<sup>312</sup> As Steve Biko wrote:

*The tripartite system of fear – that of whites fearing the blacks, blacks fearing whites and the government fearing blacks and wishing to allay the fear amongst*

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<sup>308</sup> Dr. Verwoerd in a speech in 1962, as quoted in V. February: *Mind your Colour*, p. 10.

<sup>309</sup> V. February: *Mind your Colour*, p. 2.

<sup>310</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: *Domestic servants*, p. 36.

<sup>311</sup> F. Meer (ed.): *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 21.

<sup>312</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): *Sexism, Racism and Oppression*, p. 199.

*whites – makes it difficult to establish rapport amongst the two segments of the community.*<sup>313</sup>

The history of apartheid ideology serves as a major example of how nationalist, supremacist definitions were initially invoked by the feeling of fear and the need of self-defence. The Afrikaners had to defend themselves against both the African majority and the English minority, who as representatives of the British imperialist power, exhibited economic and political attitudes which were patronising towards the Afrikaans population.<sup>314</sup> The idea of the Afrikaner nation, conceptualised at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, identified the Afrikaners as a people who were historically unified, even although they were denied political self-determination, cultural self-representation, economic progression and geographical unification. The principle features of Afrikaner identity were defined through descent, (referring to descendants of the Europeans who had settled during the Dutch period,) language (as Afrikaans had become distinct from the Dutch of the Netherlands) and religion, (meaning membership of a Dutch Reformed Church.)<sup>315</sup> The burdens imposed by the imperial minority and native majority on the Afrikaner people brought about an ideology based on puritanical suffrage. Racism played a vital but less significant role in the initial conceptualisation of the Afrikaner ideology. Before 1948, British imperialism seemed to constitute a greater threat than black resistance. Colonial conquest and racial segregation, coupled with the need for self-defence in war times were, on the other hand, legitimised by the European colonial and missionary culture. The historical fear of being vanquished by a foreign black majority gained a new dimension during the process of industrialisation, when a growing black labour force threatened the Afrikaner workforce economically. After 1948, the British imperialist power lost its relevance in the conceptualisation of an Afrikaner nation. Since then, it had to defend its integrity against the growing national liberation movement and the de-colonisation process on the international front. The mythology of the ‘divinely ordained’ Afrikaner people, based on nineteenth-century episodes such as the Great Trek, kept its validity. It was here where the notion that suffering purges, cast itself in the stone of Afrikaner identity. Afrikaner nationalists such as Malan emphasised repeatedly how phenotypical differences provided the base for national identification, defined against ‘cultural otherness:’

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<sup>313</sup> S. Biko: ‘Fear – An important Determinant’, in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko. I write what I like: A Selection of his Writings, p. 79.

<sup>314</sup> L. Thompson: The Political Mythology of Apartheid, pp. 25-30.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

*The difference in colour is merely the physical manifestation of the contrast between two irreconcilable ways of life, between barbarism and civilisation, between heathenism and Christianity, and finally between overwhelming numerical odds on the one hand and insignificant numbers on the other.*<sup>316</sup>

People's racial and gender attitudes are largely reflected in their perceptions of the standards of femininity and beauty. Western societies used to mystify the image of white puritan femininity by presenting the blond, blue-eyed, thin white woman as the classical beauty. Her portrayal as the embodiment of purity and piety was illuminated by contrasting 'the Other' – the African woman with dark skin, a broad nose, full lips and kinky hair.<sup>317</sup> Hair became a particular synonym for blackness as racial differences were thought to be sharper in hair quality than in skin colour and persist much longer with miscegenation. The negative presentation of black women in terms of beauty standards exerted a severe impact on their self-definition. Of course, black men were penalised by their blackness as well. Yet, because they were men, their self-definitions did not depend as much on their physical attractiveness. By contrast, black men's adherence to white beauty standards added to the negative self-perception black women gained in confrontation with the white consumer world. As Collin asserts:

*[B]lack women experience the pain of never being able to live up to externally defined standards of beauty – standards applied to them by white men, white women, black men, and, most painfully, one another.*<sup>318</sup>

Since the 1950s, township women became the victims of new stereotypes defining women under mature capitalism: women as sex-objects, women as consumers.<sup>319</sup> The adherence of many black women to externally defined standards has continuously been reflected and reinforced through advertising, music, literature and art. The use of skin lightening creams by black women was (and still is) a significant example in this regard, as it exemplified the psychological insecurity of many African women. In the advertising industry, white skin was associated with intelligence, wealth and beauty. Many black women supposed that a lighter complexion would enhance their value for the wedding market. Even in the 1980s, in the aftermath of the Black Consciousness Movement, African women still spent more than R30 million a year on lightening creams.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Dr Malan in a letter written in 1954 as quoted in: L. Kuper: *Passive Resistance*, p. 218.

<sup>317</sup> P. Collins: *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 79.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>319</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 150.

<sup>320</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): *Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak*, p. 168.

The power externally defined beauty standards exert on black women, mirrors the combination of gender, class and race oppression.<sup>321</sup> This notion includes black men as well. Many of them internalised the white beauty standard to such a degree that they tended to negate their race, looking for a black women (in order to stay within the regulations of the Immorality Act) with as much whiteness in her as possible. Due to the negation of race amongst many blacks, a light skinned black woman with straight hair was supposed to be physically more attractive to men. Notwithstanding legislative prohibitions, white men might have thought her to be more easily available because of her blackness.<sup>322</sup> Black feminists as Collins therefore emphasise the importance of creating functional beauty images that offer powerful alternatives to Eurocentric aesthetics.<sup>323</sup>

In order to deconstruct Western standard assumptions of nuclear family lives, there is a strong impetus on empirical research.<sup>324</sup> Contemporary Black women intellectuals such as bell hooks continue to draw on women's everyday actions and experiences in their theoretical work. The slogan '*personal is political*' reflects the recognition of the private sphere as an area of interest in which male and racist domination has its deepest ideological and material consequences.<sup>325</sup>

### 3.2. Domestic service: Deference in profession

The institution of domestic service was a microcosm of black women's exploitation and inequality upon which the entire South African social order was based.<sup>326</sup> It was institutionalised to a degree that warrants discussion in terms of black women's psychological subjugation. The image of the obedient domestic servant used to be the most controlling picture of black women's existence in the white South African society. The institution of the black domestic included an ideological maintenance, since it was the most significant inter racial contact whites used to experience - and they experienced it in very asymmetrical terms. White South African children learned the attitudes of racial domination

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<sup>321</sup> See P. Mayer: Townsmen or tribesmen, pp. 62-63.

<sup>322</sup> See also B. Higgs: 'Sex and Race' (Sechaba, vol. 4, no. 6, June 1970, pp. 2-4).

<sup>323</sup> P. Collins: Black Feminist Thought, p. 88.

<sup>324</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p. 142.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

from their relationship with black servants, their nannies in particular, and became thereby socialised into the dominant ideological order.<sup>327</sup> As mentioned previously, black domestics were rather unlikely to see themselves as ‘one of the family’ – a term frequently used by white families in reference to their live-in domestics. Being interviewed by Cock about their status in the employers’ families, most of the domestics rejected any feelings of solidarity with the white housewife. As one domestic remarked:

*Your employer looks down on you. You have to keep on saying, ‘Remember that I am a woman, too.’*<sup>328</sup>

The treatment of domestics exemplified the many forms that objectification can take. Their day-to-day working existence within the family prevented them from creating a private sphere of living. The controlling image of the black nanny has been that of an asexual woman, a surrogate mother in black, devoted to the development of a white family.<sup>329</sup> It manifested black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service, loving, caring, nurturing ‘her white children.’ Although many black nannies were indeed very loved and wielded a considerable authority in their employers’ families, they were never to forget their subordination as the obedient servant. Deference rituals such as calling domestics ‘girls’ and by their first names enabled employers to treat them as children, even as less human beings. An African domestic, the very confident and the very outsider in one, exhibited by her not belonging, the significance of belonging.<sup>330</sup> The view that the best servant was the least visible one, meant an objectification through ignorance, in which ‘the Other’, the black servant, more or less disappeared.<sup>331</sup>

The highly personalised nature of the servant’s relationship with her employer and the low level of specialisation in domestic roles are both anomalous in a modern industrial society moving towards specialised and impersonalised relationships.<sup>332</sup> Many black girls access domestic service at the age of eleven or twelve, looking after small children of white families.<sup>333</sup> The lack of educational opportunities and employment alternatives, coupled with

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<sup>326</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: Domestic servants, pp. 1-4.

<sup>327</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 3. According to Cock, Steve Biko claimed that he first became politicised through observing the exploitation to which his mother was subjected as a domestic worker.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>329</sup> P. Collins: Black Feminist Thought, p. 72.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid, p. 68.

<sup>331</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: Domestic servants, pp. 36-38.

<sup>332</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 3.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

legislation restricting the movement of black workers, all combined to 'trap' black women in domestic service.<sup>334</sup> The recipient of a tiny wage, second-hand clothes, food and lodging, 'holiday with the family', medical care and school fees for her children, is completely demeaned. The manner of payment implies that the employers suppose their domestic being unable to organise her life properly in almost every direction, whether choosing her clothes or saving for her children's schooling.<sup>335</sup>

Domestic work received the lowest prestige rating among Africans as well, since African tradition does not suppose women to perform waged domestic labour outside the house. Among Africans, domestics were often teased for the exploitative work they performed, by saying *unoblind* ('you have blindness') or *uyisilima* ('you are a fool'), even *inyama yazinja* ('dog's meat').<sup>336</sup> Considering their self-image as members of the black working class, domestics usually seemed quite unaffected by the policy and philosophy of national movements, as for instance the social and political implications of the Black Consciousness Movement. Cock's survey, although conducted in the second half of the 1970s, showed, that the interviewed women were either completely uninformed or consciously apolitical towards the BCM. The overwhelming majority advocated their children to follow a conventional career within the existing social structure instead of challenging the latter through political involvement.

The deferential attitude of servants often just masked a very different world view which had to be hidden in order to save the chance to make a living. It can hardly be denied that domestic workers recognise their dependence on the existing structure and that they question the legitimacy of the power distribution. The adoption of a mask of deference as means of coping with her situation characterises the domestic's life significantly.<sup>337</sup> Surveys conducted among domestic workers revealed that most of them explained their subordination not in terms of natural inferiority but social power structures. For this reason, domestic workers invest a significant portion of their income in the education of their children.<sup>338</sup> Moreover, they appeared to be very conscious of their personal qualities as women and attributed a sense of superiority to the fact that they had more difficulties to cope with than men or white women. Frequently, they stated comments as

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<sup>334</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: *Domestic servants*, p.11.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>336</sup> J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, p. 61.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.



*Men have lost their dignity in many ways ...Our men cannot cope with the responsibility of being head of the family ...We give them respect but they are not entitled to it ...We are far better than men but we have to respect them so we don't lower their dignity...Look at me. I am just as a man who goes to the mines. I only go home at the end of the year.*<sup>339</sup>

Their actual standing towards men, however, showed a different picture. A survey, conducted by Whisson and Weil in the early 1970s, revealed that most domestics were married to unskilled labourers and had on average four dependants to care for.<sup>340</sup> These women had clearly fallen victim to the system of migrant work and the disruption of family life it entailed. They complained about domestic violence, a lack of authority in financial matters and the unfaithfulness of their husbands in times of geographical separation. The women's statements exhibit a complete lack of awareness in domestic and family responsibilities on part of the men. Less than a quarter of the interviewed women had ever heard of a Women's Liberation Movement. In terms of the latter, servants generally did not reject the idea of a legal, political and social emancipation of women, in contrast to their employers of whom 86 per cent were informed about the international Women's Movement, but only 6 per cent appreciated the struggle for women's emancipation.<sup>341</sup> This indicates to what extent white employers proved to be dependent on the patriarchal apartheid society. A society, which might have freed them from the physical features of domesticity, but which kept them within an extremely strictly defined framework of 'white femininity'.<sup>342</sup> Since their social roles were chiefly defined within the private sphere, employers of domestic servants regarded themselves as domestic workers as well - although in a theoretical rather than practical sense.<sup>343</sup>

Cock hence argues that domestic servants exhibit a far greater 'feminist consciousness' than their white, mainly middle-class employers.<sup>344</sup> She contributes this to black women's changing position in the social structure, their growing economic independence and, in particular, the disruption of the family through the system of migrant labour. The confrontation with their husband's irresponsibility in financial and social matters questions any legitimization of traditional patriarchal patterns. It is however arguable, to what extent these considerations about women's issues can be called feminist. Both employers and

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<sup>339</sup> J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, pp. 94-96.

<sup>340</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: *Domestic servants*, p. 29.

<sup>341</sup> J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, pp. 97, 109.

<sup>342</sup> J. Prinsloo: 'Cheer the beloved country?' (*Agenda*, no. 40, 1999, p. 47).

<sup>343</sup> J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, p. 138.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

servants complained about their lack of authority within a male dominated society but did hardly express any ambitions of challenging this hierarchy.

According to Cock, white employers exhibited less potential for emancipatory steps. Not only did they prove far more dependent on their men's wages. They also adhered to the gender patterns of the apartheid society which supposed men to be responsible for women and whites for blacks. While being protected by white men, they assumed their duty and responsibility to be the moral educator of the domestic. To Cock, the employers explained this education as being based on four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.

*Our servants are our responsibility. We have to be their doctors, lawyers and do everything for them...They need a lot of help. They do not understand about modern life ...They've got a long way to go in evolutionary terms. Putting them in European clothes doesn't make them civilised....You can't compare natives to us ...They should improve matters themselves. If you are not happy at home how can you be happy at work?*<sup>345</sup>

Cock classifies the employers' attitudes towards their servants into certain categories, ranging from 'Embarrassment' about 'relying on the work of servants at all', to feelings of 'Moral Responsibility' and views of whites as being 'obliged to provide employment and education for blacks.' Employers, showing a generally antagonistic attitude towards blacks and dismissing servants after a short term, appeared to regard domestics as 'Necessary Evils.' In contrast to that, a pretty large group of employers regarded their domestic as 'One of the Family', whom 'they feel responsible for.'<sup>346</sup> The last category Cock names includes those employers, who think themselves to 'Know the Natives.' They have a kind but firm and distanced relationship to their servant, whose different culture they acknowledge and whose language they may speak. All these attitudes derived from the view in which blacks were seen as perpetual adolescents. Whisson and Weil describe this image as follows:

*She has 'boy-friends' rather than a husband and her children are viewed as the fruit of irresponsible lust rather than as the natural consummation of her womanhood. She is 'irresponsible' because she 'cannot afford to bring them up properly, so I suppose that we shall have to help her out as usual.' Her duties as a servant make it impossible for her to fulfil her maternal or wifely roles as she would wish, and so she is viewed almost as a teenager who has produced an illegitimate baby.*<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, p. 140.

<sup>346</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: *Domestic servants*, p.11.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

Surveys showed, that domestics were often treated in a way that made them conform to their employers' negative expectations. As the wages were kept to the lowest levels, the maid relied on the 'little extras' her madam might have provided, be it food or contributions to the children's school fees.<sup>348</sup> In some cases, the exploitation was so severe and personally degrading that stealing became a strategy of survival, which, in turn, reinforced the employer's image of blacks.<sup>349</sup>

Nevertheless, more than 80 percent of the domestics interviewed by Cock stated, that they discussed their family problems with their employer.<sup>350</sup> The way domestics used to be objectified was principally not intended as an insult. These unconscious insults were nevertheless expressions of the employers' ability to annihilate the humanness of their domestics. Due to her taciturn, isolated position, the domestic could not defend herself against attitudes that felt like affronts to her dignity as a human being. Self-hatred leading to crime and violence or to drug-taking and drunkenness, were clearly deviant adaptations against which most of the domestics used to be properly socialised. What enabled her to survive the context of servant life was rather the acceptance of a deferential attitude or the search for a patron on whom to depend totally.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: Domestic servants, pp. 20-21.

<sup>349</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, pp. 30, 58.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid, p. 74.

<sup>351</sup> M. G. Whisson, W. Weil: Domestic servants, p. 39.

### 3.3. Features of black women's oppression and self-repression in white-defined environments: A conceptualisation of invisible images

African womanhood and Western inspired femininity are two diverging concepts, based on entirely contradictive life conditions and cultural backgrounds. Black mothers can hardly afford to perform motherhood as a woman's single occupation and hence fail to conform to the Western image of femininity. This 'failure' has often been viewed as evidence of black people's cultural inferiority. Reflecting on their position in the historical context of slavery, Angela Davis asserts that black women's 'failure' to take on features of Western femininity, was probably the only positive result of their enslavement.

*To extract the greatest possible surplus from the labour of the slaves – the Black woman had to be released from the chains of the myth of femininity... In order to function as slave, the black woman had to be annulled as woman; that is, as woman in her historical stance of wardship under the entire male hierarchy. The sheer force of things rendered her equal to her man.<sup>352</sup>*

The Western picture of how African women play the mother figure in black homes, contrasts the 'nanny image' significantly. Considering the growing number of widowed, divorced or deserted mothers, the increasing poverty among the black population and the moral degeneration that goes along with both, many whites thought black mothers to put less emphasis on the intergenerational value transmission. Moreover, the number of children conceived hardly fitted into the moral standards white people held, based upon the nuclear middle-class family typecast. Womanist researchers emphasise the valuable support network among urban African working class women, usually neglected in feminist theory, which provides a startling contrast to the isolated position of women in the Western nuclear family structure. Cock points out that these support networks function as strategies of survival in the South African context, since they prove being of inestimable value to the women coping with the strain of their dual roles as mothers and workers.<sup>353</sup> The different ideology of black family life is not acknowledged, nor are the family's important survival mechanisms recognised. Black parents are viewed as lacking the ability to socialise their children into the wider society. It is assumed that Black children grow up with negative self-identities, because they have not been subjected to the same family policy of stability, authority and discipline as their white counterparts.<sup>354</sup> Assuming that black mothers would invest less attention and care

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<sup>352</sup> A. Davis: Reflections on the Black Woman's role in the Community of 'Slaves' (The Black Scholar, vol. 3, December 1971, p. 7).

<sup>353</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 11

<sup>354</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p. 135.

in the performance of motherhood and would therefore be responsible for the perpetuation of poverty among the next generation is like blaming Africans for their own victimisation. Since 1974, the National Party pursued a family planning course aimed at reducing the black population's growth rate. It called for preventative health, but practice revealed the actual concern not being health but politics. The aim was to increase the number of whites in relation to the black population. At clinics, in adverts, even at work Africans have been told 'A small family for a bigger future.' Africans usually responded 'I need children. They will look after me when I am old' and sometimes 'We need children for soldiers.'<sup>355</sup>

There is an assumption that Blacks are responsible for their subordination and oppression by failing to conform. This stereotype picture is indeed racist since it completely ignores the divergences in living arrangements. It assumes that nothing will change, unless blacks could be taught to take on the image of white society and unless they assimilate the white nuclear family structure - the proper and natural form upon which social order is founded. This is a racially biased notion because it assumes that anything that does not approximate to the idealised white norm would be deviant. It thereby perpetuates the most insidious form of victim-blaming, focussing on the cultural strangeness of minority groups, and fails to acknowledge the problems for blacks created by and within white society.<sup>356</sup>

Black women are constantly struggling to reconcile the contradictions separating their own internally defined image of themselves as black women with their objectification as 'the Other.' Controlling images gain their actual power through the way in which they are reinforced. They not only reflect how the privileged views the oppressed, but also how the oppressed is supposed to view the privileged and, eventually, him/herself. As bell hooks remarked:

*When black psyches are daily bombarded by mass media representations that encourage us too see white people as more caring, intelligent, liberal, etc., it makes sense that many of us begin to internalise racist thinking.*<sup>357</sup>

The most effective images in maintaining inferiority complexes based on race, prove to be silent comments, expressed in rather indirect ways. Since they could hardly defend themselves against these subtle but ever-spreading pattern of affronts, many black women

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<sup>355</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p.169.

<sup>356</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p. 140.

<sup>357</sup> b. hooks: Killing Rage, p. 117.

tended to internalise the deference behaviour they were forced to exhibit. By teaching their black children their assigned place in white power structures, black women were in fact perpetuating the system of racial oppression. They were transmitting the most effective force of the white oppressor: the inferior complex of the black person. Black women's work for the family exhibited a contradictory duality: in order to save the survival of the group, the black woman performed the conservative picture that was expected from her. As cultural workers, however, they thwarted European efforts to eliminate African culture. The survival of African customs has not been due to black people's 'failure' to conform to Western images of civilisation in as much as it reflects the process of continual resistance perpetuated in African homes.<sup>358</sup> Black women were revolutionary in terms of 'conservative' attitudes, preserving and recreating the Africanist world view. Educated women were brought up to see their education as something gained not only for their own development but for the purpose of racial uplift. Most African women do not define themselves through the controlling images which became 'common sense' in white people's minds. Under apartheid, black women were silently living two lives: one for themselves and one for the whites. Hence womanism does not call for the creation of a 'feminist' consciousness among black women, but for the wider acknowledgement of African women's perceptions of their womanhood.

It is a controversial question to ask whether an oppressive act can be legitimised as politically or ideologically motivated. Reductionist theories tend to regard people conforming within oppressive systems as 'clockwork oppressors.'<sup>359</sup> People, who conduct oppressive acts, are not viewed as individuals but as agents of an inexorable determining mechanism, whose logic and laws of historical development force the powerful class to perpetuate domination. According to this, men oppressing women are not to be viewed as independent agents, but are seen as acting on behalf of 'the mode of production', a 'programmed genetic trait', or the 'system of patriarchy'. Racism, in this regard, can be explained in terms of the 'logic of capitalism' or the inevitability of 'kin altruism.'

But no human being just passively, unquestionably internalises the attitudes and values of others and mechanistically mirrors their behaviour. Individuals are not simply role players with predetermined scripts. The racist oppressor is not merely reproducing a racist ideology but an active agent in the reproduction of a racist ideology. Individuals interpret and give

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<sup>358</sup> P. Collins: Black Feminist Thought, p. 142.

<sup>359</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, pp. 206-213.

meaning to their situation. They are not deterministically socialised and reproduced in the simple image of their society.

### 3.4. Marxism, Feminism and the context of apartheid: black-women-workers, a class of their own, a class on their own?

*One core theme in Black feminist writing is the analysis of Black women's work, their labour market victimisation as "mules" – living machines*<sup>360</sup>

Whereas people from Western societies tend to define their own personality through their work, waged African labour is generally alienating, economically and physically demanding and intellectually deadening. Neither the attainment of status, nor class conflict models adequately explain Black women's experience with social class. Since African women have traditionally been employed in agricultural labour or as domestic workers, two occupations resistant to unionisation, their paid work has been neglected in class conflict models.<sup>361</sup> Research on Black women's unpaid labour within extended families remains less fully developed in Black feminist thought than what the studies on paid women's work do. As mentioned above, traditional social science easily tends to assess African women's experience in families using the normative yardstick developed from the experiences of middle class, American and European families.<sup>362</sup> Assumptions about the universal nuclear family neither take the crucial impoverishment of black families into consideration nor do they invoke Afrocentric worldviews offering alternative definitions of family and community. Due to their social and economic deprivation, black South African families could hardly exhibit the radical split equating private with home and public with work. With regard to the destructive forces of the apartheid system, the black family used to be seen as a place of refuge, where dignity could be maintained against the humiliations of apartheid. Black women did not view family life as the main place of exploitation, but rather as the chief area of struggle against exploitation and personal oppression under apartheid. Many scholars therefore suggest that black women see their unpaid work as a form of resistance to racial oppression rather than as a form of male exploitation.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p. 43.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

In order to assess black women's racial and economic oppression, one has to consider their different roles in the capitalist, patriarchal apartheid society. Eisenstein invokes the term 'capitalist patriarchy' in order to stress that both systems are neither autonomous nor identical, but rather mutually dependent.<sup>364</sup> As demonstrated in the previous chapters, women's exploitation and oppression under industrialisation shows four different dimensions: Women were the reproducers of the workforce and served as a 'reserve army' of labour in times of expansion. Black women also gained an increasing importance as both consumers and products of consumption, since the female sexuality increasingly served as means by which commodities were promoted for sale.

In the broad field of analyses evaluating both the capitalist structures of apartheid and the exploitation of women, Marxist theories occupy an important but highly debatable status.<sup>365</sup> Although Marx and Engels have been widely criticised for their sex-blindness, they have more to say about gender than about race relations. Marx mentions women in both their work and family roles. He nevertheless unambiguously regards the typical wage labourer as male. Women are conspicuously absent from Marx's conception of the labourer and his critique of capitalism. Even the term 'prostitution' serves merely as an expression for *men's* exploitation in the capitalist society. As the following quotation shows, Marx speaks of both the worker, who produces himself, and the non-producer, who exists because of the labourer, in purely masculine terms:<sup>366</sup>

*The labourer leaves the capitalist to whom he hires himself whenever he likes, and the capitalist discharges him whenever he thinks fit, as soon as he no longer gets any profit out of him.*<sup>367</sup>

Marx and Engels continuously refer to women in the context of the family. Class location is allocated to the family as a whole and related to the social status of the male bread-winner. By defining the members of the working class as those who sell their labour power, Marx and Engels do not account for the structural position of women without paid employment – whether speaking of the wives of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. When discussing the way industrialisation impacted on the life of women, they focus particularly on the disruption of traditional labour divisions within the family. Hence, women are solely defined through their position in the family, either as the objects of the worker's alienation or as the property of the

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<sup>364</sup> Z. Eisenstein: 'Reform and/or revolution' in L. Sargent: *Women and Revolution*, pp. 350-354.

<sup>365</sup> See R. Bertelsmann: 'International Feminism and the Women's Movement' (*South African Outlook* 117 (139), 1978, pp. 62-66).

<sup>366</sup> L. Vogel: *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, p. 44.



non-producer.<sup>368</sup> Women are presented as passive victims rather than historical actors. Assuming that the force of dialectical materialism would be moving society inevitably towards the social revolution, Marx identifies material differences with social inequalities and conflict. According to the male character of Marxist thoughts, the historic dialectic occurs in the public sphere of men, in the market place, where men, depending on their relation to the mode of production, take positions with or against each other. Marxism suggests that men create themselves in production. Women's work, however, is not seen as producing the means of subsistence. They are therefore excluded from the process of a 'naturally' rising class self consciousness.<sup>369</sup> Defined predominantly through their domestic roles, they remain outside this historic process, apart from the political arena where the class conflict takes place.<sup>370</sup> Marx even seems to specify the ownership of women when he argues that under communism a community of women would be introduced and the monogamous family would be abolished.<sup>371</sup> Yet, Marx and Engels reject the interpretation of a 'community of women' as a common ground for sexual exploitation. According to them, such an assertion was due to a misinterpretation of bourgeois men and proves symptomatic of a world view which regards even women as mere instruments of production, rendering the monogamous family the ultimate form of private gain. The abolition of the monogamous family would thus particularly enhance the position of the bourgeois wife, whom Marx and Engels thought to suffer from a far greater sexual exploitation than proletarian women.<sup>372</sup>

Engels takes the Marxist analysis a little further in his work on *The origin of the family, private property and the state*.<sup>373</sup> Although many of Engels' notions merely reflect conventional nineteenth century assumptions, he shows a much stronger interest in the plight of women than Marx.<sup>374</sup> Like Marx, he identifies women's location and interests as synonymous with those of the working class. Yet, Engels' writings evidence a certain commitment to the emancipation of women. In order to evaluate women's role in the family

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<sup>367</sup> K. Marx: 'Wage Labour and Capital', in Lawrence and Wishart: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, pp. 74-75.

<sup>368</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels: 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in Lawrence and Wishart: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, pp. 49-50.

<sup>369</sup> I. Berger: 'Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry 1900-1980' (Agenda, no. 18, 1993, pp. 3-4).

<sup>370</sup> F. Meer (ed.): Black-Woman-Worker, p. 36.

<sup>371</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels: 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in Lawrence and Wishart: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, pp. 49-50.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> F. Engels: 'The origin of the family, Private Property and the State' in Lawrence and Wishart: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, pp. 461-583.

<sup>374</sup> K. Yates: The Madness of the Black Man On His Own, p. 54.

and wider society, he first reflects on women's changing position in the production process under emerging capitalism.

*All the surplus now resulting from production fell to the man; the woman shared in consuming, but she had no share in owning. The 'savage' warrior and hunter had been content to occupy second place in the house and given precedence to the woman. The 'gentler' shepherd, presuming upon his wealth, pushed forward to first place and forced the woman into second place [The] division of labour remained unchanged, and yet it now put the former domestic relationship topsy-turvy simply because the division of labour outside the family had changed.<sup>375</sup>*

Engels theorises that women's subordination was the direct result of men's accumulation of surplus, of capital which he needed to pass on to his heirs.<sup>376</sup> The monogamous nature of a relationship was essential to ensure that the heirs were the bourgeois' natural offspring. Since Engels relates monogamy to economic instead of social or sexual factors, he presumed bourgeois men with capital accumulation to be more patriarchal than working class men who had no inheritance to pass on.<sup>377</sup>

*Monogamy arose out of the concentration of considerable wealth in the hands of one person – and that a man- and out of the desire to bequeath this wealth to this man's children and to no one else's. For this purpose monogamy was essential on the woman's part but not on the man's: so that this monogamy of the woman in no way hindered the overt or covert polygamy of the man.<sup>378</sup>*

According to Engels, the 'enslavement of women' in the modern family was based on the 'overthrow of mother right, the introduction of father right and the gradual transition from the pairing family to monogamy.'<sup>379</sup> This enslavement emerged with the privatisation of domestic work, when the administration of the household lost its public character and became a private service.<sup>380</sup> According to Engels, the division of labour in the individual family mirrors the class differences of the wider society: the man represents the bourgeois, the wife the proletariat.<sup>381</sup> Beyond these social-economic considerations, Engels obviously rejects the monogamous family from a moral point of view. According to Engels, bourgeois monogamy

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<sup>375</sup> F. Engels: 'The origin of the family', in Lawrence and Wishart: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, pp. 569.

<sup>376</sup> H. Hartmann: 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union', in: L. Sargent (ed.): Women and Revolution, p. 4.

<sup>377</sup> See F. Meer (ed.): Black-Woman-Worker, p. 16; A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p. 51.

<sup>378</sup> F. Engels: 'The origin of the family', in Lawrence and Wishart: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, p. 502.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid, p. 570.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid, pp. 569-571.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid, p. 501; Eve: 'Women's Liberation. The true proletariat of Africa are the women' (Sechaba, vol.4, no.6, June 1970, pp. 16).

and prostitution were in fact poles of the same social conditions and therefore inseparable opposites.<sup>382</sup> On the other hand, the labourer, as head of the household, and while being exploited by the non-producer, realised his incapability of reaching the expectations, which the patriarchal society placed upon him. For him, marriage was the only means of owning ‘property’ and exerting power.

The first premise for the emancipation of women would be the reintroduction of the entire female population into public industry. This, in turn, required the abolishment of the family as an economic unit of society and the transformation of housekeeping into a social industry. The care and education of the children would become a public affair. Society would look after the children alike, whether they were legitimised or not. The ultimate emancipation of women, however, would only result from the entire abolishment of private property and the corresponding demise of capitalism.<sup>383</sup> Engels thus locates women’s oppression at the level of participation in production and links the conflict between the sexes to the appearance of private ownership of wealth. The fortunes of both the generalised category of ‘women’ and the oppressed class of ‘workers’ are intimately connected: neither could be free until the economic foundation based on private property was abolished.<sup>384</sup>

According to Marxist feminists, women’s oppression can only be understood from within the context of capitalism and its class system. Accordingly, racism and sexism in both their institutionalised and personalised forms, should be solely analysed in terms of the needs and interests of the capital.<sup>385</sup> The relations of production by which capitalism is defined in Marxist terms constitutes the historical context in which gender relations are played out. Women, especially black women, were placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Against Marx and Engels’ assumptions, women’s incorporation into the industry has not ‘naturally’ resulted in their emancipation. They were the most exploited of all those exploited, forming a reserve army of labour for capital. It could however be argued that the existence of a high proportion of jobs defined as ‘women’s work’, such as clerical work, nursing and shop work, indicates that women were not such an easily dispensable reserve army of labour – otherwise offices, hospitals and the retail trade business would have collapsed.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> F. Engels: ‘The origin of the family’, in Lawrence and Wishart: Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, p. 503.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., p. 569.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., p. 503.

<sup>385</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, pp. 39-41.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

Finally, it has to be concluded that Marxist theories prove inadequate to explain black women's social experiences and status, or their political motivations. According to Marx, class oppression and material exploitation determine the economic reality of the worker in the capitalist society. However, although black women's oppression is inclusive of economic exploitation, it derives from a far more complex reality and has to be considered in the material *and* ideological dimensions of patriarchy, racism and capitalism. Arguments couched in traditional Marxist terms tend to regard both race and gender as a secondary and rather insignificant aspect of social relations. The idea that women themselves constitute a class, has been advocated most forcibly by feminists who question the adequacy of traditional class analysis in terms of gender relations.<sup>387</sup> Feminist theories asserting that women's oppression derives primarily from capitalist relations, neglect the historic dimension of labour division between the sexes in pre-capitalist societies, which legitimised women's subordination to men. Feudal households were not, in any class, egalitarian between men and women. Women were given political power, but not political authority. Marxist feminism views women's liberation from the domestic sphere as synonymous with the struggle against capitalism. Indeed, the development of capitalism brought an exacerbation of the sexual division of labour. The urbanisation of Africans brought a far greater degree of women's dependence on men within the household. These developments, however, are only partially attributable to forces internal to capitalist production. They also reflect a struggle *within* the working class. There is a rising competition among male and female work seekers as 'the female reserve army' is more likely to enter positions in low-paid, insecure jobs. Furthermore, Marxist theories tend to ignore the complexity of the material base of patriarchy which does not solely rest on childrearing in the family, but on all social structures that enable men to control women's labour. Institutions outside the home, where patriarchal behaviours are taught and inferior positions of women are reinforced, are, for instance, churches, schools, sports, clubs, unions, armies, factories, offices, health centres and the media.<sup>388</sup>

Classical Marxist literature does not offer any systematic ways by which to evaluate the problem of women's emancipation. Black women's entry into waged labour was not meant to advance their social position and to liberate them from the domestic sphere. It was the only chance to make a living, yet eroded their social position even further. However, institutions

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<sup>387</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p. 61.

<sup>388</sup> H. Hartmann: 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union', in: L. Sargent (ed.): Women and Revolution, p. 16.

such as trade unions opened up new arenas in which they could articulate themselves as both women and as blacks.<sup>389</sup>

Eventually, it would be a perpetuation of white supremacy, white female supremacy, to speak of *all* women categorically in a discussion about women's issues and Marxism. Since the classic Marxist analyses focus on the class question, while largely neglecting gender analysis and entirely ignoring racial oppression, they prove most appropriate for the white women. Referring to the context of the South African apartheid society, feminist Marxist approaches suit neither white nor black women. Since most of the white South African women could buy their way out of the domestic labour sphere, they were the major beneficiaries of black women's triple oppression. In terms of their productive role, white women benefited from racialist capitalism as well, since they were privileged through job reservation. Socialist feminist theories supposing that shared working conditions would provide a basis for a multiracial class consciousness among women workers, ignored a major fact in the historical process towards apartheid and its policy of separate development: the lower the positioning of a person in the social hierarchy, the greater his/her tendency to express racial prejudices and assume positions of racial superiority. The persistence of gender oppression in socialist countries is another indicator women's incorporation into social production does not automatically eliminate sexual inequality at home or at work.<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> L. Guma: 'Women, Wage Labour and National Liberation', in R. Cohen, Y. Muthien and A. Zegeye (eds.): Repression and Resistance: Insider Accounts of Apartheid, pp. 273-275.

<sup>390</sup> R. Bertelsmann: 'International Feminism and the Women's Movement' (South African Outlook 117 (139), 1978, p. 65).

## Chapter 4

### Black women and resistance until 1960

#### 4.1. Aspects of women's political emancipation within the South African society

*In the 1950s we didn't really know that women could hold high positions as presidents of organisations.*<sup>391</sup>

The basic political allegiance of South African women was not so much determined by their sex as by their class, position and colour. The fact that until 1930 no South African woman had the vote, was both a reflection of women's traditional social inferiority as well as a factor in perpetuating it.<sup>392</sup> The history of South African suffragist movements already started in 1911. Although the campaigns were conducted by white, predominantly English-speaking women, they did not call for white women's enfranchisement exclusively. The political emancipation of black women remained untapped – neither mentioned nor rejected.<sup>393</sup> A typical feature of white women's suffrage movements was the conservative attitude of its participants concerning race and class policies. The women never wanted to overthrow the political structures but to broaden them in order to incorporate themselves. In 1930, the white women's suffrage movement became a weapon with which the National Party of General Hertzog could attack the limited black franchise that still existed in the Cape.<sup>394</sup> White women's ignorance towards racial issues eventually proved their very racist attitude. Although many white suffragists had expressed feelings of solidarity with black women, they eventually took their decision on the basis of their colour in order to preserve the privileges of their class.<sup>395</sup>

Amanda Gouws and Rhoda Kadalie remarked in their article 'Women in the struggle: the past and the future':

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<sup>391</sup> Albertina Sisulu as quoted in J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 237. See also Interview with Albertina Sisulu, in C. Villa-Vicencio: The Spirit of Hope, p. 156.

<sup>392</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 19.

<sup>393</sup> B. Mabandla: 'Women and Law in South Africa' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 3).

<sup>394</sup> Z. Dhlamini: 'Women's Liberation: A Black South African Woman's View' (Sechaba, vol.6, no.9, September 1972, p.5).

<sup>395</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, pp. 23-4.

*Had the concerns of the suffragists been truly feminist; had they questioned the structure of gender relations; had they been concerned about the subordination of women generally in society, they would have reacted differently to the flurry of political activity black women were engaged in at that time ...grass roots issues such as municipal control over their mobility, lodger permits, government monopolies over beer halls, and the outlawing of customary marriages.<sup>396</sup>*

The gulf between white and black South African women widened particularly in the 1950s, in the context of the implementation of apartheid. Black women were more and more proletarianized, whereas white women, benefiting from occupational stratification, achieved an increasingly prosperous living-standard. While Black women were more and more burdened with discriminatory apartheid legislation, white South African women eventually gained full equality in both social and legislative terms.

The enfranchisement of black women was no political goal that could be achieved in isolation from the wider struggle. A representative black women's movement could only be formed in context with the struggle for national liberation. Black women's protests were not purely politically but rather socially motivated. They did not focus on 'women's issues' or gender oppression. It was basic 'bread and butter' subjects such as rents, passes, the cost of living, discriminatory legislation and the introduction of Bantu Education, that motivated their open resistance.

*Passes and Bantu education are the same thing. One is meant to enslave our women and the other the minds of our children.<sup>397</sup>*

Black women were hence drawn into politics by organisations in which the programmes incorporated these issues and where political priority centred on the national liberation struggle. The most important organisations to deal with women politically, were the ANC, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and the trade unions movement. Until the 1940s, however, these organisations hardly emphasised the active involvement of women within the liberation movement. Hence, they did not really pay attention to the many barriers that prevented women from participating in political affairs.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> A. Gouws and R. Kadalie: 'Women in the struggle: the past and the future', in Liebenberg, I. (ed.): The long March. The Story of the struggle for liberation in South Africa, p. 216.

<sup>397</sup> New Age, 19.4.1956, p. 5. See also Drum, November 1958, pp. 26-31.

<sup>398</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 25.

## 4.2. Features of popular (informal) and organised (formal) resistance:

### An overview

The scarcity of observers and later researchers to take note of Black women's protests made Black women appear as silent and passive objects in the history of the national liberation movement. This perception was strengthened by the lack of names of female activists which were to be passed on to posterity.

Numerous women's campaigns as, for example, the 1913 anti-pass campaigns in the Orange Free State or the protests against the introduction of municipal beer halls in Natal in 1928/29, however, indicate black women's active involvement in informal local and national protest movements at a very early stage.<sup>399</sup> Women's activism usually focussed on social issues that directly affected the life of African families, such as pass issues, rents and women's occupation in informal sectors, such as domestic beer brewing.<sup>400</sup> The latter was a traditional activity from which African women became prohibited during the 1920s. In the townships, beer brewing had become an economic necessity for many women since it was one of the very few areas open to self employment. From the late 1920s, however, many municipalities were usurping this role by opening up municipal beer canteens. Several scholars view the beer protests of 1928/29 not only as a form of protest against the state's intervention in the economy, they also suggest that black women resisted their subordination as wives who had to secure the basic necessities for the family without having any control over the allocation of household resources. Being tied up with domestic responsibilities, they had no access to employment either. According to Guma, workers' wives used to barricade the factory gates on pay days in order to secure a part of the household income for essential necessities.<sup>401</sup> Beer brewing was hence an indirect way of channelling the men's wages back into household resources. An important feature of township life disappeared when African men's wages went into municipal coffers rather than into enterprises of the township women.<sup>402</sup> This explains why women often constituted the majority of participants at beer boycotts, which erupted into violence.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> J.C. Wells: We now demand, pp. 133-134.

<sup>400</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Oberym, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 83.

<sup>401</sup> L. Guma: 'Women, Wage Labour and National Liberation', in R.Cohen, Y. Muthien and A. Zegeye (eds.): Repression and Resistance: Insider Accounts of Apartheid, p. 278.

<sup>402</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 77.

<sup>403</sup> See Ibid, pp. 34-36, p. 77, p. 231.



Boycotts of beerhalls and public transport as well as anti-pass protests and squatter movements were grassroots campaigns fuelled by issues of economic insecurity and domestic responsibility. The leading role of women in these campaigns was significant, as the men stood by almost passively from the onset of the women's pass movements in 1913.

*We the men, who are supposed to be made of sterner stuff than the weaker sex, might well hide our faces in shame, and ponder in some secluded spot over the heroic stand made by Africa's daughters on the 6 June 1913. Our manhood has almost been extinguished. We docilely accept almost every abject position, and submit to every brutality of the white man, with little more than a murmur. Not so our women. They have accepted the white man's challenge, and have openly defied him to do his worst.*<sup>404</sup>

According to Wells, both African men and white politicians trivialised women's protests against pass laws. In the initial stages, the responses of white officials to resisting women were virtually indifferent. They rather bypassed the female leaders of the campaigns and went on negotiating with male black politicians whom they supposed to be responsible for the women's behaviour. Official blindness to the women's actions was demonstrated first in 1955, when the announcement, that passes would be issued to women, came one week before the scheduled demonstration in Pretoria. Another example was the announcement of the destruction of Sophiatown, which was made prior to the 1956 great march in Pretoria. Both demonstrations were staged by women against apartheid measures such as females' incorporation into the pass system and Bantu education. The ban on meetings of ten or more Africans was lifted just as the pass-issuing units arrived in Johannesburg in 1958. All this indicates the government's ignorance of the strength, or even existence, of the women's resistance movement.<sup>405</sup> According to an article published in *New Age* in 1955, Verwoerd claimed that the majority of Africans 'welcomed' his policies. However, he refused to meet any black delegates. Prime Minister Strijdom called the women's protests a 'scandalous incitement.' He indicated that the National Party would not tolerate any actions that undermined the 'healthy democratic institution of Parliament' and would take steps to ensure that 'the country was governed by the majority and not dictated by the minority.'<sup>406</sup> In 1956, when 20000 women marched to the Union Building in Pretoria, Strijdom simply refused to meet the leaders of the demonstration. At a demonstration in Johannesburg, one month before the Pretoria demonstration, the Native Commissioner had rejected any personal confrontation

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<sup>404</sup> Gouws and Kadalie: *Women in the struggle*, p. 218. (as quoted from J. Wells: *We have done with pleading: The Women's 1913 Anti-Pass Campaign*, Johannesburg 1991, p. 30).

<sup>405</sup> J.C. Wells: *We now demand*, pp. 133-134, 134.

<sup>406</sup> *New Age*, 3.11.1955.

with the crowd of 2000 female protesters. According to *New Age*, the Commissioner commented that, as far as he was concerned, 'The incident never took place.'<sup>407</sup>

The initial motivation of black women for political activism rose from community issues that directly affected them and to which they could easily relate. When they started organising protest campaigns, they came up against the actual disabilities society has imposed upon them. This forced them to look more critically at the wider context considering their social and political disabilities as women and blacks. The growing industry drew an increasing number of African women into the towns where they faced conditions that forced them to take a more active role than either tribal or Western social patterns condoned as natural or desirable for women in the 1940s and 1950s. The rising cost of living and periodic shortages of basic commodities led to the establishment of community organisations. A considerable number of African women were engaged in voluntary organisations such as *mtshaolos*, which were established in order to help people in coping with the pressures of urban life. Most of these self-help groups supported household savings. The most common were (and still are) burial societies and *stokvels*.<sup>408</sup> Buying clubs and consumer societies were established, notably the People's Food Council in Johannesburg and the Women's Food Committee in Cape Town. The campaigns against rising food prices took the form of protest meetings, street marches and deputations to the authorities.<sup>409</sup> The latter reflected and stimulated the growth of political consciousness among previously isolated black housewives and women workers. The Food Committee, for instance, was already showing signs of shifting its focus from the food situation to wider political issues, when it proclaimed in 1946: 'Today we fight for food, tomorrow for the vote and then for the freedom for all.'<sup>410</sup>

As insignificant as the actual political impact of the Committee eventually was, the statements of its members recognising their powerlessness as individuals being excluded from the existing political structures were equally as significant.<sup>411</sup> The Committee could

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<sup>407</sup> '2000 Demonstrate Against Passes. But Native Commissioner says 'It never happened''(*New Age*, 19.7.1956, p. 1).

<sup>408</sup> '*Stokvels*' (also called *Stockvelles*) are neighbourhood groups providing social and financial support for their members. The women contribute regularly to a common pool of funds. Individual members draw, in turn, periodically large sums from this pool. The money is mainly used for informal housing, school uniforms etc. J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): *Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak*, p. 215. See also E. Mashinini: *Strikes Have Followed me all my Life*, p. 17.

<sup>409</sup> T. Lodge: *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, p. 141; I. Berger: 'Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry 1900-1980' (*Agenda*, no. 18, 1993, p. 6). See also 'Food Queues well organised. Women's Programme for Future' (*The Guardian*, 27.6. 1946).

<sup>410</sup> 'Food Queues well organised. Women's Programme for the future' (*The Guardian*, 27. 6.1946).

<sup>411</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 82.

hence be seen as one of the first pre-emptive signs indicating the possibility of an organised political women's movement, based on a broader and more independent base than political parties' women's sections such as the ANC Women's League (ANCWL). The Committee sprang directly from the gender stereotyped work which made the domestic sphere exclusively a women's concern. To a certain extent, this was an attempt to 'make the private public,' – not in terms of personal relationships but in the way apartheid directly impacted on women's lives.<sup>412</sup>

The real take-off of African women entering manufacturing began during the 1950s, picking up momentum in the 1960s. The majority of 'economically active' black women were still employed in the domestic service sector, almost isolated from any options of political activity. Black women's status was hence riddled with contradictions and ambiguity. Obviously, there has been a strong need for a forum where they could express their frustrations and demands which were steadily growing. Yet, since black women's demands were so bound up with issues from the wider social and political sphere, their organisations could only grow *within* the wider liberation movement. In times of general political inactivity, the only organisations available to provide these forums were the churches or mutual aid societies.<sup>413</sup> It proved almost impossible to elaborate large-scale political organisation in the reserves. Rural women were still too isolated and far too dominated by tribal institutions. Yet, the potential for rural people to break out in spontaneous protests against particular institutions and manifestations of their oppressed living conditions has always been there. The 1950s became a period of unprecedented activity by African women in both political organisations and in rather spontaneous forms of protests. As these mass campaigns were generally conducted among urban women, there must have been a considerable number of working women, even trade unionists, among them. Yet, the 1950s women's campaigns did not bear the character of workers' protests. The demonstrations were initiated by mothers and wives who feared for the security of their family. The names of their councils, such as the 'Mothers' Congress' appeared to bear contradictory functions. For they identified the women's action as political, yet addressed the actors in apolitical terms – at least with regards to class and gender analyses.<sup>414</sup> As a result, the protests received an ambivalent,

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<sup>412</sup> J. Shapiro: 'Political and Economic organisation of women in South Africa' (*Africa Perspective*, no. 15, Autumn 1980, p. 8).

<sup>413</sup> J. Cock: *Maids and Madams*, p. 48.

<sup>414</sup> The 'Mothers' Congress' was established to join women for protest meetings in Pretoria. The programme focused on Bantu Education, although incorporated issues of the Freedom Charter such as land redistribution, as well. See 'Mothers Plan Protest Deputation to Pretoria' (*New Age*, 11.8.1955, p. 6).

often contradictory evaluation in the writings of academic researchers. Although generally acknowledged for their energetic appearance, the campaigns were and are criticised, even disparaged, for lacking profound political attitudes and class awareness. Lodge, for instance, acknowledges the significance of the 1950s campaigns in terms of the national movement. Yet, he interprets women's protests as a conservative movement, seeking to preserve customary social structures.

*In the course of their protests women would sometimes show an angry awareness of the way African men could be emasculated by their situation, a reaction to the frequent failure of men to perform their customary role as protector and defender of the household.*<sup>415</sup>

Lodge attributes the significant militancy of these protests to the fact, that women were not yet burdened by pass restrictions and did not experience work in the same humiliating and brutal way as men did.<sup>416</sup> He thereby indicates that women were either less oppressed or that their oppression was qualitatively different, meaning, less significant. Contemporary black newspapers such as *Drum* mirrored this attitude, for they recognised and ridiculed women's political engagement at the same time:

*On the political plane too women have come...For the laws of this country have now started pots and pans rattling in the kitchen and a number of things are on the boil. Passes for the women, for instance, and the schooling of their children under the Bantu Education are on their minds.*<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> T. Lodge: *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, p. 139.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151: Lodge quotes from Julia Wells: 'The day the towns stood still: women's resistance in Potchefstroom, 1912-1930', p. 42: 'When Josie Palmer (a leading member of the CPSA in the 1940s) was asked why women were so much more politically active than men, she promptly replied "Because men are cowards! They are afraid of losing their jobs" According to Lodge, Palmer's statement implies 'that women did not have jobs worth losing.'

<sup>417</sup> 'The All-in Congress' (*Drum*, February 1956, p. 20). See also 'Meek Women Talk Back' (*Drum*, November 1958, pp. 32-33).

#### 4.2.1. Anti-pass protests

*African women will not tolerate a move which is most disgusting and which should outrage the conscience of all democrats.*

*Our fight is on.*<sup>418</sup>

The position African women occupied in the theory and practice of apartheid determined the legislation affecting them. Their changing social status and increasing incorporation into the state's migrant and labour legislation, shaped the context in which women's involvement in anti-apartheid policies unfolded in the 1950s. Any analysis of the way women were incorporated into the pass system has to consider African women's general role in the South African society as well as the changes it had undergone by the time the National Party came to power. Such an analysis also has to take into account that influx control from the 1950s through to the 1980s cannot be interpreted in exactly the same terms, since this would ignore the interrelation between ideology and economy.

Until the 1950s, attempts seeking to control African women's mobility and urbanisation were localised and ineffective. The Urban Areas Act of 1923 laid the basis for segregated housing in urban areas and established the basic criteria for qualification to stay in urban areas. Women were excluded from this legislation. In the 1930s, however, provisions were made to bring women more closely under influx control regulations.<sup>419</sup> The 1930 amendment to the Urban Areas Act required women to obtain prior permission from municipalities to stay in urban areas. The amendment also tied the urban status of women closely to their ability to prove that they had male relatives legally settled in urban areas. A further amendment to the Urban Areas Act in 1937 stated that women had to obtain permission from both the magistrate in their home district and the local urban authority.<sup>420</sup> The legislation of that year also tied the urban status of African women to the requirement of having adequate accommodation.<sup>421</sup> Until the late 1940s, the majority of African women was still living in the tribal, pre-capitalist societies of the so-called 'native reserves.' Their productive and reproductive role under capitalism was thus primarily located in the pre-capitalist reserve economies. In the towns, they constituted an insecure and marginal minority. There was hence no need to impose pass laws on them and the few legislative provisions in this regard

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<sup>418</sup> Bertha Mkize, as quoted in *The Guardian*, 6.4.1950.

<sup>419</sup> T. Lodge: *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, p. 140.

<sup>420</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>421</sup> J. Simons: 'South Africa's family and marriage law reformed' (Paper presented at *Malibongwe Conference*, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 281).

were not strictly implemented. By the time the National Party came to power in 1948, the urban African population had drastically increased. In 1951, African women still held no more than one per cent of the industrial labour force. Yet, their numbers had increased to 21,5 per cent of the African urban population.<sup>422</sup> The 1951 Industrial Legislation Commission described the declining percentage of males amongst urban Africans as a

*clear indication that the native population in urban areas is, to an increasing measure, beginning to assume a normal family structure which is indisputable proof of a growing tendency towards permanent urbanisation.*<sup>423</sup>

Needless to say, a 'normal family' life depended on far more than a mere overall improvement in the balance of a population's gender-ratio. The impoverishment accompanying the urbanisation of Africans, already proved highly destructive to traditional family structures. It was only in the 1960s that black women's numbers in industrial employment rose significantly. By 1960, they accounted for two per cent and by 1970 they were on a par with coloured women at seven percent of the total employment in industry.<sup>424</sup> Since the mid-1960s, the expanding role of African women in production had important repercussions on state policy. In the 1950s the state did not have to implement influx control on women as workers but on women as mothers, as 'superfluous appendages.'<sup>425</sup> The same can be said about the agricultural sector. The farmers complained that their farms were holding the ground for unproductive women and children while the men went to town to look for more lucrative employment.<sup>426</sup> According to apartheid, the place of an African woman was in her home, meaning, her homeland. In a speech held in 1950, the Minister of Native Affairs referred to the influx of black women to the urban areas and maintained that

*[it] is constantly being said that the natives in the cities deteriorate. The undesirable conditions are largely caused by the presence of women who in many cases leave their homes contrary to the wishes of their fathers and guardians and contrary to tribal customs. To my mind there are already too many urbanised blacks who have turned their backs on the tribal customs and I do not intend to assist the process.*<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p.128.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., pp. 148-149.

<sup>425</sup> H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p. 13.

<sup>426</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 127.

<sup>427</sup> Minister of Native Affairs in a speech in 1950 as quoted in C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 128.

At the beginning of the 1950s, traditional tribal institutions in the reserves proved no longer capable in exercising sufficient control over the mobility of African women. By 1951, the percentage of African women living in urban areas had increased to 21.57 percent, more than three times that of the 1921 figure. The government therefore decided to revise their pass laws.<sup>428</sup> The threat of passes for women first emerged publicly in 1950, when proposed amendments to the Urban Areas Act were leaked to the press. Manifold press reports give a picture of the immediate, vociferous and hostile response on the part of the African population.

*Africans won't tolerate having their women interfered with by the police. If the Government has been looking for trouble to the country, this is the best way of doing it....Can you imagine the abuses and scenes which will take place when policemen accost women and search them for the hated pass?*<sup>429</sup>

Unlike its predecessors, the NP government enforced the incorporation of women into the pass law system in a rather violent way.<sup>430</sup> In 1952, the government initiated a program that envisaged bringing all African women under the pass system. Before that, African women's migration had been indirectly controlled through the pass system their men and guardians were subjected to.<sup>431</sup> The fact that newspapers already carried articles on black women's anti-pass protests in 1950, shows women's awareness of that issue before the actual legislation was introduced.<sup>432</sup> The key legislation facilitating the incorporation of women into the influx control system was the Natives (Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents) Act of 1952. This act required all Africans to carry a 'reference book' containing the information hitherto kept in a variety of documents. It contained their photographs and information about their places of origin, their employment records, their tax payments and their encounters with the police. Hence, the euphemistically named 'abolition of passes' subjected women to the Urban Areas Act in the same way as men.<sup>433</sup> The Native Laws Amendment Bill was published in the same year. It was officially passed as the Natives (Urban Areas) Amendment Act in 1955. Under Section 10 of this Act, rights of Africans to live in a town were confined to those who had been born there or had worked there for ten years with a single employer. Both acts clearly stipulated the inclusion of women in the pass system. Newspapers and

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<sup>428</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>429</sup> 'We will not carry passes' (*The Guardian*, 9.3.1950).

<sup>430</sup> J.C. Wells: *We now demand*, p. 135.

<sup>431</sup> S. Duncan: 'Women under Apartheid' (*NUSAS Law Directive*, Law Students Council. *Law in South Africa: Lifting the Veil*, Cape Town Law Conference, July 1981, p. 54.)

<sup>432</sup> See, for instance, *The Guardian*, 9.3. 1950.

<sup>433</sup> H. Joseph: 'Women against Passes' (*Fighting Talk*, January 1956, p. 4).

political organisations reacted immediately upon the publication of the Native Laws Amendment Bill in 1952. The *Guardian* headlined in response ‘Slave Labour Bill means passes for African women.’<sup>434</sup> In February 1952, the Transvaal section of the ANCWL announced its opposition to the Native Laws Amendment Bill and questioned the government’s legitimatisation to ‘force us off the land and then to seek cheap labour for the farmers? To divide us into racial groups so as to rule us even better? To starve us and expose us to tuberculosis? To have jailed our men day in and day out and now come and say: You women must carry passes, too?’<sup>435</sup>

Considering the protest potential of the enforcement of passes, the government adopted a very low profile method when it started issuing reference books in 1952. It deliberately avoided the large towns, where opposition was most organised, and started the distribution in smaller towns and remote districts of the ‘white’ countryside. Women farm workers were dependent on their employers and often proved ignorant about the implications of the reference books. The implementation of the legislation had the immediate effect of instituting an embargo on the further entry of African women from rural areas to towns for the purpose of finding work.<sup>436</sup>

In 1956, the first area where passes were issued, was Winburg in the Orange Free State. The women initially accepted the reference books and 1429 documents were issued. According to *New Age*, the women were told that the administered documents were not passes.<sup>437</sup> The ANC sent Lilian Ngoyi, representative of the ANCWL, to Winburg in order to explain to the rural women the actual implications of the reference books. Thereafter the Winburg women marched to the Magistrate’s office and publicly burnt their passes. Although refusal to accept a pass was not yet illegal, burning of passes were. The women were therefore arrested on charges of common theft. The cost of their defence was paid by the FSAW.<sup>438</sup> The Winburg protests motivated protests all over the country.<sup>439</sup> The spontaneous defiance of women who previously had been apolitical and ignorant to the pass system indicated the significant impact pass issues exerted on black women’s political consciousness.

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<sup>434</sup> *The Guardian*, 14.2. 1952

<sup>435</sup> *The Guardian*, 6.3.1952.

<sup>436</sup> S. Duncan: ‘Women under Apartheid’ (*NUSAS Law Directive*, Law Students Council. Law in South Africa: Lifting the Veil, Cape Town Law Conference, July 1981, p. 54).

<sup>437</sup> ‘Winburg women burn their pass books’ (*New Age*, 19.4. 1956, pp. 1, 6).

<sup>438</sup> R. de Villiers: *The Resistance to the Extension of Passes to African Women: 1954-1960*, p. 11.

<sup>439</sup> *Drum*, *The Guardian* and *New Age* gave valuable reports on the Winburg protests. See for instance *New Age* 22.3. 1956.



Most of the anti-pass protests of the early 1950s were localised and sporadic. They cannot be compared to the campaigns that developed after 1956 when the large scale distribution of passes to women began. Yet, they marked the beginning of a more radical, politicised standing of African women towards their position under apartheid. A considerable number of people decided rather to flee the country than to carry passes.<sup>440</sup> All arguments against women's incorporation into the pass system attested to their domestic role as wives and mothers. Without a reference book, an African woman could not obtain regular employment, marry or obtain a birth certificate for her children. Nor could she get lawful accommodation, apply for a pension or carry out any of the normal activities associated with existence in a modern state.<sup>441</sup> It was claimed that passes directly threatened the security and well-being of the family, since they imposed on women the risk of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment.<sup>442</sup> The enforcement of passes was regarded and treated as a community issue by both men and women. For the most part, opposition to passes was bound up with a conservative defence of traditional institutions, chieftainship, the patriarchal family and established gender roles. This was especially the case in the rural areas, where women acted in conservative defence towards their eroded way of life. Betterment schemes, including institutions such as cattle culling, destroyed traditional patterns of settlement and threatened women's already tenuous access to land.<sup>443</sup> Women of migrant husbands felt that they could not take out the book without their men's consent.<sup>444</sup> Protest campaigns of rural women featured many traditional elements in terms of dressing, dancing and segregation of women from men.<sup>445</sup> One of the most outrageous protest movements against betterment schemes and pass restrictions was led by rural women in Zeerust in 1958. Kuper specifically refers to their rising sense of political relevance and unaccustomed assertiveness which he considers to be 'remarkable for the dominant role of traditionally subordinated women.'<sup>446</sup> As the case of the Zeerust women proves, protests in rural areas hardly ever focused on pass issues alone, but were bound up with complaints about the destruction and removal of community structures in economic, political, social and geographical terms. In 1957 Chieftainess Madinoge Kholokwe of the tribe of Sekhukhuniland in the Northern Transvaal led a protest movement against

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<sup>440</sup> 'Zeerust, the women's battle.' (*Drum*, May 1958).

<sup>441</sup> S. Duncan: 'Women under Apartheid' (*NUSAS Law Directive*, Law Students Council. Law in South Africa: Lifting the Veil, Cape Town Law Conference, July 1981, p. 55).

<sup>442</sup> See: 'Mothers Plan Protest Deputation to Pretoria' (*New Age*, 11.8. 1955, p. 6).

<sup>443</sup> T. Lodge: *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, pp. 272-290.

<sup>444</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 205.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid*, p. 234.

<sup>446</sup> L. Kuper: *An African Experience*, p. 17.

government removals, for which she was imprisoned from 1961 to 1971, after having received a reprieve from her sentence of death.<sup>447</sup>

The women who defied the reference book units were rather indirectly demonstrating for females' freedom and equality. Their major reason for defying passes was the direct threat it posed on the family, through the migrant labour system. It was also declared that passes endangered and insulted women's virtue. Firstly, they directly contradicted the husband's authority in the patriarchal family.<sup>448</sup> A *Drum* article reporting on women's protest movements in Zeerust in 1958, includes characteristic comments by men such as 'if my wife no longer belongs to me let the government pay me back my lobola and have her.'<sup>449</sup> Secondly, considering the arbitrariness of the state's bureaucracy, women could easily fall victim to sexual harassment if they were detained.

*It means that no husband can ever be sure any day that his wife is his wife; nor can he be sure that his child may not be taken away from him and sold to farmers under the pretext of failing to comply with the pass regulations...how can any decent home be built for the proper upbringing of the children ... A man has only to come into a home or stop a woman on the street and say he is a policeman or detective and the law of the country empowers him to take away that woman and to touch any part of her body as they can do with men under the pretext they are searching for a pass. Even in the days of slavery there was nothing like this. This is the basest method of humiliating people and destroying the honour of its womanhood.*<sup>450</sup>

Pass laws did eventually not only intimidate the vital role of women within the family but also the traditional thoughts that kept them there. Ultimately, 'women and children', claimed as an abstract and emotive category, have always served as a flourishing slogan to politicise the common population. Black women's pass protests were characterised by their spontaneity, enthusiasm and informal organisation. Most of the local demonstrations lacked an overall strategy as well as the support of an organisation that could have sustained and directed the campaign. Inevitably, the outburst of popular feeling had to exhaust itself after some months. Yet, these protests represented the first large-scale appearance of black women on the political stage, operating in terms of modern, non-tribal, political structures.<sup>451</sup> The focus on mass action drew African women into a far more active role in the national liberation movement. The Defiance Campaign, launched jointly by the African National

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<sup>447</sup> N. van Vuuren: *Women against Apartheid*, p. 55.

<sup>448</sup> J.C. Wells: *We now demand*, p. 133.

<sup>449</sup> Zeerust man as quoted in 'Zeerust: the women's battle' (*Drum*, May 1958).

<sup>450</sup> T. Lodge: *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, p. 144.

<sup>451</sup> *New Age* 24. 11. 1955, 19.1.1956, 27.11.1955.

Congress (ANC) and South African Indian Congress (SAIC) in 1952, called all people, irrespective of sex or colour, to infringe upon the regulations governing people of colour, thereby openly courting arrest and jail. The numbers of women involved, and the leading roles ANC Women's League (ANCWL) members played in that campaign, proved, that black women's political involvement was gaining a national dimension.<sup>452</sup> In mass movements as the Defiance Campaign, men in the ANC Youth League were confronted with women whose daring broke all the boundaries of customary respect for men and acquiescence to male control.<sup>453</sup> The numbers of women imprisoned for active involvement in pass protests or other campaigns such as boycotts of busses or beer-halls was considerable. Press reports on women's protests tended to draw attention to their high-spirited mood, rather than to their militancy.

*You would not have guessed this was the serious business of arrest for some breach of the law. It looked like a great festival. The women sang and danced and pranced, flailing their arms and poking out that defiant thumb.*<sup>454</sup>

In general, however, women never envisaged severe social reconstructions in terms of gender issues. Although the anti-pass campaign appeared increasingly assertive after 1956, it was in fact steadily driven back onto the defensive considering the extensive pass distribution of the government after 1956.

The anti-pass campaign of the Federation of South African Women and the Congress Alliance (ANC, South African Indian Congress, Coloured People's Congress, Congress of Democrats and the South African Congress of Trade Unions)<sup>455</sup>, as well as the spontaneous outbursts of resistance found widely militant support. In many factories, African women refused to register at the labour bureaux.<sup>456</sup> This did not have the effect of halting the implementation of pass regulations but delayed them for several years.<sup>457</sup> Of all apartheid measures, the incorporation of women into the influx control system was the most fiercely contested. And, with the exception of land rehabilitation in the reserves, it was the most difficult to implement.<sup>458</sup> At the annual conference of the ANC in January 1959, a National

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<sup>452</sup> M. Turok: 'Women political prisoners. Taking her place in the battlefront of the struggle: women in detention in South Africa.' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 1). According to Turok, in the Eastern Cape 1 067 of the total of 2 529 volunteers were women.

<sup>453</sup> P. Bonner, P. Delius and D. Posel (eds.): Apartheid's Genesis 1935-1962, p. 235.

<sup>454</sup> 'The battle of the women' (Drum, December 1958).

<sup>455</sup> J.P. Brits: The Penguin Concise Dictionary of Historical and Political Terms, p. 55.

<sup>456</sup> New Age, 7.9. 1956.

<sup>457</sup> J. Yawitch: Tightening the noose, p. 5.

<sup>458</sup> T. Lodge: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, p. 150.

Anti-Pass Planning Council was appointed and the year 1959 was declared 'Anti-Pass Year.'<sup>459</sup> There was a special banner hanging at this annual conference, reading

*Makabongwe Amakosikazi – We thank the women*<sup>460</sup>

The year 1959 witnessed massive uprisings of women in Cato Manor, starting with exhaustive beer-raids. Yet, their grievances went far beyond the issues of beer halls. They claimed against dipping tanks, betterment schemes, increased taxes, influx control, police provocation and the inhuman, poor living conditions in that area. Because of its militancy and number of participants, the uprising in Cato Manor, became a historic event. It was also the last noteworthy protest of women against passes. In 1959 the resistance was eventually crushed and by March of that year, distribution of passes was almost complete in Johannesburg, the last area to be brought under the regulations.<sup>461</sup> In 1959 the state eventually gained complete control over the female work force. Through the implementation of Government Notice 59 of 1959 it became compulsory for women to have their service contracts registered at the pass office.<sup>462</sup> The incorporation of African women into the influx control system had the effect of dividing the female African population into one group with rights to live and work in urban areas, and into another confined to the Bantustans, structurally and legally deprived of access to work and residence in urban areas. This division was most rigidly enforced by both law and administrative practice from 1964.<sup>463</sup>

Black women's anti-pass campaigns were entirely different from the women's rights movement taking place in the Western World. First World women regarded their movements as the manifestation of a new political era in which women were actively involved. Lilian Ngoyi's remark in 1956 that "We don't want men who wear skirts under their trousers. If they don't want to act, let us women exchange garments with them"<sup>464</sup> bears witness to the fact that in contrast to First World women, African women were defying the very foundations of a customary society which was patriarchal in its structure and outlook but provided them with more independence and authority than Western societies had considered either 'natural'

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<sup>459</sup> R. de Villiers: *The Resistance to the Extension of Passes to African Women: 1954-1960*, p. 1.

<sup>460</sup> J. Shapiro: 'Political and Economic organisation of women in South Africa' (*Africa Perspective*, no. 15, Autumn 1980, p. 7).

<sup>461</sup> J. Yawitch: *Tightening the noose*, p. 5.

<sup>462</sup> S. Duncan: 'Women under Apartheid' (*NUSAS Law Directive*, Law Students Council. Law in South Africa: Lifting the Veil, Cape Town Law Conference, July 1981, p. 54).

<sup>463</sup> J. Simons: 'South Africa's family and marriage law reformed: towards one system for all South Africans' (Paper presented at *Malibongwe Conference*, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 282).

<sup>464</sup> Lilian Ngoyi, as quoted in 'Masterpiece in Bronze' (*Drum*, March 1956).

or respectable at that time.<sup>465</sup> Tom Lodge's conclusion on the significance of the past protests confirms the above:

*Men were viewed as weak and passive, enmeshed in an emasculating system: significantly, one of the themes of the anti-pass protests was that the women's passes involved a usurpation by officialdom of African men's domestic authority. In many respects it was a highly conservative rebellion, although no less justifiable for that. Therein lay its strength and moral passion.*<sup>466</sup>

#### 4.2.2. Black Women and the Trade Union Movement

Considering their actual under-representation in the industrial work force, African women's involvement in trade union activism and labour organisation is especially noteworthy. To the South African economy which was entirely built on an exploitative system of cheap black labour, black trade unionism was a danger threatening politics and economics. The state had sought to exclude African men from trade unionism as early as 1924, when all 'pass bearing Natives' (read all male African workers) were excluded from the term 'worker' as defined in the Industrial Conciliation Act. Although their trade unions were not declared illegal, Africans could not be registered as union members and were thereby forced to operate outside the existing conciliation machinery.<sup>467</sup> This enabled African women to take leading positions in trade unionism, until they themselves became 'pass-bearing Natives' in the second half of the 1950s. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, certain trade unions dealt with an increasing number of working-class women, who up until then had been virtually excluded from political and women's organisations. The trade union movement provided a training ground for African women who became politically involved. Several unions intended to enhance the political education of their members.<sup>468</sup> Despite their low educational background, black women could take leadership positions and even act as delegates on the international stage. *Drum* and *New Age* greatly commemorated black women's representative activities in trade unions. *New Age's* coverage on Elisabeth Mafekeng's attendance of an international trade union conference in Bulgaria in 1955, pays high tribute to her work as the

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<sup>465</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 23.

<sup>466</sup> T. Lodge: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, p. 151.

<sup>467</sup> H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p. 39; C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 113.

<sup>468</sup> T. Lodge: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, p. 141.

president of the African Food and Canning Worker's Union.<sup>469</sup> The article features fairly assertive statements made by Mafekeng that render her belief in the capability of South Africans to liberate themselves within a multiracial struggle. However, the article headlined with a quotation from Mafekeng, describing her overseas experience: 'I was so happy that I forgot I was black', and largely covering statements about her initial insecurity and shyness in terms of being a black female delegate, the article clearly diminishes her individual capacity as a black women and emphasises the common concern of liberation.

The importance of trade union work amongst women was obviously tempered by the smallness of the female labour force. Because of the gender-stereotyping of jobs, women tended to be concentrated in the food and clothing industries where they had to perform the work previously done by women at home. The membership of the unions established in these industries was largely constituted of women, initially predominantly white Afrikaans women. Most women in trade-union politics were urbanised factory workers in the Garment Industry, and they were organised under the male-dominated Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUSCA) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). The leadership of these unions remained dominated by white women, although the numbers of black women were increasing. These unions took a very active interest in issues relating particularly to women's working conditions such as compulsory overtime or even maternity leave.<sup>470</sup> There was however an overt tendency to put so-called 'women's issues' last on the agenda. Until the 1980s, the campaigns concerning black women's working conditions proved rather fruitless. Nevertheless, these unions provided a forum for discussions among the female workers.<sup>471</sup> They learned how to hold debates, how to organise campaigns and demonstrations and how to deal with white authorities. They also realised that they could enter the political arena and gain leading positions despite a lacking educational background, notwithstanding their gender or race.

The 1950 Suppression of Communism Act was not only used against the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) itself but also against black, liberal and multiracial unions in general – irrespective of their actual political outlook. Many prominent trade union organisers such as Ray Alexander, Bettie du Toit, Hilda Watts (Bernstein) and Joey Fourie belonged to the 'listed' communists. They were harassed, debarred from trade union work and eventually

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<sup>469</sup> 'I was so happy I forgot I was black' (*New Age*, 8.12.1955, p. 6).

<sup>470</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Oberyem, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): *Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak*, pp. 142-144.

<sup>471</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 58.

banned under the Suppression of Communism Act. The latter was followed by two further pieces of legislation which finally destroyed the entire framework of non-racial unionism: the 1953 Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act and the 1956 Industrial Conciliation Act, which ended any future recognition of unions with a multi-racial membership. They either had to split into 'uniracial' unions or form separate racial branches. Since African women were now required to carry passes, they could no longer be defined as employees in terms of the 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act. Like their men, they were prohibited from joining trade unions legally. Thereafter, employers reduced African women's wages drastically and began to replace European women with African. When several demonstrations of workers against the banning of trade union leaders collapsed into violent confrontations with the police, many women got badly injured as well. It was a warning that women involved in protests should henceforth not expect any leniency on grounds of their sex.<sup>472</sup>

Women workers hardly identified with their jobs in the factories. Nor was there a natural bond among female colleagues who came from the same class but different cultural backgrounds. The workers would unite on the factory floor for specific goals but that rarely resulted in true political commitments. At trade union meetings, articulate members and officials would enhance commitments of class solidarity and the women workers would identify directly. Women workers provided vociferous followings at meetings, where songs and slogans demonstrated unity, but this hardly ever bound them in fraternity in the struggle.<sup>473</sup> Although they were more actively engaged in social issues, large unions had lost their capacity to consolidate true feelings of solidarity. This led to brittle personal relations among the workforce. Moreover, most African women had to rush back home after work to support their family, as husbands often disapproved of their wives' engagement in organisations outside the community.

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<sup>472</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p.121.

### 4.3. Black Women and the National Liberation Movement

#### 4.3.1. Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)

*The time of sitting home and waiting is past*<sup>474</sup>

The emancipation of women and their equal participation in all spheres of public life has always been a feature of communist doctrine. Communist parties have therefore been among the first that realised and enhanced the potential of women's political involvement. From its beginning, the 1921 founded CPSA endorsed the principle of 'no discrimination on the grounds of race or sex' and proclaimed slogans such as 'the communist work among women is half of the battle.'<sup>475</sup> Although the CPSA's initial all-white membership became predominantly black after its expansion in the 1940s, the white members retained a considerable importance beyond their numbers. Most of the female politicians with an CPSA background who played significant roles within the national liberation movement, were white.<sup>476</sup> Leading CPSA women such as Ray Alexander exhibited a strong feminist consciousness considering the role and status of *all* working women. The CPSA contributed significantly to the organisation of women within the national liberation movement. Women were regarded as a central part of the political struggle and the fact that they suffered special disabilities which required particular attention, was officially recognised. The CPSA therefore sought to enhance a more systematic training of women 'comrades.' It was also the first party that decided to commemorate International Women's Day during the 1930s.<sup>477</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, the CPSA's proclamations were very subversive, indeed. Nevertheless, the criticism of the CPSA towards patriarchal social structures did not mean that its organisational work was entirely freed from sexual discrimination. Especially in its earlier years, anti-sexist proclamations were rather theoretical agreements than political commitments.<sup>478</sup> Most of the CPSA members still adhered to conventional views on the institutions of the family, marriage and gendered labour division. Beyond its ideological approach, the CPSA viewed gender discrimination as a minor problem in the South African

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<sup>473</sup> F. Meer (ed.): Black-Woman-Worker, p. 147.

<sup>474</sup> Alice Harrison: Words to Women, in: International, 10.11.1922. (as quoted in C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 47)

<sup>475</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 46.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid, pp. 45-55, p. 95.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid, p. 51.



context of apartheid and anti-communism. This was also reflected in press articles of left-wing newspapers giving indispensable but still generalising records of the women's protests. Although left-wing organisations and newspapers paid significant attention to the annual Women's Day celebrations, there was still a strong tendency to oversimplify and hence trivialise women's special oppression. The particular forms of oppression women suffered as distinct from men, were not mentioned.

The CPSA's focus on women was nevertheless pioneering in the national liberation movement. As set out in its 1941 programme, the CPSA recognised sex discrimination as something to fight against.<sup>479</sup> For all its inconsistencies, the CPSA encouraged new ways of thinking about the position of women. The CPSA proved subversive, since it particularly focused on working women and sought to establish contact between women of different colour groups.

*Toiling native women, white working women, realise your interests, wake up to fight for better conditions side by side with your husbands, fathers and brothers: only by a united front can you get rid of all the exploitation which you suffer under capitalism and where you as women are the greatest sufferers.*<sup>480</sup>

During the 1940s, when the rising number of grassroots campaigns sought to counteract the decline of African's living conditions, the CPSA involved itself in most of the essential black community issues: passes, boycotts, wages and protests against the rising cost of living.<sup>481</sup> In the aftermath of the war, the CPSA continued to work actively in the trade unions. It propagated the doctrine of non-racial class solidarity while concentrating on the organisation of black workers. The end of the war and the NP's access to power in 1948 also meant the end of the CPSA. The 1950 Suppression of Communism Act officially dismissed the CPSA as a legal South African party. The CPSA later regrouped underground and continued its work through existing organisations. Ex-members who sought to perpetuate the distribution of Marxist ideas among the population, faced harsh restrictions. Books were banned, free discussions limited and Marxist ideas confined.<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 46.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid, p. 95.

<sup>480</sup> Umsbenzi, 10.2. 1932 as quoted in C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 55.

<sup>481</sup> T. Lodge: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, p. 141; P. Bonner, P. Delius and D. Posel (eds.): Apartheid's Genesis 1935-1962, p. 259.

<sup>482</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, pp. 95-97.

### 4.3.2. The African National Congress (ANC)

When it was founded on the 8 January 1912 in Bloemfontein, the ANC was a Westernised elite organisation of ‘chiefs and gentlemen.’ Most of them were the product of missionary education and descended from an upper middle-class or middle class background. Striving for personal and national advancement, they concentrated on the reduction of the customary economic colour bar, aspired to gain full political partnership within the white parliamentary democracy, and called for the enhancement of black people’s opportunities to obtain higher education.<sup>483</sup> Their intention was not to counter European racialism with comparable exclusiveness. Their expansive, outward-looking nationalism was based on the ideology of non-racialism<sup>484</sup>, and could make little headway against the reality of the white South African power structure.<sup>485</sup> The early ANC hence exhibited a conservative attitude of urban-middle class, which proved reminiscent of the white women’s suffragist movement: Both identified with the privileged white class and ignored the bulk of black South Africans. In short, both were seeking to extend rather than overthrow the existing power base in order to incorporate themselves. The ANC took the same stand towards women as contemporary white political parties. Its 1919 constitution reflected the peripheral standing of women within the ANC: being only accorded the status of ‘auxiliary membership’, women could neither become full members nor gain voting rights. Only very few women qualified for ‘auxiliary membership’ in terms of social status, economic standing and educational background. Within this separate category, women stood outside the scope of the ANC’s regular activities.

The unsatisfactory references to black women’s political actions were not only due to their inferior status. The ANC itself was a rather unconvincing organisation considering its political outlook, its structure and tactics.<sup>486</sup> Since it did not seek to create a mass following, it hardly directed its policy toward community issues round which women could have been organised such as housing, education, the cost of living and police raids against illicit beer brewing. It was only in the 1940s, in the wider context of national liberation, that the ANC came out unequivocally in support of an universal movement that included women as well.

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<sup>483</sup> F. Ginwala: ‘Women and the African National Congress, 1912-1943’ (*Agenda*, no. 8, 1990, p. 78)

<sup>484</sup> Multiracialism opposed racial segregation through its emphasis on the need to establish a pluralist society granting each ethnic colour equal social, political and economic rights. It thereby acknowledged cultural differences between ethnic groups, yet opposed any discrimination on grounds of the latter. Non-racialism, by contrast, exhibits a ‘colour-blind’ attitude, not only rejecting any form of racial discrimination, but also neglecting the political dimension of racism. Social, economic, political and cultural differences between ethnic groups, resulting from racist governmental policies are thus opposed through ignorance.

<sup>485</sup> P. Walshe: *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa*, pp. 34-40.

<sup>486</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 34.

Until then it was left to individual members and other organisations, particularly the Communist Party and the trade unions, to respond to these questions and utilise them to politicise women.

In the 1940s, under the presidency of Dr. A.B. Xuma, the ANC underwent significant changes in terms of its organisational structure, its resistance techniques, its membership recruitment and political programme. This was mainly due to the changing social, economic and political context. The already inadequate living standards of Africans had worsened drastically during the war. With their increasing impoverishment went a growing militancy and politicisation. The establishment of the Congress Youth League (CYL) in 1943 marked the emergence of a more radical group of young leaders within the ANC.<sup>487</sup> Much as Charlotte Maxeke (who died in 1939) had urged in the 1920s that Africans had to become independent from white sympathisers, but to continue co-operating with them, the leaders of the Youth League called for African leadership, self-determination and control over political ideology. Although they thus anticipated the black consciousness developments of subsequent decades, they were not separatist. The Youth League emphasised repeatedly the need to 'go down to the masses' and the importance of such direct action of boycotts, strikes and trade union mobilisation. This marked a significant break with the deferential politics of the ANC in the 1930s.<sup>488</sup> Vivien Ncakeni was the only woman among the six leading proponents of this position. Another woman among the founders of the ANCYL was Albertina Sisulu (then not married).<sup>489</sup>

Other parties such as the previously quiescent South African Indian Congress (SAIC) showed a rising activeness and militancy as well. Most parties were now urging the cultivation of a mass membership. The 1940s proved being a preparation ground for the following decade of political mass actions. For the first time the ANC committed itself to a policy of universal adult franchise, the inclusion of women in the definition 'adult' and the endorsement of the democratic principle of majority rule.

In 1949, the ANC adopted the 'Programme of Action' which called for extra-legal but non-violent methods such as boycotts, strikes and civil disobedience. This was no longer the policy of a black middle class that aspired to share political partnership with the colonisers. It was an anti-governmental policy, aiming at the national liberation of the majority of South

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<sup>487</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, p. 36.

<sup>488</sup> N. Worden: The Making of Modern South Africa, p. 86.

<sup>489</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, p. 36.

Africans, calling for the right to self-government under the banner of African nationalism. The Defiance Campaign of 1952 became the ANC's first attempt to put its radical sentiments into practice, when thousands of men and women protested for about six months through civil disobedience against discriminatory laws.

With regard to the establishment of a mass basis, 'women' were now seen as an area for potential membership recruitment that had previously been neglected. Yet, their changing status in membership did not only emerge from the need of a broader basis. It reflected rather the changing position of women within society as already manifested in the enfranchisement of white women. Since the ANC itself envisaged the establishment of a democratic, non-racial society, it could no longer render women as 'auxiliary members' – neither within its own organisation nor in the wider society.<sup>490</sup> The ANC's changing attitude towards women had already been reflected in a resolution passed at the ANC's annual conference in 1941, which envisaged the revival of the ANC women's section. It was also recommended to accord women the same status as men in the classification of membership and position of election to leadership positions.<sup>491</sup> In 1943, women were eventually granted full membership. The ANC Women's League (ANCWL) was established and the American born Madie-Hall Xuma, wife of ANC president Dr. Xuma, was elected president.<sup>492</sup>

#### 4.3.3. The Bantu Women's League

The Bantu Women's League was established within the ANC in 1913 as a consequence of the successful resistance campaign against the extension of pass laws in the Orange Free State. It was the first national organisation of black women that operated within the framework of non-tribal institutions.<sup>493</sup> The material on the League is scarce and fragmentary, most of its members remain anonymous. Its political activity focused on the anti-pass campaigns of that period, particularly those in the Orange Free State. The League's main function, however, was to organise the catering and entertainment at the ANC meetings

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<sup>490</sup> F. Ginwala: 'Women in South Africa Today' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 80).

<sup>491</sup> T.G. Karis and G. Carter (eds.): From Protest to Challenge. A documentary history of African politics in South Africa, 1882-1964, vol. 2, p. 186.

<sup>492</sup> T. Lodge: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, p. 14; N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, p. 36.

and conferences.<sup>494</sup> Since its political outlook was not directed towards the social and political emancipation of women, it did not seek to challenge traditional views of gender roles within the ANC or in the wider society. Some of its leading representatives such as Charlotte Maxeke, however, are prime examples of the opportunities afforded to women at this time. Maxeke, who came from a Christian background and had received university education in the United States, pursued a career remarkably similar to that of contemporary male ANC leaders.<sup>495</sup> According to A.B. Xuma, Maxeke demonstrated the potential of Western education. To him, she was the embodiment of the ANC's determination to involve women and 'crystallise the belief in our movement in the equality of both sexes.'<sup>496</sup> But Maxeke also embodied the very limits of black women's aspirations in those days. Limits that society imposed on her and that she accepted – or, at least, not overtly criticised. Neither did she question traditional gender relations. In a time, when white women's suffragist movement eventually succeeded, she was not considering the general political emancipation of women nor the restructuring of the tribal society but, instead, claimed for the preservation of the latter. Her main concern focused on the breakdown of parental control 'under which native women had all the virtues of noble women.'<sup>497</sup> Her leading role in the Women's League and its anti-pass campaigns was highly respected. As an auxiliary member, however, she never enjoyed an equal status within the ANC leadership - and never had the vote.<sup>498</sup>

Until the mid-1930s, the Bantu Women's League remained the central organisation for women's political activities. It was also the only women's organisation specifically invited to the All African Conference in 1935 which focused on the threat of total disenfranchisement of the African population.<sup>499</sup> The Bantu Women's League was later succeeded by the National Council of African Women (NCAW), founded in 1933. Constituted among an elite group of African professionals (predominately nurses and teachers), it did not primarily regard itself as a political organisation but rather as one involved in 'non-European

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<sup>493</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 33.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> International Defence and Aid Fund: To Honour Women's Day, pp. 18-19. Charlotte Maxeke graduated at Wilberforce University (Cleveland, Ohio) in 1905, becoming the first African woman from South Africa to obtain a bachelor's degree.

<sup>496</sup> As quoted in International Defence and Aid Fund: To Honour Women's Day, p. 18. See also S.D. Gish: Alfred B. Xuma, p. 65.

<sup>497</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 39.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid, pp. 36-39.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

welfare.<sup>500</sup> From its beginning, NCAW was strongly influenced by several liberal white women's organisations that proved anxious to establish links with moderate black organisations. Its white counterpart was the National Council of Women (NCW), a determinedly apolitical, white middle-class organisation. Interestingly enough, women's organisations always tended to seek for solidarity beyond the colour bar. In general, the cooperation took place on a social, often deliberately apolitical, basis.<sup>501</sup>

Those patterns of importance which had an emerging appearance in the work of the Bantu Women's League, also determined black women's struggles during the following decades. The emphasis was on women working alongside their men to overthrow structures that oppressed them as blacks. Secondly, the women were not questioning the basic structures of African society and did not consider radical changes in established gender patterns – neither within their families nor within the wider society. The ANC continued to see women primarily as mothers and wives. This view conditioned the outlook of its female members as well. Despite this mode of thinking, women became increasingly aware of their particular interests and difficulties that necessitated the organisation of women as a distinct group from men.

#### 4.8. The African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL)

Established in 1943, the ANCWL was not an independent but subsidiary body to which all female ANC members automatically belonged. In structure and policy it followed its parent body, the ANC. It operated on three levels – national, provincial and branch level – each of which was run by an elected committee. As manifested in its programme of action “Rules and Regulations of the African National Congress Women's League”, the ANCWL sought to arouse the interest of African women in the national struggle for freedom and equality and assist the widespread organisation of women. Secondly, to take up special problems and issues affecting women. Thirdly, to carry on propaganda against apartheid and discriminatory laws among African women.<sup>502</sup>

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<sup>500</sup> F. Ginwala: 'Women and the African National Congress, 1912-1943' (*Agenda*, no. 8, 1990, p. 89.)

<sup>501</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 38.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

There is only fragmentary material about the ANCWL's actions in the 1940s. Under the presidency of Madie Hall Xuma, the ANCWL's position hardly differed from that of the Bantu Women's League. Its membership was predominantly drawn from a middle-class background. Notwithstanding its enhanced status within the ANC, its active work was rather apolitical, limited to conventional 'women's work' such as fund-raising and catering. Yet, many of the ANC members, who still adhered to the very traditional social structures, were suspicious and reluctant in giving their daughters and wives the consent to become politically involved in the ANC.

In comparison to her successors in the 1950s, Madie Hall Xuma exerted a minor political influence on the position of the ANCWL. Nonetheless, an interesting figure in the national women's movement. Her high American academic background included a Masters Degree from Columbia University and made her one of the 'talented tenth', as the black American elite was termed at that time.<sup>503</sup> This and the fact that she was an unmarried woman in her forties when she married Dr. A.B. Xuma in the 1940s, clearly distinguished her from other black American and African women.<sup>504</sup> Coming from an elitist American background, she viewed herself as far more emancipated than the majority of African women. In an interview with *Drum* in 1953, Madie Hall Xuma argued that in South Africa, women were much more discriminated against than in the USA, where men and women would share housework on a 50-50 basis.<sup>505</sup> Similarly she repeatedly emphasised her belief in racial upliftment and called on black South Africans to follow the example of African Americans, who, thanks to their cultural sophistication, education and economic progression, could help Africans 'advance.' Viewing the South African scene almost entirely in terms of her American background, she intended to join Christian African-Americans and well educated Christian African women together, in order to teach black South Africans the ideas and politics of their American counterparts. In addition to her role in the revitalisation of the ANC's women's section, she became known for launching the Zenzele clubs in the 1940s. The Zenzele clubs, which derived their name from the Zulu word meaning 'do it yourself', constituted an influential network of women's organisations which intended to help women improve their domestic facilities as well as gain administrative and managerial knowledge in running social and

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<sup>503</sup> I. Berger: 'An African American 'Mother of the Nation' (*Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, September 2001; pp. 547-565).

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.* p. 552.

<sup>505</sup> 'Is a woman's place in the home?' (*Drum*, September 1953, p. 10)

political organisations.<sup>506</sup> During the 1940s, the clubs remained a small, exclusive movement, largely constituted of women from an upper middle-class and middle-class Christian background. Notwithstanding their profoundly political idea of improving black women's social status, preparing them for political activities and thus uplifting their self-esteem as blacks and as women, the Zenzele clubs were severely criticised as apolitical, domestic institutions.<sup>507</sup> The clubs changed toward a more popular basis in the 1950s, when the emergence of a black women's movement drew an increasing number of black women into national social organisations. Through the affiliation with the World Young Women's Christian Association (World YWCA) in the 1950s, Zenzele clubs also gained an international support basis.

Together with her husband, Dr. A.B. Xuma, Madie Hall Xuma enhanced the identification of the ANC with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. In public addresses and presentations, she repeatedly emphasised the need to liberate black people from their inferiority complex, which perpetuated their subordination under white supremacy. Hall Xuma asserted that the enslavement of the black population had not only been due to physical oppression, but also psychological self-repression.<sup>508</sup> Accordingly, she stressed the importance of black South African women's collective activity in turning their skills and talents to the progression of all Africans. Yet, Madie Hall Xuma's approach was not directed at the establishment of grass root movements, but at inciting a duel process in which the individual achievement of the privileged would uplift the entire race. Although claiming to help blacks liberate themselves from the feelings of inferiority, caused by colonisation and racial oppression, she did not seek to challenge missionary education systems as the 1949 established ANC Youth League and, in particular, the BCM of the 1970s did. Her Christian American background in fact corresponded with missionary ideas which dismissed 'immoral' African institutions such as polygamy and lobola as well as customary clothing and religious rites. Xuma's re-election in 1946 reflects her popularity at that time. In 1949, however, her elitist belief in 'racial uplift' and her attitude to place more emphasis on domesticity and welfare than political activism were more than outdated. Madie Hall Xuma, was forced to

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<sup>506</sup> S.D. Gish: Alfred B. Xuma, p. 125, p. 168. The Zenzele movement in the Eastern Cape was originally established by Florence Jabavu in 1925. Madie Hall Xuma established the first Zenzele Club in Johannesburg in 1941.

<sup>507</sup> I. Berger: 'An African American 'Mother of the Nation' (Journal of Southern African Studies, vol. 27, no. 3, September 2001, p. 549, p. 547).

<sup>508</sup> S.D. Gish: Alfred B. Xuma, p. 100.



leave her leading position in the political arena but continued working for the Zenzele clubs.<sup>509</sup>

In the 1950s, ANCWL's president, Ida Mtwana, envisaged it becoming a 'real force' in the national struggle.<sup>510</sup> The Defiance Campaign, jointly launched by the ANC and SAIC in 1952, marked the start of the active involvement of the ANCWL in the national struggle. Several of its members played leading roles in the campaign. Florence Matomela, president of the ANCWL in the Eastern Cape, for instance, was one of the 35 leaders arrested and charged by the state under the Suppression of Communism Act.<sup>511</sup> Since the ANC's membership increased drastically in the aftermath of the Defiance Campaign, the ANCWL gained a large number of recruits as well. The actual numbers, however, were only fragmentary documented. The ANCWL had now clearly expanded its scope of activities beyond 'tea and typing.' It was in fact the first national women's organisation that enhanced women's political activism on a broad basis. Another indication of the ANCWL's aspiration to enhance a political gender awareness amongst the female population, was the institutionalisation of the International Women's Day celebrations during the 1950s.<sup>512</sup>

Viewed retrospectively, the establishment of a national organisation that aimed to represent the majority of South African women, was a significant event. It proved that the ANC had eventually committed itself to help women overcome the distinct and inferior position they occupied in society in order to enhance women's political participation. It had recognised the necessity to set up a separate body that focused on special women's issues. Nevertheless, women were still regarded as a category of members with special additional duties and responsibilities deriving from the domestic sphere. Until the 1950s, the ANCWL was dominated by middle-class women, whose lives were not directly undermined by apartheid regulations. Its work was limited to conventional 'women's work' such as fund-raising and catering. The actual growth, politicisation and radicalisation of the ANCWL's membership took place in the 1950s with the emergence of the women's pass protests.<sup>513</sup>

A separate body proved necessary in order to give women adequate opportunities for political activism in the national struggle. It gave female ANC members a footing that was, at least

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<sup>509</sup> I. Berger: 'An African American 'Mother of the Nation' (*Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, September 2001, p. 560).

<sup>510</sup> *Drum*, August, 1953, p. 9.

<sup>511</sup> J.C. Wells: *We now demand*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>512</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, pp. 194-197.

<sup>513</sup> 'Our fight is on.' (*The Guardian*, 6.4. 1950).

theoretically, equal to that of men. Yet, directing women into a separate body also meant the perpetuation of existing sexual divisions and the reinforcement of stereotypes considering the work and roles women were supposed to perform. Three crucial questions that would maintain a particular significance throughout the history of black women's protests, already burdened the ANCWL in the 1950s: To what extent could women's issues be treated as a special area – without detracting them from the importance of issues of common political and social concern? Secondly, how could equality be achieved through separation if the confrontation within the common struggle was continuously avoided? And, last but not least, how could the ANCWL consider itself truly national if it failed to reach the majority of women living outside the larger urban areas?<sup>514</sup>

#### 4.3.5. The Federation of South African Women (FSAW)

*The struggle against the pass laws is not a matter for African women alone; it is not a matter for the African people alone. It is part and parcel of the struggle for liberation.*<sup>515</sup>

Founded in 1954, the FSAW was constituted as a federation of 'organisations of groups of females above the age of 18 years' and drew its membership entirely from the affiliated Congress Alliance organisations, namely the ANC, SAIC, the Congress of Democrats (COD), the South African Coloured People Organisation (SACPO) and left-wing trade unions.<sup>516</sup> There has previously been no women's organisation that brought so many women of different ethnic groups and classes together. Yet, since it was made up of the ethnically based bodies of the Congress Alliance, the FSAW was never, strictly speaking, a non-racial (colour-blind) organisation. Each Congress party retained its identity upon affiliating to the FSAW. In a truly non-racial organisation, ethnic groups would have played no part in the determination of membership at all. In practice, however, colour consciousness played very little part in the FSAW'S affairs. The FSAW regarded the removal of political, economic and social inequalities suffered by blacks as the overriding concern for any broad women's

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<sup>514</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 142.

<sup>515</sup> H. Joseph: 'Women against Passes' (*Fighting Talk*, January 1956, pp. 3-4).

<sup>516</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, pp. 165, 237. The Congress Alliance, established in 1952/53 among anti-apartheid parties, was supposed to provide the base for a unified national liberation movement.

movement operating within the context of national liberation. The 'Women's Charter', set up at the First National Conference of Women on 17 April 1954 in Johannesburg, stressed the dual nature of black women's struggle for equality: The FSAW's prime responsibility was its allegiance to the national struggle and the participation in its campaigns.<sup>517</sup> The charter began by affirming emphatically the overriding community of interests that women shared with men.

*Women do not form a society separate from men. There is only one Society and it is made up of both women and men. As women we share the problems and anxieties of our men and join hands with them to remove social evils and obstacles to progress*<sup>518</sup>

This was followed by the FSAW's commitment to women's emancipation from an inferior gendered position through the abolition of laws, practices and conventions that became obsolete and a brake on progression. The position of the FSAW within the Congress Alliance was not clearly defined. Since it was constituted on the member organisations of the Congress Alliance, its own membership was not on an individual basis but federally organised.<sup>519</sup> The recruitment of members reflected the initial approach to form a women's organisation within the liberation movement, an organisation in which the female members of the Congress parties could be allocated specific, women-oriented tasks. Hence, the FSAW's course of action had to concur with the policy of the Congress Alliance and its major party, the ANC. In terms of its own constitution and set of aims relating specifically to women, however, the FSAW appeared to be an independent body. Nevertheless, it was never officially represented on the National Consultative Council (NCC), the highest coordination body within the Congress Alliance. There, it was only indirectly represented through the female delegates of the organisations the women of the FSAW belonged to.<sup>520</sup> In 1954, ANCWL delegates complained about the huge gap between the theoretical endorsement of gender equality and its inadequate practice. They stated that 'women have been used as tools to raise money without representation in the Congress.'<sup>521</sup>

Considering its federal structure as well as its political and financial dependence, the FSAW appeared organisationally weak and could never have set up an independent policy focusing specifically on the emancipation of women. Yet, it was actually the fear of the latter which

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<sup>517</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 279.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid.

<sup>519</sup> T. Lodge: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, p. 143.

<sup>520</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 257.

explains the dominant attitude the ANC took towards the national women's organisation. The ANC sought to prevent the FSAW from taking an individual stand from which it could compete with the ANCWL for membership and would prove too independent from ultimate Congress control. In fact, the ANC showed the same stand it had already taken on the composition of the Congress Alliance, namely its insistence on its separate identity as an African political party. It did not commit itself to cooperate with any policy that would surrender the independence and authority it enjoyed as the major party of the Congress Alliance. In terms of its anti-pass campaigns, however, the FSAW proved its capability to motivate and organise women on a large-scale.<sup>522</sup> The ANC had failed to respond to the announcement of pass laws in the first place and was therefore seriously criticised by the Africanists.<sup>523</sup> The FSAW, which never worked on a long-term strategy, immediately launched an extensive campaign of conferences, meetings, demonstrations and local protests as soon as it was announced that passes would be introduced for women in 1955.<sup>524</sup> Together with the ANCWL, it also reacted against other apartheid legislations introduced in the early 1950s. Both the Group Areas Act of 1950 and the Bantu Education Act of 1953 were key indications of the NP's concept of intensified racial segregation. The extension of the Group Areas Act went far beyond earlier measures. In order to achieve the residential segregation of different ethnic groups, people were removed on a large scale. The public meetings and angry discussions which proceeded with the removals had politicising effects on local women.<sup>525</sup> The membership of the ANCWL and FSAW grew significantly in urban areas such as Sophiatown which were threatened by the removals.<sup>526</sup> Both organisations played leading roles in the organisation of the Alexandra bus boycott, as well.<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Mrs Gelana Twala, delegate for Alexandra, Johannesburg as quoted in: Drum, February 1954, p. 11.

<sup>522</sup> 'Will our Women Carry Passes?' (Drum, January 1956, p. 19).

<sup>523</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 166. The 'Africanist' faction first emerged within the Transvaal ANC in 1955. Strongly nationalist, the group was suspicious of whites in leadership positions of the national liberation movement and criticised the multi-racial approach of the Congress Alliance.

<sup>524</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 190.

<sup>525</sup> 'Women ordered to leave Cape Town.' (New Age 21.4.1955).

<sup>526</sup> 'New Faces in Congress' (Drum, March 1955, p. 24).

<sup>527</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, p. 46; B.J. Liebenberg, S. B. Spies (ed.): South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, p. 387: The Alexandra bus boycott, taking place at about the time of the preparatory examination of the Treason Trial in 1957, opposed the penny rise in the single bus fare between the township Alexandra and the centre of Johannesburg, which most Africans, living under the breadline, were unable to afford. The bus boycotters attracted an enormous amount of support and interest among whites, of whom many gave lifts to Africans walking to work.

In 1955, after thousands of women had been involved in local protests all over the country, the FSAW initiated the first mass demonstration of women in Pretoria.<sup>528</sup> The multiracial approach was endorsed, particularly to overtly disapprove the protests of Black Sash<sup>529</sup> women who elected not to include Non-Europeans in their protest against the newly introduced provision of apartheid legislation. The women did not only protest against the pass system but discriminative apartheid regulations in general such as Bantu Education, the Population Register, the Group Areas Act, the Suppression of Communism Act, the Criminal Laws Amendment Act and the Public Safety Act.<sup>530</sup>

According to Helen Joseph, more than 2000 women from all over the country attended the protest marches to the Union Building.

*They came dignified, determined...women of all races, united in their purpose, carrying their little children in their arms or on their backs, brilliantly clad in national costumes, in saris, some in their working clothes because they had no others.<sup>531</sup> [T]hey had occupied the amphitheatre, had indeed peacefully stormed the Bastille of the privileged whites. For the Union Buildings were regarded as sacrosanct; not even 'Whites only' notices were placed there, because in all these years the non-whites had never gathered there, had never thought of doing so.<sup>532</sup>*

Denied audience with the responsible cabinet ministers, the women signed hundreds of protest statements which had been prepared by the FSAW leaders Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa and Sophie Williams.<sup>533</sup> The press reports on the demonstration were as numerous as ambiguous. The conservative white press reflected the attitude of many whites who viewed the demonstration as a result of incitement by whites.<sup>534</sup> In 1956, the

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<sup>528</sup> H. Joseph: 'Women against Passes' (*Fighting Talk*, January 1956, p. 3).

<sup>529</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, pp. 173-174. The Black Sash was founded in 1955 by a small group of predominantly English-speaking, middle-class white women. Initially named 'Women's Defence of the Constitution League', it was formed specifically to protest against the government's attempts to eliminate common roll voting rights for Coloureds through the 'Separate Representation of Voters Bill.' The characteristic demonstration style of the women who stood silently outside public buildings in urban centres, wearing black mourning sashes draped over one shoulder, gave the organisation the nickname 'Black Sash', which later became its official name.

<sup>530</sup> 'Pretoria conquered by the Women!' (*New Age*, 3.11. 1955, p. 1).

<sup>531</sup> H. Joseph: 'Women against Passes' (*Fighting Talk*, January 1956, p. 3).

<sup>532</sup> H. Joseph: *Tomorrow's Sun*, p. 81.

<sup>533</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 187.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid*, p. 187: *Die Vaderland*, 28.10.1955: 'Blanke vroue ... was doenig met die reelings ... veral bedrywig om toe te sien dat alles stil en vlot verloop' (White women ... were involved in the organisation ... particularly concerned with seeing that everything went peacefully and smoothly.) *Rand Daily Mail*, 2.11.1955 published a letter, written by Lilian Ngoyi, mentioning that Prime Minister Strijdom described the demonstration to a women's branch of the Nasionale Jeugbond as 'scandalous because it was incited by Europeans.' In any case, for the white press it was something remarkable about the sight of 'blanket-clad Native women' confronting the national government, as stated in *Cape Times*, 10.8.1956.

stage was set for a massive repetition of the previous year's demonstration in Pretoria.<sup>535</sup> More than 20000 women from all provinces travelled to the capital, many women had to travel for days.<sup>536</sup> Some had to sell furniture in order to afford the travel, many nannies brought 'their' white children.<sup>537</sup> More than 20000 petitions were delivered at the office of the Prime Minister who himself was absent. It surfaced later that Strijdom had not even looked at them before the security police removed the papers.<sup>538</sup> In their protests the women were primarily motivated by concerns deriving from their motherhood. Their protest declarations attested to the destruction of homes, when women were arrested under pass laws and torn from their children. It was also feared that women and young girls would be exposed to humiliation and degradation at the hands of pass searching policemen. Ultimately, women would lose their right to move freely.

*We speak from our hearts as mothers, as women. Life cannot be stopped. We must love and marry and find a home. We must bear children in hope and in pain; we must love them as part of ourselves, we must help them to grow, we must endure all the longings and sufferings of motherhood. Because of this we are made strong, to come here, to speak for our children, to strive for their future. We, the voters and voteless, call upon you, the Ministers responsible for these Acts, and upon the Government and the electorate of South Africa, to hearken to the protest of the women, for we shall not rest until we have won for our children their fundamental rights of freedom, justice and security.*<sup>539</sup>

The women stood in silence for thirty minutes in front of the Union Building. Thereafter they bursted into the warrior's song of the women of Natal with its topical words 'Strijdom you have tampered with the woman, you have struck a rock.' Having sung their triumphant anthem 'Nkosi Sikelel'i-Afrika', they dispersed.<sup>540</sup>

Commenting on the success of the Pretoria demonstration, Chief Luthuli said: 'When the women begin to take an active part in the struggle, as they are doing now, no power on earth

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<sup>535</sup> J.C. Wells: *We now demand*, pp. 110-115.

<sup>536</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 187. The estimated figures of the number of participants vary – due to the ideological outlook of the publishing institutions. *Die Vaderland* (10.8.1956) reported an approximated figure of 6000-1000. The *Cape Times* (9.8.1956) estimated about 10000 participants. The FSAW's estimation of 20 000 participants became widely acknowledged. But as the *Cape Times* (10.8.1956) stated, it was 'probably the largest mass gathering of women in the country's history.'

<sup>537</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 187: *Die Vaderland* (10.8. 1956) included two pictures of black domestics holding white children and asked 'Weet hul ouers waar hulle is?' (Do their parents know where they are?) In addition it presented photographs of white and black women standing together and stated 'Hier word gehelp dat die nie-blanke vroue die vorms...kan onderteken' (here the non-white women are being helped to sign the forms)

<sup>538</sup> 'Treason: End of Round One' (*Drum*, September 1957, p. 25). Pass Petitions of August 9, 1956 are reprinted in: (1) *New Age*, 9. 8. 1956, p. 3. (2.) D. Mermelstein (ed.): *The Anti-Apartheid Reader*, pp. 244-245.

<sup>539</sup> H. Joseph: 'Women against Passes' (*Fighting Talk*, January 1956, p. 4).

can stop us from achieving Freedom in our Lifetime.’<sup>541</sup> Indeed, as a national women’s organisation, the FSAW was a challenge to traditional prejudices against women’s political autonomy and adulthood. These prejudices were not only rooted within the South African society in general, but in the parties of the Congress Alliance in particular. Many African, Indian and Coloured men feared that the male hegemony within their society would be threatened by a multi-racial women’s movement. Since the ANC was committed to a struggle on a grassroots basis, its leaders officially recognised the importance of mobilising women in order to gain a mass movement. In 1955 Chief Lutuli, national president of the ANC, conceded that traditional relationships between men and women needed to be restructured in order to enable women to take part in political work more actively.

*We know that we cannot win liberation or built a strong movement without the participation of the women. We must ...make it possible for women to play their part by regarding them as equals and helping to emancipate them in the home, even relieving them of their many family and household burdens so that women may be given an opportunity of being politically active. The men in the Congress Movement must fight constantly... those outmoded customs which make women inferior and by personal example must demonstrate their belief in the equality of all human beings, all sexes.*<sup>542</sup>

Although speaking at a national conference, attended by both men and women, Lutuli directed his appeal to the men only. The appeal exhibits a kind of ‘benevolent paternalism.’ Instead of mentioning the rising number and force of women entering the political arena and calling for equality, he assumes that women cannot be emancipated without being helped and uplifted by their men.

In practice both actions and attitudes often lagged far behind publicly proclaimed principles. By the end of the 1950s, the movement had yet to grant women a full and unequivocal recognition of their rights as equals to men. The lag between theory and practice was mostly marked at the level of the ANC’s rank and file. Many African men actually opposed passes for women because they feared to loose the authority over their womenfolk to the government. Traditional values relating to patriarchy and patrilineal kinship ties were still strongly in evidence, even among urban Africans.<sup>543</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> ‘Strijdom, you have struck a rock’ (*New Age*, 6.8.1956, p.1).

<sup>541</sup> Chief Luthuli as quoted in ‘Women have said ‘No’’ (*New Age*, 16.8. 1956, p. 5).

<sup>542</sup> As quoted in C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 259.

<sup>543</sup> B.A. Pauw: *The Second Generation*, pp. 145-157.

The national leadership of the ANC appeared to adopt a more sophisticated approach to the FSAW than rank and file members. The statements of ANC leaders on gender relations proved to be both progressive and reactionary. Being asked if there were ‘not signs that women are going to play a much bigger – perhaps the crucial part – in politics’, Chief Albert Luthuli, emphasised the increasing participation of women who should ‘not only actively but in silent ways contribute to the struggle.’<sup>544</sup> A year after his progressive statement on the necessity of reconstructing gender relations, as quoted above, Luthuli overtly expressed the actual conservatism of a party that aspired to reconcile its traditional aspirations with the transcended image of a progressive political mass organisation, when he proclaimed: Women are putting men’s traditional dignity and so-called superiority in jeopardy. Do African men of our day want to play the second fiddle to women?<sup>545</sup>

The ANC national executive regarded women’s political priorities as centring on domestic issues, a conventional perspective which the FSAW shared. Within the FSAW the women discussed the need to challenge traditional roles in the domestic sphere in order to emancipate women from their subordinate position within the patriarchal society. Hilda Bernstein recalls that while the FSAW and ANCWL of the 1950s were ‘a means of organising women for the national liberation struggle’ they also served as ‘a means of obtaining the usual work out of the women - feeding and finding accommodation for delegates to conferences and similar work.’<sup>546</sup> It was the FSAW who provided the accommodation and catering arrangements for major national conferences such as the Congress of the People in 1955, the National Workers Conference in 1958 and the National Anti-Pass campaign in 1959.

In preparation of the 1955 Congress of the People, the FSAW provided a list of demands which were supposed to be incorporated into the Freedom Charter. ‘What women demand’<sup>547</sup> was a more detailed exposition of ideas already contained in ‘The Women’s Charter’ and the FSAW’s ‘Aims.’ It focused mainly on issues relating to health care, education, housing, social services and food. The most debated topic was certainly the issue of birth control. Black women could be *forced* by white magistrates to undergo a sterilisation. In case they fell pregnant, women were rarely granted legal abortions. More than 70% of the legal abortions were granted to white women. The latter also had the option to undertake an abortion in a European country. African women, however, could seldom afford private solutions which

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<sup>544</sup> ‘Luthuli Talks’ (Drum, June 1958, pp. 59-61).

<sup>545</sup> ‘Chief speaks: a message by Albert Lutuli’ (Drum, August 1959).

<sup>546</sup> H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p. 43.



were safe.<sup>548</sup> Women's need for children on the one hand, and their lack of control in sexual relationships on the other, have been further constraining factors on the choice of childbearing.<sup>549</sup> The women's discussions about birth control at the FSAW meetings revealed how conscious they were of their subordinate role within the family. It showed the difficulty of allowing oneself to question the own oppression in order to challenge it. Freeing women's sexuality from the reproductive role increases their authority within the family tremendously. The woman can thereby control and conceptualise her own life in a way that directly contradicts the authority of the father and husband within the patriarchal family. As previously mentioned, customary law entitled the father to hold guardianship over his children. Children were a means of social prestige and men literally possessed them, even if they divorced their wives.<sup>550</sup>

Although the issue of birth control had been an important topic in 'What women demand', it was not seriously discussed at the meetings of the Congress Alliance. In fact, it was dismissed right away. The fact, that it was not regarded as a matter of political discussion showed the limited perception of women's emancipation among the Congress members. The rejection of definitions about sexual equality and discrimination, conducted from a female perspective, was not in particular due to the Africanist culture. Sex and sexuality were not socially sanctioned topics of public discussion and, in raising this issue at a public meeting such as the Congress of the People, the FSAW was breaking new ground.<sup>551</sup> It took another decade until women's issues found access to the political stages in Europe. In South Africa, birth control remained a taboo topic for the next 30 years.<sup>552</sup>

In general, however, it was passivity rather than active objection the FSAW had to face when presenting campaigns to male Congress members. Whereas the majority of male politicians emphasised the value of the pass resistance campaigns, only few actively joined in. There seem to be several reasons for the lack of effective support on part of the men: Firstly, the ANC was plagued by internal dissensions and an organisational weakness in general. There

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<sup>547</sup> Reprinted in: C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, pp. 285-7.

<sup>548</sup> G F. Ginwala: 'Women in South Africa Today' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 6).

<sup>549</sup> A. Moodley: 'Defining Reproductive Rights' (Agenda, no. 27, 1995, p. 12).

<sup>550</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak, p. 170.

<sup>551</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 183.

<sup>552</sup> F. Ginwala: 'Women in South Africa Today' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 6).

was also a lack of psychological motivation on the part of the men, since they themselves were used to carry passes. The whole issue was not as new and distressing for them, as it did not threaten them directly. The position of women in politics was regarded with an ambivalent attitude. Eventually, the anti-pass campaign was conceived to be a 'women's issue' by the general membership of the Congress Alliance.

In its day-to day affairs, the FSAW relied heavily on a very small group of extremely hard-working individuals. The demands placed on those women possessing administrative and managerial skills were accordingly high. Helen Joseph, for instance, served on the executive committees of the FSAW (National and Transvaal) and COD and held a fulltime job as well.<sup>553</sup> The lack of skilled leaders became even more crucial when the FSAW executives came under increasing pressure from the state. Individuals were banned and meetings were disturbed by the harassment and intimidations of the security police which scared off potential recruits. Founded two years after the Defiance Campaign, the FSAW benefited from the increasing membership recruitment by the Congress Parties but also suffered from the growing political pressure imposed on them. Ray Alexander (FSAW's first national secretary) and Hetty McLeod (national treasurer) were the first FSAW leaders to be banned. Their banning was a clear indication for FSAW members that they would not remain unaffected by the government's policy.<sup>554</sup> After 1955, African women became an increasingly vulnerable and threatened group. Many of them were 'unqualified', living illegally in townships and squatter communities. They did not only risk their jobs but also their residential rights through political involvement. *New Age* carried several articles on the efforts of the security police to deport ANCWL and FSAW activists from Cape Town on the grounds that they did not qualify for urban residence.<sup>555</sup> Following the 1955 Congress of the People, the government retaliated by arresting 156 persons active in the national movement, including 22 women, and charged them with treason. Indian and African women organised a feeding and washing system for the prisoners, and the Treason Trial Defence Fund was established to provide for the needs of the families left behind. By 1961 all the charges had been dropped or the accused found not guilty. The FSAW suffered a severe setback from the imprisonment of some of its main leaders.<sup>556</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 250.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid, p. 166.

<sup>555</sup> New Age, 24.3.1955; 21.8.1955; 1.3.1956; 7.6.1956.

<sup>556</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, pp. 47-49.

The lack of responsibility and initiative on the part of the ordinary members of the FSAW was in fact a product of several interacting and reinforcing factors: Sex, class and colour all conspired together to ensure that the majority of the FSAW members, mostly urban African women in their 40s, were poorly educated, without any managerial skills. For most of the township women who became leaders in the FSAW, it had been the trade unions that provided them with a valuable training ground. Most of the women in the upper ranks of the campaigns were trade unionists, teachers, nurses or social workers.<sup>557</sup> Only very few had the bureaucratic and administrative skills to keep the FSAW functioning as an organisation. Due to their middle class background, the small number of white women were in a strong position to dominate the FSAW on both the administrative level and the debating forum. They were also privileged in terms of education, mobility, greater financial security and rather comfortable, private working conditions. Considering their enfranchisement, they were already familiar with the techniques of debates on democratic forums. At many meetings, more time was spent on speeches and discussion than on administrative details. Singing and dancing were features of the FSAW that made its conferences spirited, festive occasions. Although the social atmosphere at the meetings was energetic and powerful, there was a lack of debate from the floor.<sup>558</sup> Due to the dominance of the FSAW leadership, the process of decision-making was very centralised. The FSAW also failed to extend its organisational work into the rural areas.<sup>559</sup> It therefore was to keep its urban identity throughout its years of active work. Furthermore, the FSAW had almost no financial resources of its own on which to operate. African women, who constituted the majority of its members, belonged to the lowest income group in South Africa. The budget problems of the FSAW also stemmed from its ambiguous position within the Congress Alliance. Since many ANC politicians refused to distinguish the FSAW from the ANCWL, its requests for separate financial support were hardly acknowledged. On the other hand, there was no definite financial responsibility of the ANCWL towards the FSAW.<sup>560</sup>

The amount of money collected for churches, however, proved that there was an enormous fund-raising potential amongst the women in the townships. A comparison between the different stances of religious and political institutions, reveals the subordinate position of the

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<sup>557</sup> J.C. Wells: We now demand, p. 130.

<sup>558</sup> New Age, 9.7.1955.

<sup>559</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 142.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid., pp. 251-254.

latter within a male dominated, undemocratic society.<sup>561</sup> The majority of men regarded the church as a legitimate organisation for women to work in and to assist financially. Considering the insecure political sphere, the church offered its adherents an immediate release from the psychological pressure of apartheid. Moreover, it initiated commonly acknowledged self-help groups. One could even obtain socially influential positions within the church - without exposing oneself to any political insecurity.<sup>562</sup> Yet, since the churches provided no place for women except as auxiliaries and service groups, women played no role in church leadership decisions affecting their participation in the anti-apartheid movement.<sup>563</sup>

It is debatable whether the ANC hindered or helped the FSAW to become an accepted organisation within the Congress Alliance. And it is doubtful whether the FSAW would have gained more influence and authority on both national liberation and women's policies if it had been based on an individual membership. There was hardly space and time for gender related issues due to the increasing political pressure on the national movement. The FSAW was chiefly occupied with the immediate demands of planning and organising anti-pass campaigns. In 1955, it had already accepted that without the ANCWL it could never be more than a peripheral organisation within the national movement. Any conflict that threatened the unity of the national liberation movement had to be avoided. The senior position of the ANC as 'leader of the mass of women' was to be respected.<sup>564</sup>

As far as the liberation of women within the South African society was concerned, the FSAW failed to conduct an analytical programme to achieve this aim. Most of the organisation's energy was channelled into the practical work of campaigning against the national oppression. There was hardly time for theoretical analysis in order to develop a general understanding of women's social subordination into a critical analysis of gender inequality.<sup>565</sup> In practice, the FSAW was far less judgmental of male dominance than many of its statements about women's emancipation would suggest. Euphoric statements about the end of women's subordination in the domestic sphere like that of Ida Motwana during the inaugural conference of the FSAW proved stimulating in the mobilisation of women, although the realisation of the slogan was never really intended.

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<sup>561</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 254. See F. Meer (ed.): Black-Woman-Worker, pp. 21-33.

<sup>562</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 254.

<sup>563</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, p. 33.

<sup>564</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, pp. 257-259.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid, p. 265.

*Gone are the days when the place of women was in the kitchen and looking after the kitchen. Today they are marching side by side with men on the road to freedom.*<sup>566</sup>

Most women within the FSAW accepted that their responsibilities were primarily domestic and their political contributions supportive rather than innovative.<sup>567</sup> This attitude was also reflected in the conservative defence of home and custom which characterised the anti-pass protests of rural women during the 1950s.<sup>568</sup> Although the FSAW leadership strongly endorsed the abolition of any kind of gender discrimination, it continually stressed women's role as wives and, specifically, mothers. Frequently 'mother' and 'women' were interchangeable terms in the FSAW rhetoric. The invitation to the FSAW's inaugural conference, for instance, appealed to women in very general terms as 'mothers of the nation – a half of the population.'<sup>569</sup>

The position and influence of the FSAW within the Congress Movement was nevertheless acknowledged and respected. The Congress Alliance eventually proved too weak to withstand the sanctions of the state. Its style of protest was indicative of a desire to persuade through moral example. In 1958, the ANC Women's League and the FSAW were instructed to call off the deliberate courting of arrest by women anti-pass demonstrators. Thereafter proposals for action by women on passes took the form of nationwide prayer meetings.<sup>570</sup> In 1955, the FSAW sent Ngoyi and Dora Tamane as delegates to the World Congress of Mothers held in Switzerland by the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), to which the FSAW was affiliated. As part of the trip, the women visited China, the USSR, East Germany, and England – all without South African passports.<sup>571</sup> The active engagement of the FSAW certainly increased the status of women in the Congress Alliance. This was not at least reflected by the election of Lilian Ngoyi to the ANC national executive in 1955 and the ANC's decision to commemorate August 9<sup>th</sup> as national 'Women's Day', in honour of the great demonstration staged by the FSAW and ANCWL in Pretoria in 1956.<sup>572</sup> Most

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<sup>566</sup> Quoted in C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 183.

<sup>567</sup> J. Shapiro: 'Political and Economic organisation of women in South Africa' (*Africa Perspective*, no. 15, Autumn 1980, p. 10).

<sup>568</sup> T. Lodge: *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, pp. 273-9.

<sup>569</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 142.

<sup>570</sup> T. Lodge: *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, p. 78.

<sup>571</sup> 'World Conference of Mothers. Four South African Delegates.' (*New Age*, 7.7.1955, p.6) See also: MaNgoyi: 'A Gallant Leader', in: M. Tlali: *Mihloti*, pp. 51-55.

<sup>572</sup> 'Masterpiece in Bronze' (*Drum*, March 1956) The article reports on Ngoyi's career into the highest ranks of the national movement. Despite a very poor educational background, she became the first African woman in the Transvaal Provincial Executive of the ANC, the National Executive and was elected president of the

importantly, the FSAW viewed women as political and social actors in their own right. It was critical and impatient of passivity and defended its limited decision-making powers and autonomy strongly.<sup>573</sup> It encouraged the trend towards greater female independence and sovereignty within the urban African family in the 1950s. It never dismissed the ideology of the African family unit. By contrast, it sought to promote the confirmation of the latter through a kind of social restructuring that responded to the changing social infrastructure in the townships. For many women their political involvement had a radicalising effect on their perceptions of themselves and their place in society. The FSAW gave women the opportunity to look beyond the traditional boundaries that formerly circumscribed their lives. During the Treason Trial, Helen Joseph explained the FSAW's dilemma with regard to women's rights and their emancipation in South Africa:

*[that] does not in any way mean that the Federation of South African Women was not concerned with the problem of women's rights, and that it did not strive for the emancipation of women ...what was realised was that it would be impossible for women to achieve their rights as women in a society in which so many fundamental rights were denied to both men and women by virtue of their sex.*<sup>574</sup>

It could be supposed that the FSAW's rejection of ethnic boundaries not only reflected the multiracial policy of the Congress Alliance and ANC, but was an expression of a multiracial solidarity of motherhood, or even a nascent feminist consciousness.<sup>575</sup> These moderate, multi-racial aspirations however eventually prevented the FSAW from developing analytical programmes about black women's emancipation. The FSAW exposed itself to the contradictions any women's movement with universal aspirations faces when operating in a society that is as diverse as the South African. The FSAW sought to fight the ethnic divisions of society by simply ignoring them as irrational and discriminatory.

It was only in Cape Town that the FSAW achieved closer cooperation with white women who were not officially associated with the Congress Alliance. The 'Cape Association to Abolish Passes for African Women' was established in 1957 at a joint gathering of representatives from the FSAW, the ANCWL, the Black Sash, the NCW and the Anglican

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FSAW. She was the only breadwinner for her children, worked full-time in a factory, participated in the Women's Garment Workers' Union for the Reef and became treasurer of the S.A. Non-European Council of Trade Unions. She is portrayed as an intelligent, disciplined but too emotional personality. Quotations from Ngoyi's statements are usually teemed with vivid figures of speech.: 'We women are like hens that lay eggs for somebody to take away. That's the effect of Bantu Education.'

<sup>573</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 265.

<sup>574</sup> Helen Joseph as quoted in C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 263

<sup>575</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 276.

Mothers' Union.<sup>576</sup> It continued to function as a loose co-ordinating body for several years. The joint commitment stayed within the conventional framework of co-operation between women's organisations in the Cape. The association did not exert any significant political impact, nor did it motivate further cooperation between women's groups elsewhere. Women's organisation with different racial backgrounds hardly ever co-operated on a political basis. Considering their dedication to the national struggle, white women were important on an individual basis only.<sup>577</sup>

Indeed, the mere existence of a multiracial organisation was itself a rejection of apartheid. During the following decades, however, black people became increasingly aware of the fact, that a multi-racial policy proved rather ineffective in aiming at a transcended multi-racial, truly democratic society. As a result, the national movement became not only more militant but also sceptical of the participation of whites.

The dilemma of the FSAW was that, although it was open to *all* women, it was certainly not representative of *all* women. Being female does not necessarily mean sharing a common experience and identity. Where white FSAW members retained an importance beyond their numbers, African women were underrepresented in the FSAW leadership. The lack of participants from rural areas was further proof that the FSAW did not truly correspond to the complex relationship of wealth and power - which ultimately determined the women's political allegiances. The chief problem was not the participation of white middle-class women, but the rather compliant and passive attitude among the FSAW membership towards the dominant leadership. Most African women acknowledged the leadership positions white women achieved because of their privileged social status. They themselves were not motivated to aspire to any political career and did not envisage jeopardizing the security of their family.

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<sup>576</sup> 'Multi-Race-Protest' (*Drum*, October 1957)

<sup>577</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, pp. 204 - 205,

#### 4.3.5.1. The FSAW and black resistance in the Sharpeville aftermath

On 21 March 1960, 69 Africans died in a protest march to the police station at Sharpeville. What was initially meant to be a peaceful demonstration of some 3000 Africans against passlaws erupted into violence when the protesters confronted the police.<sup>578</sup> The protest had been initiated by the 1959 founded Pan African Congress (PAC), which called for a campaign that was more sustained than the series of single day anti-pass marches which the ANC had announced in December 1959. The incident was severely criticised on the international stage. Strikes and stayaways followed throughout the country. A state of emergency was declared and hundreds of leading political activists were detained. The passing of the 1960 Unlawful Organisations Act authorised the government to ban the ANC and PAC as political organisations, forcing them to operate underground. In 1962, the COD was banned as an organisation. The Congress Alliance continued its existence but suffered another severe blow when leading PAC and ANC politicians were sentenced to life imprisonment. The banning of the ANC and PAC revealed the failure of non-violent resistance. Thereafter, the organisations could no longer openly defy laws which they regarded as inimical to black interest. In 1961, some ANC leaders including Mandela, Sisulu and other ex-Youth League organisers founded Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), an underground guerrilla organisation. Until July 1963, when its headquarters were raided and its leaders captured and sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island, Umkhonto we Sizwe conducted a number of sabotage attacks on power stations and government installations. In the Western Cape and Transkei, PAC activists formed a more radical guerrilla organisation called Poqo ('Pure' or 'Alone' in Xhosa), which envisaged to provoke a general uprising by killing police, suspected informers and governmental agents as well as whites. Poqo was founded and brought to a close at about the same time as Umkhonto we Sizwe.<sup>579</sup>

In the aftermath of Sharpeville, the FSAW faced a security crackdown by the state on the national movement. The restrictions on those banned in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act were increased, new, extra-judicial forms of restrictions and house-arrest were created. Helen Joseph became the first person banned under house arrest in South

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<sup>578</sup> N. Worden: The Making of Modern South Africa, pp. 106-107; B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies (eds.): South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, pp. 369-370; J. Grobler: A Decisive Clash? A short history of Black protest politics in South Africa, 1987-1976, pp. 122-124.

<sup>579</sup> N. Worden: The Making of Modern South Africa, pp. 114-115.



Africa.<sup>580</sup> The FSAW, its structure, tactics and outlook proved unable to survive the radical changes of the following decade. Although the FSAW was not officially banned, it struggled to regain its influence in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre. It faced enormous difficulties in terms of financial resources and membership recruitment, due to the ever-spreading net of security legislation and the increasing harassment by the security police. It still proved dependent on the Congress Alliance, particularly its senior partners, the ANC and ANCWL. Yet, it was this junior position that kept the FSAW alive. It would probably have been banned along with the ANCWL, if it had been based on an individual membership.<sup>581</sup> The main difficulties, however, arose from the detention and banning of FSAW leaders such as Helen Joseph and Lilian Ngoyi.<sup>582</sup> As mentioned above, the FSAW relied heavily on the capacity of its few leaders. Most of them had to go into hiding and temporary retreat. In 1961, the FSAW revived its activity. It remained as it was, not changing over to an individual membership, but established community based clubs amongst black women from which it drew its membership. It thus retained its federal form, although its status as an affiliated organisation had already proved to be problematic in terms of decision-making and financial procedures.<sup>583</sup> The FSAW still adhered to the principle of extra-parliamentary, non-violent campaigns. Most of the women had not been socialised to accept violence as a means of redressing their problems. Most of them lived in areas where violence was endemic. Murder, rape, assault and armed robbery were common features of the poor, overcrowded townships. Hence, they were reluctant to identify with the increasingly radical direction the ANC policy took after its banning. The FSAW saw women as mediators in the peaceful transition towards a multiracial democratic South African society. This attitude became especially apparent when the FSAW president, Lilian Ngoyi, attacked pistol clubs set up for white women as a 'disgrace to womanhood.'<sup>584</sup> During the 1950s, the FSAW had largely failed to elicit any positive response from other women's organisations outside the Congress Alliance. During the 1960s, since its former allies were banned, the FSAW sought to broaden its base and find assistance among other women's organisations. It strengthened its contact with the Liberal

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<sup>580</sup> International Defence and Aid Fund: To Honour Women's Day, pp. 12-13.

<sup>581</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 269.

<sup>582</sup> International Defence and Aid Fund: To Honour Women's Day, pp. 12-13, pp. 33-34. Joseph and Ngoyi were among the 30 people convicted in the 1960 Treason Trial. Thereafter, both were repeatedly served with banning orders.

<sup>583</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 270.

<sup>584</sup> See 'The Women speak up' (Drum, October 1961, p. 47).

Party, the NCW and, in particular, the Black Sash.<sup>585</sup> In August 1961, the FSAW organised the Women's Day celebration and in November it held its third national conference.<sup>586</sup> Lilian Ngoyi and Helen Joseph were re-elected to their positions as national president and secretary respectively. The FSAW's stand on political issues such as pass-laws, Bantu Education and the Bantu Authorities Act was reaffirmed. Notwithstanding the number of police attending the conference, it called for the lifting of the ban on the ANC and PAC and requested a stop to arbitrary arrests, prolonged trials and bannings. With the increasing political pressure, the FSAW's membership decreased rapidly. Open communication between the head office and the regions became extremely difficult and members sought to remain anonymous.<sup>587</sup> There is no single date marking the end of the FSAW. Since it was neither banned, nor officially dissolved, it merely disappeared from the political scene during 1962. In February 1963, it became compulsory for all African women to carry reference books. The FSAW had to realise that its members had neither the resources nor the numbers to resist the distribution of passes any longer.<sup>588</sup> Many women continued their fight as individuals throughout their whole lives. One of the most known was Annie Silinga, who died in 1981 without ever having carried a pass.<sup>589</sup> By 1963, the anti-pass campaigns had eventually been brought to a close. On historically marked funeral occasions, former members of the FSAW would still emerge as a body wearing their federation uniforms. Beyond these symbolic reminders, however, the FSAW had terminated its existence.<sup>590</sup>

The incapability of the FSAW to continue functioning as an organisation marked the end of an era of national, multiracial women's organisations in South Africa. Yet, the FSAW's ideas concerning the emancipation of women in the political, economic and social sphere had been too fundamental to be destroyed by the ever-spreading net of security legislation. They were reflections of the women's position within a changing society and their value increased with

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<sup>585</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, pp. 58, 65, 76; C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, pp. 173-5. In the 1950s, the Black Sash was essentially a conservative organisation, formed to protect the constitution, not to seek radical change. Its members were anti-Nationalist but not pro-majority vote. The Black Sash did not ally itself with any anti-apartheid or multi-racial organisation in the 1950s, although it did develop bases for coordination with the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR). In 1963, the Black Sash opened its membership to women of all races. During the 1970s, it took a more definite anti-apartheid standing. It then worked closely with the SAIRR and established information centres for African women in urban centres. It organised demonstrations against detentions and apartheid legislations and developed public education programmes to inform the white population.

<sup>586</sup> 'The Women speak up' (Drum, October 1961, p. 47).

<sup>587</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 272.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>589</sup> See International Defence and Aid Fund: To Honour Women's Day, p. 37.

the extension of apartheid. Before the FSAW, almost all women's organisations, from left to right across the political spectrum, had been organised as mere auxiliaries to parent, male-dominated bodies and had been viewed in a 'tea and typing' capacity.<sup>591</sup> In fact, the FSAW was the first national women's organisation that worked on a comprehensive programme for women's participation in the national movement. Most importantly, it did not stand isolated with its ideas about women's emancipation but took it up in discussions with male Congress members. Despite all the features that tempered its stand on women's emancipation in practice, it represented a real and serious attempt to incorporate women into the political programme of the national liberation movement in order to make them to political actors in their own right, on an equal footing with men. Ruth Mompati stated in this regard:

*When we are free as a nation, we will have created the foundation for the emancipation of women. As we fight side by side with our men in the struggle, men become dependent on us working with them.*<sup>592</sup>

Until the end of the 1960s, 'anti-apartheid' action was based on survival and day to day opposition. Resistance and refusal to comply with apartheid rules was maintained in the social work of women's organisations.<sup>593</sup> Most African women were too far removed from mainline politics and economics to even be observed by the police. As social action was acceptable for women, they were usually ignored and not viewed as a threat. During the 1960s, women of all races took over informal leadership positions of socially orientated, a-political 'anti-apartheid organisations.' The Black Sash continued to be involved in programmes to alleviate the human suffering caused by apartheid. Its main objectives were pass laws and influx control. It maintained and expanded its advice offices in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban and Grahamstown, and started operating in conjunction with the SAIRR. In 1971 The Black Sash issued a nine-point 'Charter for Women' which was presented as a petition to Parliament. The proposed 'fundamental rights and freedoms which shall not be violated by any law or administrative action' were to provide any woman her right to choose her marriage partner, to live with her husband throughout her married life, to life with her children, to gain access to free education for children and to own or to rent property in her own name.<sup>594</sup> It was also requested that every woman should have the right to

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<sup>590</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 274. (as quoted from: Federation of Women, p. 3. FSAW FII).

<sup>591</sup> C. Walker: Women and Resistance in South Africa, p. 275.

<sup>592</sup> Ruth Mompati as quoted in D.E.H. Russel: Lives of Courage, p. 116.

<sup>593</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, p. 78.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid, p. 84.

freedom of movement and residence, the right to work, free choice of employment and the right to just and favourable conditions of work. Eventually, a woman should have the right to live her 'declining years with those who care for her'.<sup>595</sup>

At face value, these claims appear to bear a revolutionary character. The rejection of African women's inclusion into the pass system, meant a challenge to the instrumental basis of the policy of separate development. But as the claims were limited to the social sphere only, they did not directly contradict the system of separate development itself.<sup>596</sup> The claims neither included back women's political liberation, nor their legal emancipation. In fact, this strategy proves symptomatic of the history of South African women's organisations and their collaboration beyond the colour bar. The Black Sash Advice Office workers were loving and caring, but when the doors of the office closed, they went home in their cars to their warm houses and a good meal, probably prepared by the domestic who was 'one of the family.' While white women's organisations tended to patronise 'self-help projects', in order to alleviate the impact apartheid exerted on black women as mothers and wives, they entirely ignored the actual cause of this system. Significantly, the elaboration of the nine-point Charter for Women happened in a time, when the BCM had already gained momentum. The events in the late 1970s, however, changed the policy of the Black Sash significantly. In 1981, the Black Sash supported a resolution not to rest 'until we have established a democratic South Africa based on the Freedom Charter.'<sup>597</sup>

Women began to regroup in the 1970s, picking up on the FSAW'S history for inspiration. The chief organisation of black women's resistance in the 1970s, the Black Women's Federation, drew on the 'Women's Charter' in its own statement of position – with one major difference: Whereas the FSAW had committed itself unequivocally to multiracialism, the Black Women's Federation was, as its name indicated, open to black women only. It allied itself to the Black Consciousness Movement which will be analysed in the following chapter.

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<sup>595</sup> Ibid.

<sup>596</sup> J. Shapiro: 'Political and Economic organisation of women in South Africa' (Africa Perspective, no. 15, Autumn 1980, p. 7). Shapiro also points to the fact that the Black Sash never encompassed any form of feminism.

<sup>597</sup> E. Mashinini: Strikes Have Followed me all my Life, p. 130.

## Chapter 5

### The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM)

#### 5.1. The background and development of Black Consciousness (BC)

*We have allowed ourselves to be divided and to be ruled – and subsequently, we black people contribute to our own oppression more than our oppressor enslaves us.*<sup>598</sup>

During the 1960s, the NP government consolidated its ideological, social and economic apartheid policy. The Suppression of Communism Amendment Act of 1965 prohibited the publication of speeches and writings of banned persons. The destruction of Sophiatown signalled the end of hope for integration. The high degree of state repression prevented any kind of anti-governmental action. Despite their influence on the international level, none of the national underground organisations proved capable to mobilise effective demonstrations until the end of the 1960s. The banning, exiling and imprisonment of national leaders caused a power vacuum which manifested itself in attitudes of fear and apathy among the black population. An average school child in the early 1970s had never heard of the ANC or the PAC and could not identify with the names of Mandela or Sobukwe.<sup>599</sup> Until the late 1960s, when black people came to realise and organise the revolutionary potential which grew with the widening gap between Black and White, it where predominantly whites who represented blacks, almost unaccompanied by the latter's opinion.<sup>600</sup> The NP's policy of separate development called blacks to pursue their political and cultural course independently from white power structures. Liberal politicians, on the other hand, expected blacks to organise under the patronising guidance of their reformist courses. The ideological and organisational intransigence of this twofold policy of white supremacy forced black intellectuals to materialise innovative means of black resistance. Black people's politicisation had to be organised in a way, which proved radical, self-sufficient and independent from white

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<sup>598</sup> S. Moodley: 'Back Consciousness, the black artist and the emerging black culture' (SASO Newsletter, vol. 2, no.3, May/June 1972, p. 18).

<sup>599</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): From Protest to Challenge. A documentary history of African politics in South Africa, 1982-1990, vol. 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979, p. 107.

<sup>600</sup> S. Buthelezi: 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 112.

representation. At the height of its most oppressive and confident years, apartheid produced a black counterpart, whose apparent correspondence with separate development in fact initiated a unique psychological liberation movement among the black population: the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). Initiated in 1967 and officially brought to a close in 1977, the BCM evolved as a short-lived counter-ethnicity movement, as a defiant ‘stepchild’ of apartheid. As Steve Biko, the embodiment of the ‘Black Consciousness generation’ stated:

*My friendships, my love, my education, my thinking, and every other facet of my life have been carved and shaped within the context of separate development. In stages during my life I have managed to outgrow some of the things the system has taught me.*<sup>601</sup>

BCM was founded by students who descended from the first generation of blacks growing up under apartheid. In order to analyse the approach of the movement it is necessary to consider the repressive system that sought to divert blacks into ethnic-based developments and to ‘tribalise’ the nascent black intelligentsia by linking education to the homeland policy.

The implementation of the 1959 ‘Extension of University Act’ had made it illegal for the country’s white universities to enrol any black students without government approval. The only exceptions were the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the University of Natal, which ran a ‘non-European’ medical school on a separate campus. Fort Hare, a traditionally private institution for black academic education, was taken over by the government. Previously affiliated to the Rhodes University, the latter became a tribal college restricted to Xhosa speaking students. The Act of 1959 also mandated the creation of four new universities: the ‘Coloured’ University of the Western Cape (UWC), the ‘Indian’ University of Durban, the University of Zululand at Ngoye, and the University of the North at Turfloop for African students from the Sotho, Tswana, Venda, Pedi and Shangaan-speaking groups. The tribally-based universities were supposed to provide psychological underpinnings for the future ‘independent’ African homelands. The intention was to raise ‘ethnic elites’ as a compliant future leadership class, determined to play cooperative roles in maintaining the social order.<sup>602</sup>

With reference to their location in rural districts and isolation from external events, black academic institutions were soon labelled ‘bush colleges.’ The interaction among universities was problematic. Telephone service was limited, travel expensive and political news were

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<sup>601</sup> S. Biko: *We Blacks*, in A. Stubbs (ed.): *Steve Biko: I write what I like*, p. 27.

<sup>602</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): *From Protest to Challenge*, vol. 5, pp. 90- 103.

usually filtered through the South African media. Black professors had to expect sanctions if they gave talks on unauthorised subjects. Most of the research was carried out by white universities. Hardly any funds were provided to give staff members the possibility of attending conferences and workshops held at other universities. Black faculty members were excluded from university policy-making councils. They were paid on a lower salary scale and were promoted at a slower rate. Afrikaner administrators made sure that curricula, library holdings and campus cultural life were cleansed of 'corrupting' intellectual material.<sup>603</sup> The tightest control was exerted on syllabi, examinations and external examiners, generally appointed from Afrikaner universities. Science and research was ranked low among institutional priorities, whereas a high value was set on the formal discipline of the students. Nonconformity such as infractions of campus dress codes, engagement in unapproved campus activities and behaving in an audacious manner could easily result in reprimands or even suspension. Although elected by the students, Student Representative Councils (SRC) were forced by university principals to co-operate within the disciplinary academic system. The undemocratic nature of black universities mirrored the repressive, undemocratic structure of the wider society. The top positions in the fields of lecturing, research and administration were occupied by graduates from Afrikaner universities, who exercised an ideological indoctrination that provided a seedbed for rising nationalism and politicisation.<sup>604</sup>

Liberal organisations as the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) opposed governmental interventions in the academic sphere of research and education. In the 1960s, NUSAS was the major student organisation at historically English-medium universities in South Africa. As NUSAS incorporated black students in its membership and pursued a reformist policy that aspired equal participation of blacks in social, political and academic systems, it not only attracted many black students, but also enjoyed a progressive reputation at the international stage. Biko himself stated that it took years until his admiration for NUSAS' ideals and leaders turned into frustration and, eventually, accusations. Initially, he was convinced that the common final objective, the non-racial society, would prove sufficient to create the basis for a multiracial struggle. Only when he started to systematically analyse the deeply entrenched ideological attitudes within society, did he realise, that it was actually the daily subordination of each individual that kept the momentum of oppression going.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>603</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>604</sup> SASO Newsletter, vol.2, no. 2, March/April 1972, p. 13.

<sup>605</sup> D. Woods: *Biko*, pp. 153-4.

Biko's remark that 'So many things are said so often to us, about us and for us, but very seldom by us' emphasised that it was the fact of representation, that caused subordination.<sup>606</sup>

In 1967, the meetings of the liberal student organisation NUSAS had eventually proved, that blacks were merely regarded as symbols of a multiracial policy. NUSAS' multiracial policy was manifested through the presence of blacks at meetings; not through their active involvement.<sup>607</sup> They were neither allowed to obtain influential positions in the organisational structure, nor were they treated as equals on the social level. Black students also had disadvantages in debate participation, due to their different educational background, language barriers and their lack of experience with political forums.<sup>608</sup> Since the majority of white students proved reluctant to trust the rhetoric, intellectual and organisational talents of their black colleagues, NUSAS took hardly any efforts to introduce black students to political terminology and techniques of liberal discussions. They assumed to understand how apartheid impacted a black person's life and what perspective the latter would have. Hence, they did not realise that their privileged position, given by their skin colour, would always prevent them from making common, identifiable experiences with the oppressed.<sup>609</sup> In their view, their educational, economic and cultural background privileged them to act as spokesmen of their black associates. Hence, blacks were represented by white students who thought to help blacks by silencing them. As apartheid derived its power from constantly reinforcing negative self-images in personalities it sought to subjugate, these liberal students did not propagate a policy which opposed the apartheid ideology. They worked within and perpetuated the very structure of apartheid as they controlled black responses provoked by the policy of the white supremacy.<sup>610</sup> White liberals were generally not interested in a sudden, radical social transformation. They aspired social reforms, not a revolution.<sup>611</sup> Bearing in mind their class background, most of the students did not even jeopardise their social standing by solidifying with blacks. Beyond this rather subtle discrimination on the political level, there was an official racial segregation on the social level, for instance, in

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<sup>606</sup> S. Biko: 'Introduction', in S. Biko (ed.): Black Viewpoint, p. 5.

<sup>607</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): From Protest to Challenge, vol. 5, p. 94; T. Sono: Reflections on the Origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 24.

<sup>608</sup> L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 23.

<sup>609</sup> S. Biko: Black Souls in White Skins, in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, pp. 22-23. See also J. Kozonguizi: 'The South African 'Left' and the struggle for liberation' (Race Today, vol. 1, no.5, September 1969, p. 142).

<sup>610</sup> Steve, Biko: The Definition of Black Consciousness, in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, pp. 50-51.

<sup>611</sup> M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 23.



terms of accommodation.<sup>612</sup> Africans were thus separated into what was supposed to be their respective 'ethnic' or 'tribal' groupings.<sup>613</sup> Although NUSAS had been principally open to students of all colours, it was certainly not truly non-racial in its character. Disillusionment began to grow as NUSAS seemed to confine itself to symbolic multiracial activities and protests against government infringement on academic freedom.<sup>614</sup> Racist attitudes were hardly openly admitted and hence not overtly visible. Yet, they existed, rather subtly, but permanently present. Blacks felt alienated and dominated by liberal representatives. Eventually, they were represented by those, who were for the most part benefiting from the apartheid system. An exclusively black movement, initiated, directed, implemented and evaluated by blacks themselves, was supposed to be the only valuable response to the intransigence of white supremacy.

The annual Conference of NUSAS in Grahamstown in 1967 exemplified NUSAS' twofold policy of proclaimed multiracialism on the one hand, and racially segregated meetings and accommodation on the other. As a result of this, black students, among them Steve Biko, who attended the conference as the delegate of the Wentworth medical school, started working towards a separate, exclusively black student organisation. In 1968, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) was formed. The formal inaugural conference took place at Turfloop in July 1969, where Biko was elected first President of SASO.<sup>615</sup>

Initially developed in the sphere of black academic institutions, BC expressed the criticism of the nascent black intelligentsia against the liberal concept of 'multiracial, gradualist integration' and its 'white-defined' value system which had never been examined by blacks. According to Biko, it was a concept 'based on the assumption that all is well with the system apart from some degree of mismanagement by irrational conservatives on the top.'<sup>616</sup> Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu argued that liberals killed the revolutionary zeal of the black masses by promising them a 'controlled' change which will result in some mythical, 'mosaic' multi-racialism.'<sup>617</sup> A 'true integration' could only take place, when every group had found an

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<sup>612</sup> L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, pp. 22, 24.

<sup>613</sup> P. Gqola: Black Woman, You are on Your Own: The gender Politics of Black Consciousness literature published in *Staffrider*, unpublished MA Thesis, p. 28.

<sup>614</sup> M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, pp. XVI-XVII.

<sup>615</sup> J. Grobler: A Decisive Clash, pp. 162-164.

<sup>616</sup> S. Biko: The Quest for a True Humanity, in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, p. 91.

<sup>617</sup> Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu as quoted in R. Fatton: Black Consciousness in South Africa: The Dialectics of Ideological Resistance to White Supremacy, p. 84.

equal status within the system. Both, whites and blacks had to define their identity autonomously.<sup>618</sup> As Noel Manganyi wrote:

*The racist creates his own destiny and that of his victim primarily because of his ontological insecurity and alienation from the racist possibilities of his being. The black man should not experience himself as having a present or future investment in getting lost in whiteness as he searches for ontological security. The two can only meet in future if each reserves his freedom to search in whatever direction he chooses.*<sup>619</sup>

BC's call for authentic self-representation was not a unique phenomenon at that time. It was preceded by the Black Power Movement in the USA, whose exponents opposed the multiracial approach of the Civil Rights Movement. Black radicals as Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton propagated a policy according to which black people could only free themselves from racial oppression, if they established their organisations on the principle of 'Black Unity.'<sup>620</sup> Since Black Consciousness exclusively called for the liberation of blacks, it was widely criticised by liberals who regarded the movement as 'reverse racism.' According to Biko, however, it represented the only relevant answer to apartheid society and ideology.

*The overall analysis, therefore based on Hegelian theory of dialectic materialism, is as follows. That since the thesis is a white racism there can only be a valid anti-thesis, i.e. a solid black unity to counterbalance the scale ... it is only when these to opposites have interplayed and produced a viable synthesis of ideas and a modus vivendi.*<sup>621</sup>

The uniqueness of BC derived from the way in which its exponents responded to the terminology of apartheid and defied it at the same time. They were the spokesmen and representatives of a young audience that was increasingly receptive to fairly complex political ideas. Most importantly, they defied the political apathy of their parental generations, who used to aspire the gradual reduction of racial discrimination through collaboration with whites.

*In a true bid for change we have to take off our coats, be prepared to loose our comfort and security, our jobs, and our positions of prestige, our families, for just as it is true that 'leadership and security are basically incompatible', a struggle*

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<sup>618</sup> A. Césaire: Discourse on Colonialism, p. 9; C. Ndamse: 'The New Day', in S. Biko (ed.): Black Viewpoint, p. 43.

<sup>619</sup> N. Manganyi: Being-Black-In-The-World, p. 15.

<sup>620</sup> T. Sono: Reflections on the Origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 41. According to Sono, the principle of 'Black Unity', meaning unity of blacks only, served as the prime example for BC's call for 'Black Solidarity.'

<sup>621</sup> S. Biko: 'The Definition of Black Consciousness', in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, p. 51.

*without casualties is not worth its salt. We must make real that prophetic cry to black students: 'Black man, you are on your own!'*<sup>622</sup>

## 5.2. An interpretation and evaluation of the BCM

It would be misleading to measure Black Consciousness (BC) in traditional political, social or organisational terms. Referring to its actual achievements, the BCM seemed to constitute the most successful failure in the history of anti-apartheid movements. In October 1977, just one month after Steve Biko had died in prison, all Black Consciousness organisations, including SASO and the BPC, were banned under the Internal Security Act. With Biko's death, the Black Consciousness Movement lost its initial founder and leading charismatic personality. Biko was the 21<sup>st</sup> black person who died in a South African prison within a period of twelve months.<sup>623</sup> The loss of his leadership as well as the very circumstances of Biko's death proved to be both the initial motivation and final failure of the Black Consciousness Movement: the ideological and organisational intransigence of the white power structure. Yet, it was this very intransigence that eventually provided black people with the most determined will to defy oppression from their standing at the very bottom of society.

*Being an historically, politically, socially and economically disinherited and dispossessed group, they have the strongest foundation from which to operate. The philosophy of Black Consciousness, therefore, expresses group pride and the determination by the blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self. At the heart of this kind of thinking is the realisation by the blacks that the most potent weapon in the hand of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.*<sup>624</sup>

BC emphasised that the power structure of apartheid was mainly based on the inferiority complex of blacks towards white colonialist supremacy. In order to free colonised people from their differential attitude, one had to dismiss the structural power and ideological legitimisation of white hegemony. The BCM's ultimate objective was therefore the 'psychological liberation' of all people who were discriminated against in terms of the colour of their skin. According to Manganyi:

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<sup>622</sup> S. Biko: 'The Quest for a True Humanity', in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like p. 97.

<sup>623</sup> L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p.15.

<sup>624</sup> S. Biko: 'White Racism and Black Consciousness', in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, p. 68.

*Black Consciousness should be understood to mean that there is mutuality of knowledge with respect to the 'totality' of impressions, thoughts and feelings of all black people [S]kin colour ... is insignificant. What is important is what the skin actually signifies in sociological and psychological terms.*<sup>625</sup>

For the first time, blacks assumed the power for definition and self-definition on their part.<sup>626</sup> 'Being black' became a point of reference from which all Indians, Coloureds and Africans had to find their own identity, apart from the white value system former ethnic elites had sought to affiliate with. The BCM uphold the principle of non-collaboration and conformed to Africanist views in terms of land redistribution, generally associated with the PAC.<sup>627</sup> But a comparison between the Black Consciousness Movement and its ideological precursors would be misleading. Black Consciousness transformed African nationalism from an elitist ideology into a nation wide mass movement. The Africanists intended to influence the popular behaviour through political organisations with definite programmes. Due to their exclusive ideology, they initially pursued their policy on a small popular basis, before they enhanced approaches to gain the basis of a mass movement. The success of their rather exclusive groupings can therefore be measured in conventional organisational terms. In contrast to that, the Black Consciousness Movement was deliberately missing formal organisational features. Since it was still defining itself in the 1970s, it deliberately lacked a distinct political orientation.<sup>628</sup>

According to Noel Manganyi, Black Consciousness was time-bound and therefore characterised by its temporality.<sup>629</sup> The BCM neither gave a clear definition of the envisaged transcended society nor did it enhance an official strategy towards 'physical liberation.' The essentially 'non-static orientation' of the BCM was probably its most revolutionary aspect. It opposed the apartheid state without viewing itself as a state coming into being.<sup>630</sup> Biko himself rejected the exclusive concept and the militancy of Africanists and sought to establish

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<sup>625</sup> N. Manganyi: Being-Black-In-The-World, p. 18.

<sup>626</sup> See L. Kuper: Race, Class and Power, p. 84.

<sup>627</sup> J. Grobler: A Decisive Clash, pp. 117-121. According to the Africanists, Africans were the only true and rightful owners of Africa, as all non-Africans had immigrated from across the seas. With regard to the issue of land-redistribution, Africanists of the PAC rejected any forms of minority rights. The Thirty Point Plan of the BPC stressed the theme of land allocation in detail. It also centres on the idea, that Africa originally belonged to Africans only. Yet, it featured less rigid claims in terms of land-redistribution. A. Buthelezi (ed.): The Black People's Convention (BPC) – South Africa: Historical background and basic documents, pp. 24-27.

<sup>628</sup> See M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 242.

<sup>629</sup> M. N. Manganyi: Being-Black-In-The-World, p. 19.

<sup>630</sup> See M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 42.

a resistance movement that united all oppressed groups.<sup>631</sup> Africanism was hence an important part of the BCM, but, as Biko emphasised, devoid of nationalism:

*National Consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension.*<sup>632</sup>

The rapid growth of grassroots politics and the radicalisation of socialist organisations emerging from the BCM were phenomena of the 1980s. The basis was however elaborated in the pre-Soweto era. The rapid growth of literacy and higher education among Africans enabled an increasing number to participate in political discussions. BC was able to use the system's exclusion of Coloureds and Indians to form a totally new composite of a social identity. The emphasis of Black Consciousness on the principle of Black Solidarity as means to fight colonialist elitism would prove to be instrumental over the long term in fostering a democratic political culture among blacks. Because it maintained a philosophical rather than political outlook, the BCM could work through more informal channels of influence. Furthermore, it could not easily be parried by the state, since the apartheid ideology actually encouraged Africans to embrace ethnic identities. SASO envisaged the establishment of a 'Free University', which would give every black student some leeway for expression and the opportunity to examine without any prejudice the subjects of his choice. This 'truly BLACK University' opposed the system of Bantu Education as much as it seemed to suit the system of separate development.<sup>633</sup> From its start, BC had a constituency that proved to be much larger, more self-reliant and better prepared with organisational and leadership skills than any of the previous movements. According to Ramphela, young activists recognised that their status accorded them privileges not available to the majority of blacks. Students were thus urged to plough back their acquired skills into the community for the development of the poor.<sup>634</sup> In 1972, the Black People's Convention (BPC) was formally launched at Edendale with Reverend Mashwabada Mayatula as interim head. It was supposed to become the BCM's overt political organisation.<sup>635</sup> During its first two years, the BPC took political stances on a range of international issues: against foreign investment and for international

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<sup>631</sup> C.R.D. Halisi: 'Biko and Black Consciousness Philosophy', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 105.

<sup>632</sup> S. Biko: 'White Racism and Black Consciousness', in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, p. 72. See also R. Fatton: Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 4.

<sup>633</sup> SASO Newsletter, vol. 2. no.4., September/October 1972, p.3.

<sup>634</sup> M. Ramphela: 'Empowerment and Symbols of Hope', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 156.

<sup>635</sup> A. Buthelezi (ed.): The Black People's Convention (BPC) – South Africa: Historical background and basic documents, pp. 2-8.

economic sanctions, against Pretoria's campaign to engage in dialogue with other African governments, and for the international boycott of white South African sports teams.<sup>636</sup> The apartheid regime seemed to have waited impatiently to see BC graduate towards a non-student organisation. At the end of 1973, all persons of the BPC's initial executive committee, besides Winifred Kgware were banned.<sup>637</sup>

BC activists refused to accept dominant paradigms portraying blacks as victims of racism and exploitation. Instead, they paid attention to the creativity and resilience which underpinned the strategies of survival blacks had elaborated over the years.<sup>638</sup> This was especially evident in the projects of the Black Community Programmes (BCP), which were directed at the development of self-reliance in black communities.<sup>639</sup> Nengwekhulu, full time organiser of SASO and leading in the organisation of BCP projects, stressed the danger inherent in all community development programmes to potentially become welfare projects:

*The main purpose of welfare projects is to alleviate the suffering rather than to eradicate the source of the evils. Welfare projects have never brought a revolution and they are not likely to ignite one; in fact they destroy and annihilate all elements necessary for a revolution.*<sup>640</sup>

This implied that projects had to be initiated, directed, implemented and evaluated by blacks themselves. The projects covered a wide range of fields: literary campaigns, health, education, leadership training, publications, home industry and child care.<sup>641</sup> They were not only supposed to meet the needs of the poor but to establish models of development for the country as a whole. The projects were also seen as an important strategy to bridge the gap between educated and uneducated blacks. The fact that black people were discriminated against as a group was regarded as sufficient condition for their capacity and desire to identify with one another for the common good.<sup>642</sup> The actual realisation of the projects, however, confronted the students with a degree of poverty and demoralisation, that did not fit

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<sup>636</sup> A. Buthelezi (ed.): The Black People's Convention (BPC) – South Africa: Historical background and basic documents, pp. 7-8; SASO publications focused on four aspects: education, foreign investment, urban planning (either conducted by white nationalists or white capitalist institutions as the Urban Foundation) as well as the organisation of sport. See SASO Bulletin, vol.1, no.1, June 1977, pp. 2-5.

<sup>637</sup> T. Sono: Reflections on the Origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 83.

<sup>638</sup> M. Ramphela: 'Empowerment and Symbols of Hope', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p.161.

<sup>639</sup> See M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, pp. 93-94.

<sup>640</sup> (Harry) Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu as quoted in: R. Faton: Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 99.

<sup>641</sup> T. Sono: Reflections on the Origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa, pp. 70-73.

<sup>642</sup> M. Ramphela: 'Empowerment and Symbols of Hope', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 171.

in with their ideals and romantic notions of the capacity of poor people to be active agents of history.<sup>643</sup> Self-help at community level presupposes a degree of social coherence that enables individuals to identify the self with the community. Scant regard was however given to *'the bitter fruits of powerlessness'*, as Ramphele illustrates the air of apathy and despair that infuses poor environments through crime, alcohol abuse, the destruction of family relations and moral degeneration.<sup>644</sup>

*It became difficult to see how the same people were ever going to rise up against their oppressors and liberate themselves. Not only were they exploited by their white employers, but they also seemed to offer little resistance to black money-makers who preyed on them, posing as healers, money-lenders and landowners. They seemed so resigned to their fate.*<sup>645</sup>

The students' resources in terms of finances, material and time available, were limited. And so was the motivation, when the degree of poverty did not prove stimulating but preventative for any kind of political organisation. Yet, although the results might not have met the ambitious aspirations of the students, the projects were definitely not entirely ineffective. Most importantly, the projects corresponded with the existentialist view that individuals and communities *chose* freedom or enslavement. In order to overcome fear, it was essential for the oppressed to confront their oppressors.<sup>646</sup> A rather successful approach in which the BCM created means of self-affirmation and self-representation was made in the cultural sphere. Black Consciousness emphasised the inspiration of black people through literature and performing art. Leading BCM members such as Sam and Strini Moodly, Asha Rambally and Saths Cooper were founding members of the Theatre Council of Natal (TECON), a group concerned with creating 'relevant' theatre.<sup>647</sup>

BC adherents regarded Western education as a process of socialisation tending to undermine black intellectuals' commitment to their people and their respective cultural values. Teaching was regarded as a political act and gave high preference to the educational methodology of Paul Freire and his book *'Pedagogy of the Oppressed.'*<sup>648</sup> Together with Anne Hope, Biko

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<sup>643</sup> M. Ramphele: 'Empowerment and Symbols of Hope', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 171.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>645</sup> M. Ramphele: A Life, p. 64.

<sup>646</sup> C.R.D. Halisi: 'Biko and Black Consciousness Philosophy', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 101.

<sup>647</sup> L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 28; Black Review, 1973, pp.106-108.

<sup>648</sup> M. Mangena: On your own, p. 24.

established training programmes, the emphasis of which was on production, health and social conditions.<sup>649</sup> This special style of teaching was directed at the creation of further curricula and training programmes.<sup>650</sup> The initial group of SASO leaders trained by Anne Hope, established extensive training programmes for university and high school students. BC's emphasis on the verification of its ideology through social work on grassroots level was significant. It demonstrated the importance of the individual being and equated the political with the social sphere. The aim of the training programmes was to undo the process of Western socialisation blacks were subjected to. Kuper asserts BC's re-definition as follows:

*The characterisation of the dominant group permeate all the institutions. They are embedded in education, history, anthropology, political theory, theology, grammar, and these have to be purged ... and redefined....The justifications of colonial rule, as a civilizing mission, are seen in the context of ruthless exploitation and violence. Violence is redefined so that indoctrination or high rates of infant mortality become acts of violence. Through the prism of redefinition, the benevolent aid which former colonial powers feel they are giving to the underdeveloped countries of the world is refracted into neo-colonialism ... The wealth of industrialised nations is viewed as dialectically to the impoverishment of the underdeveloped countries.*<sup>651</sup>

As an ideology, Black Consciousness resonated in the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) which remained the main organisation for the formulation and perpetuation of BC until 1976. It also chronicled the BCM in both the *SASO Newsletter* and *SASO Bulletin* whilst simultaneously generating solidarity between the various black campuses.<sup>652</sup> The message of the BCM was disseminated at conferences such as the SASO conference on Creativity and Black Development and the Black People's Convention in 1972 as well as the Edendale Black Theology Conference in 1973. As forecasted in the introduction to the SASO publication *Black Review* 1972, two major trends dominated the 1970s: firstly, the self-definition in the present through and within the black community and, secondly, the re-writing of black history.<sup>653</sup> Notwithstanding the many references to demolish the canons of

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<sup>649</sup> Anne Hope was one of the few whites directly involved in BC programmes. She was a member of the Grail, a lay Catholic sisterhood, coordinator of group programmes at the Christian Institute and served on one of the SPROCAS commissions. Furthermore, she was running training courses on Freire's educational method in Johannesburg and Swaziland. L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 35. M. Ramphela: 'Empowerment and Symbols of Hope', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 155.

<sup>650</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): *From Protest to Challenge*, vol. 5, pp. 111-114.

<sup>651</sup> L. Kuper: *Race, Class and Power*, p. 94. See also B. Khoapa: 'The New Black', in: S. Biko (ed.): *Black Viewpoint*, p. 65.

<sup>652</sup> S. Buthelezi: 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 112.

<sup>653</sup> B.A. Khopa (ed.): *Black Review*, 1972, p. 1.



colonial history, BC intellectuals made no systematic effort to rewrite Black history.<sup>654</sup> With regard to the strict censorship, the banning of black political literature from previous decades and the lack of black writing in general, BC activists were determined to transform research and publication by and about black South Africans. Until the 1970s, the South African Institute for Race Relations (SAIRR) was the chief institution conducting annual surveys of events in the country. The BCM criticised the SAIRR for its portrayal of blacks as entirely passive, helpless victims of apartheid, people ‘without achievements, a community of failures who were noted for murder, rape, theft and family disorganisation.’<sup>655</sup> Another criticism of the SAIRR’s surveys focused on its portrayals of blacks as sufferers, aided and abetted by negative and sensationalist newspaper reportage in black dailies, which contributed to the poor self-image of blacks.<sup>656</sup> BC sought to elaborate surveys that showed blacks in a positive, active picture - illustrating their survival strategies, showing their efforts to transform their conditions and exhibiting the actual causes of their poverty. One result of these considerations was the *Black Review*, initiated in 1972 and published for the first time in 1973. Its research was based on newspaper reports, annual reports from black organisations, the *Government Gazette* as well as nation wide interviews with social workers and BC activists. It provided information about BCM projects and activists throughout the country and facilitated the network between community workers. Although its period of publication was limited, the *Black Review* exerted a great and lasting impact.<sup>657</sup> It challenged the SAIRR to change its annual survey in format and content. Today, it provides a highly informative source for historical studies. Another BC publication was the *Black Viewpoint*, launched in 1972. It was supposed to serve as a forum for black people to express themselves on current political and social issues.<sup>658</sup> *Black Viewpoint* eventually failed because of the very reason it was initiated. As a result of the culture of survival, black people placed great value on social interaction and servicing of social networks rather than on reflective activity. In part the Bantu Education system also contributed to a lack of creative writing skills among the black population.<sup>659</sup> The third BC journal, the *Black Perspective*, was supposed to cater for black

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<sup>654</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): *From Protest to Challenge*, vol. 5, p. 108.

<sup>655</sup> M. Ramphela: ‘Empowerment and Symbols of Hope’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 162.

<sup>656</sup> M. Ramphela: *A Life*, p. 67.

<sup>657</sup> Since its actual initiator and editor, Biko, had been banned, the *Black Review* was officially said to be edited by Bennie Khopa.

<sup>658</sup> A. Rambally (ed.): *Black Review*, 1975-6, p. 108.

<sup>659</sup> M. Ramphela: ‘Empowerment and Symbols of Hope’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 163 .

academics and professionals. It was thought to encourage empirical research and publication on issues affecting the black community. Only one issue was published in 1973.

Black Consciousness sought to initiate the politicisation of the masses and their involvement in grassroots activities. Attempts to evaluate the democratic character of the BCM reveal the ambivalence between philosophy and analytical theory, ideology and practical organisation. A crucial point was BC's exclusion of whites in order to elaborate a national movement based on Black Solidarity. Biko's argument in this regard was that 'We are oppressed not as individuals, not as Zulus, Xhosas, Vendas or Indians. We are oppressed because we are black. We must use that very concept to unite ourselves and to respond as a cohesive group.'<sup>660</sup> On the one hand, BC was respectively related to those who were oppressed under apartheid. It was a movement constituted by the oppressed to liberate the oppressed. While Black Consciousness did not admit any white anti-apartheid activists in its liberation process, it did not proclaim 'Black racism' or 'anti-Whitism.' Biko declared:

*One cannot be a racist unless he has the power to subjugate. What blacks are doing is merely to respond to a situation in which they find themselves the objects of white racism.*<sup>661</sup>

Since whites could never truly identify with the oppressed population, their participation was supposed to dilute the revolutionary will of the black masses. The strong adherence of BC activists to the principle of non-collaboration revealed itself at the third General Students' Council in 1972, when then SASO president Themba Sono articulated intentions to 'move away from the aloof attitude of regarding Bantustans and other separate development bodies in negative light ... to coagulate our plans even with our detractors ... Black and white, whether they are security police, liberals, non-whites, etc.'<sup>662</sup> The executive committee, whom Sono had failed to inform, reacted immediately after his speech, compelling him to depart from his presidential position. BC publications reported comprehensively on this event, confirming SASO's non-collaborationist stand and dismissing liberals' assumptions about a multiracial, ideological realignment, potentially raised by Sono's speech.<sup>663</sup>

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<sup>660</sup> S. Biko: The Quest for a True Humanity, in A. Stubbs (ed.): *Steve Biko: I write what I like*, p. 97.

<sup>661</sup> S. Biko: Black Souls in White Skins, in A. Stubbs (ed.): *Steve Biko: I write what I like*, p. 25.

<sup>662</sup> Themba Sono as quoted in 'The 3<sup>rd</sup> General Students' Council – An Assessment, in SASO Newsletter, vol. 2, no. 4, September/October 1972, pp. 13-14.

<sup>663</sup> SASO Newsletter, vol. 2, no. 4, September/October 1972. Sono's dismissal is a repeatedly emphasised theme in this SASO Newsletter. BC's non-collaborationist stand is emphasised through Biko's article on the government's Bantustan policy as well as several letters describing Mangasotho Buthelezi as a Chief of a 'Black Labour Reservoir', a collaborator with white power and capitalism.

The BC philosophy opposed white liberalism and rejected close alliances with white anti-apartheid activists. In praxis, the BCM rather followed the pragmatic approach ‘use whites without being used by them.’ Although whites were excluded from BC organisations, it was actually them who provided the main financial contributions and international connections for the BCM. Furthermore, white liberal organisations had served as major examples for the establishment of the BCM’s organisational structure.<sup>664</sup> Later, when BC developed a more socialist course, political cooperation with white liberals was not only rejected because of their privileged position in apartheid’s racial hierarchy, but because they were seen as representing a bourgeois class enemy.<sup>665</sup> Yet, their support in the form of money, logistical resources and advice was still welcomed as long as it did not influence the matters of struggle. Thus, the BCM enhanced the possibility to appropriate white sources without being forced to modify black agendas. For many BC activists, this procedure eased the transition to ‘non-racial’ policies, when they joined exiled or underground organisations of the ANC in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising.<sup>666</sup>

Another issue impeding the concept of Black Solidarity was the ‘intra-black hierarchy’ apartheid had reinforced among Indians, Coloureds and Africans. African students, who were committed to the Africanist course of the PAC, argued against the inclusion of Indians and Coloureds. Considering their rather privileged position among the oppressed, the latter were supposed to adhere to certain structures they benefited from. Indians, on the other hand, while prominent in the early membership of SASO, experienced a certain denial of self at the BCM grassroots level. Constituting a minority group in the movement, they felt pressured to replace their cultural heritage with African symbols and were never accepted as authentically ‘black’ enough.<sup>667</sup> Another inconsistency of BC appeared to be the very definition of ‘blackness’ as a political term. Initially, it was supposed that any person who was discriminated against in terms of the colour of his/her skin was an ally. Apparently, the exclusiveness of BC only concerned the participation of whites. Throughout the 1970s, however, BC increasingly rejected alliances with blacks who served the political system. In his classification of blackness, Biko distinguished between ‘relevant’ blacks (those who realised their oppression and rejected the value system of white supremacy) and ‘irrelevant’

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<sup>664</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): *From Protest to Challenge*, vol. 5, pp. 122, 339.

<sup>665</sup> N. Ndebele: ‘Black Development, in S. Biko (ed.): *Black Viewpoint*, p. 21.

<sup>666</sup> S. Buthelezi: ‘The Emergence of Black Consciousness’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 124

<sup>667</sup> K. Moodley: ‘The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 146.

blacks ( those who were obedient towards the system). Since it opposed the government's policy of re-tribalisation, BC did not measure people along ethnic lines. It was the political consciousness of a person that determined him as 'black' or 'non-white', as a participant or enemy of the BCM:

*If one's aspiration is whiteness but his pigmentation makes attainment of this impossible, then that person is a non-white. Any man who calls a white man 'Baas', any man who serves in the police force or Security Branch is ipso facto a non-white.*<sup>668</sup>

Since the term 'non-white' reflected apartheid's view of blacks as 'non-people', BC utilised the term in order to emphasise the way in which the socio-political 'blackness' of a person's consciousness determined his/her humanity.<sup>669</sup> This was notwithstanding the fact, that socio-political self-affirmation largely depended on the educational and material background of a person. Ramphele regards the notion of 'non-whites' as a simplistic excommunication of blacks who failed to act within the concept of Black solidarity. This assertion is part of Ramphele's general critique of BC's ignorance towards the way in which physical conditions limit the development of a critical political consciousness.<sup>670</sup>

Apart from an entrenched male dominance, which will be discussed in the following chapter, the organisation of the BCM appeared to be non-hierarchical. With regard to their opposition against any form of elitism, SASO students saw themselves as equals and peers unconstrained by any political orthodoxies or traditions. The rapid changes within the studentship required great efforts for the recruitment of new leaders. Workshops and discussion circles were established to improve the political knowledge and organisational skills of the students. SASO sought to enhance a pluralistic social and cultural campus life to

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<sup>668</sup> S. Biko: The Definitions of Black Consciousness, in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, p. 48.

<sup>669</sup> L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 26; T. Sono: Reflections on the Origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 85.

<sup>670</sup> M. Ramphele: 'Empowerment and Symbols of Hope', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, pp.172-3; C.D.T. Sibisi: 'The Psychology of Liberation', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 133. According to Sibisi, defence mechanisms of denial are usually regarded as inefficient and 'neurotic' because constant effort is required to protect the ego against anxiety, which is liable to break through. As further strategies employed to protect the threatened ego, Sibisi names: projection (ascribing one's pain and predicament to persons and influences foreign to oneself), reaction formation (the blacks who are whiter than white) and identification with the aggressor. The last mechanism might be seen in the black official (the homeland leader or black policeman) who diligently and with genuine conviction, enforces apartheid laws; not all black officials in the service are reluctant participants forced by necessity to play by the rules.

which everyone should have been able to contribute to.<sup>671</sup> According to Biko, the movement sought to centralise people's attention onto the ideas of BC and to prevent the creation of a leadership cult.<sup>672</sup> It nevertheless proves problematic to evaluate the democratic character of BC. Apparently, there was no explicit attention paid to democratic procedures. In fact, Black Consciousness called less for democracy than for freedom.<sup>673</sup> The latter was merely defined in terms of the end of discrimination and exploitation. How these values and objectives ought to be translated into specific innovative institutions or administrative systems, however, was a matter entirely left to the future. There appeared to be an anti-authoritarian style inherent in student politics that subsequently carried over into the high school as well as youth and trade union movements. Looking at the composition of its membership, the BCM hardly gave the impression of a grassroots movement. Many of the BCM exponents and identifiable associates graduated from backgrounds that were relatively socially privileged and thus unrepresentative of the black community as a whole. According to Koglia Moodley, however, university students were not as isolated from the harsh conditions of apartheid society as one might suppose, since far more black students descended from working-class backgrounds than usual profiles of medical students would suggest.<sup>674</sup> Due to their dependence on student loans, however, this 'academic working class' was less likely to jeopardise the unique chance to escape from the poverty of black communities. As a result, BC's organisational work depended on a few representatives in different parts of the country. This situation was aggravated by the fact that BC initially emerged as an opponent to white liberalism and was only later related to the daily life experience of the black majority. The philosophical course of Black Consciousness was strongly determined by the leadership of Biko, who primarily focused on the psychological, cultural and socio-political impact of apartheid and neglected economic analysis. Biko also proved to be restrained concerning violence and revolutionary proclamations. According to his view, the 'psychological liberation' had to be pursued on a legal basis before any attempts of 'physical liberation' could be implemented.

*The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself, to pump back life in his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting*

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<sup>671</sup> S. Buthelezi: 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, pp. 114-5.

<sup>672</sup> Biko as quoted in M. Arnold (ed.): *Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>673</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): *From Protest to Challenge*, vol. 5, p. 339.

<sup>674</sup> K. Moodley: 'The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 144.

*the evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is what we mean by an inward-looking process. This is the definition of "Black Consciousness."*<sup>675</sup>

The 'second step', however, remained largely unanswered. It was often stated that 'the people will decide' once the time would come.<sup>676</sup> Indeed, BC organisations like SASO proved to be rather cautious in implementing revolutionary theories that directly combated the structural forces of the racist regime. SASO itself could not afford to initiate revolts, since it had to pursue its political course on a legal basis. It was hence continually walking the tightrope in seeking to stay within the limits of the law without showing respect for it.<sup>677</sup> It was decided at a very late stage that the Black People's Convention (BPC) should concentrate on mass action. The idea of BC was to give the black man the self-affirmation as well as the socio-political knowledge allowing him to enhance critical analysis and initiate resistance *on his own*. Actually, BC never eschewed pacifism as a strategy, it simply avoided to raise the question.<sup>678</sup> The academic choice between violent or non-violent forms of resistance was a matter of tactical, not moral considerations.<sup>679</sup> There was however a definite understanding among BC exponents that pure self-defence against apartheid forces legitimated violent actions.<sup>680</sup>

BC leaders pursued their policy in relative isolation from popular manifestations of public revolts. As a result, there emerged merely little organic linkages between the leaders and the masses. That in turn, lessened the urgency for radical and comprehensive theorisations on social and economic policies. Since the policy of BC organisations was rather cautious and lacked a political programme, the organisational relations between the BCM and the working class remained rather vague.<sup>681</sup> So were its linkages with the actual leading forces of the Soweto revolt, the South African Students Movement (SASM) and the Soweto Students' Council (SSRC).<sup>682</sup> Significantly, its working class organisation, the Black Workers' Union

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<sup>675</sup> S. Biko: 'We Blacks', in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, p. 29.

<sup>676</sup> K. Mokoape, T. Mtintso and W. Nhlapo: 'Towards the Armed Struggle', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 136.

<sup>677</sup> M. Ramphela: 'Empowerment and Symbols of Hope', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 163.

<sup>678</sup> See M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 150.

<sup>679</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): From Protest to Challenge, vol. 5, p. 318.

<sup>680</sup> T. Sono: Reflections on the Origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 84.

<sup>681</sup> C.D.T. Sibisi: 'The Psychology of Liberation', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 134.

<sup>682</sup> T. Lodge: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, pp. 328, 331. The SASM developed from an organisational subculture of township teenager associations. The SSRC was formed in June 1976 and composed of SASM delegates, two from each Soweto secondary school.

(BAWU), formed in August 1972, neither drew a lot of African members nor exerted a notable impact on the black working class when the latter launched a wave of industrial strikes in 1973 and 1974.<sup>683</sup> The paradigm concerning the psychological impact of Black Consciousness and its actual organisational weakness caused a disjunction between the young fellowship of the BCM and the proletarian masses. Although BC sought to provide a liberation philosophy each black person could identify with, black people, and workers in particular, tended to view its approach as too sophisticated and ideological. BC's focus on education and development hardly provided ground for them to develop actions which called for the immediate betterment they aspired.<sup>684</sup> As a result, the workers formed their resistance movement rather autonomously and stayed independent from the BCM when they continued their defiance in 1976.<sup>685</sup> White democrats tended to reorientate themselves towards the labour movement. Since white liberals and their multiracial approach were excluded from the BC anti-apartheid struggle, they tended to downgrade the significance of racial discrimination and the national oppression of blacks and placed a greater emphasis on the class struggle.

BC neither enhanced a clear definition of the future democratic society nor prescribed a way towards it. The same can be said about the socialist approaches within the BC Movement. The initial BC thought offered a critique of capitalism that was radical without being explicitly Marxist, and democratic while offering a critique of the limits of South African liberalism.<sup>686</sup> In fact, the BC's socialist commitment was hardly grounded in a coherent and detailed analysis of South African capitalism.<sup>687</sup> Biko was often criticised for rejecting Marx's relevance. The *African Communist* accused Biko of 'being a 'liberal', an idealist, insufficiently anti-capitalist, a pacifist, lacking understanding of the mass struggle.'<sup>688</sup> Biko's reluctance to identify with concrete socio-economic analysis also derived from his aim to create close relations with both the PAC and ANC. The 'Mafeking Manifesto', a statement on economic policy debated at a symposium of the Black People's Convention in 1976, presented an attempt to unify both Marxist and non-Marxist adherents with BC, ANC and

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<sup>683</sup> A. Marx: Lessons of Struggle, pp. 57-58.

<sup>684</sup> The SASO Bulletin from 1977 provides a perfect example of BC's focus on education as means of liberating all blacks. It concludes with the call: 'You shall be keeping pace with your historical task in your role as students.' SASO Bulletin, vol.1, no.1, June 1977, p. 9.

<sup>685</sup> B. Hirson: Year of Fire, Year of Ash, p. 149

<sup>686</sup> L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p.17.

<sup>687</sup> R. Fatton: Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 143.

<sup>688</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

PAC backgrounds. The document proposed features for a mixed economy with a high degree of state ownership or control. Although the document called for more radical and specific changes than any economic blueprint proposed by a black political organisation until then, it failed to produce a basis for identification among the national movements.<sup>689</sup>

As BC exponents of the early 1970s tended to circumvent Marxist terminology, they spoke less about socialism than about Black Communalism, calling the latter a

*'modified version of the traditional African economic lifestyle which is geared to meet the demands of a highly industrialised and modern economy'*<sup>690</sup>

In his cross-examination during the SASO-BPC trial that resulted from the FRELIMO support rally<sup>691</sup>, Biko explained that

*we are advocating black communalism which is, in many ways, similar to African socialism. We are expropriating an essentially tribal background to accommodate what is an expounded economic concept now...We have got to accommodate the whole relationship between industry and politics. But there is a certain plasticity in this interpretation precisely because no one has yet made an ultimate definition of it.*<sup>692</sup>

BC denounced the individualistic tendencies of the black petty bourgeois and condemned the process of class formation taking place within the African elite. Since BC regarded economic exploitation as one of the main causes for colonial conquest and racism, it was considered that a social transition had to be implemented along socialist lines. Yet, the BCM never seriously considered the problems of the promised transition to African communalism. The concept called for far-reaching reforms such as the nationalisation of banks and mining conglomerates as well as the establishment of communal agriculture co-operatives.<sup>693</sup> In contrast to the Freedom Charter, however, it lacked a defined philosophy for social

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<sup>689</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): From Protest to Challenge, vol. 5, pp. 149-151.

<sup>690</sup> A. Rambally: Black Review, 1975-76; pp. 123-125.

<sup>691</sup> B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies (eds.): South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, pp. 460-461; L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, pp. 52-53. In September 1974, SASO and the BPC called upon blacks to hold *Viva Frelimo* meetings in order to celebrate the victory of the Front for the Liberation on Mozambique (FRELIMO). Although the government prohibited these meetings, 500 students at Turfloop and a number of blacks in Durban gathered for celebrations. The police intervened and arrested several protestors. Seven months after the rally, thirteen people were charged under the Terrorism Act in April 1975. By the time Biko gave evidence in May 1976, four people had been released and there were nine accused. Although the accused were found guilty and sent to Robben Island for terms of between five and six years, the high-profile nature of this court case in fact promoted the cause of the BCM.

<sup>692</sup> M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 51.

<sup>693</sup> See 'The Mafeking Manifesto': Statement on economic policy debated at a symposium of the Black People's Convention, May 31, 1976, in T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): From Protest to Challenge, vol. 5, pp. 548-550.



modification. Apparently, it did not envisage the *complete* transformation of the society and its political and economic institutions.

Due to its profound desire for change, the BCM showed extreme confidence in the final triumph of its cause. During the 1970s, it increasingly adopted Marxist phraseology and displayed an overt commitment to revolutionary violence. Many of the students who participated in the Soweto uprising were officially committed to socialism and Marxism. The BC's commitment to communalism, equality and fraternity - in itself revolutionary- might have become an integral part within a socialist transformation of society. Eventually, however, BC failed to present a firm and comprehensive socialist program, since its socialist approaches appeared to be based on moral outrage at capitalist exploitation rather than on scientific research. The lack of a systematic economic theory considering the actual transition from South African capitalism to African socialism, reflected the external conditions within which BC was formed, namely its repression during its formative and short lived legal existence. After 1975, the appeal of Marxism became more powerful to BC adherents as the frontiers of the socialist world were expanding. Mozambique and Angola fought under the banner of socialism and received assistance from the Eastern Bloc countries. Western powers were tacitly allied with Pretoria because of their common interest in opposing communist expansion. On the international political stage, Marxist theories gained more recognition by Western left-wing intellectuals, who regarded 'race' as an unscientific category. According to them, Marxism provided a basis for sophisticated analyses and explanation for most political problems.<sup>694</sup>

BC was broadened in scope and influence and was to have its most visible effect in the Soweto uprisings of 1976, when black school children protested against the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools. The demonstrations spread from the youth to almost all sectors of the community. Critics, however, often claim that the organisational weakness of the BCM caused the eventual failure of the Soweto uprising. In May 1976, Biko himself had previously stated that he did not consider Blacks to be in the position to overthrow the state.<sup>695</sup> Yet, it had been the BCM that spurred the revolutionary consciousness of the youth that finally led to the Soweto revolt. The BCM eventually failed to enhance a comprehensive strategy of political emancipation. Due to the absence of a proletarian party, it proved difficult to unite workers and students on the national level. When the young rebels of

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<sup>694</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): From Protest to Challenge, vol. 5, p. 319.

<sup>695</sup> M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, pp. 115, 148.

Soweto tried to encourage the working class, they expressed the need for solidarity among all oppressed groups in order to join into an all-encompassing socialist revolution. The workers, however, did not see any obligation to sacrifice their wages and job security for a political struggle that lacked any well-planned program. When BC claimed to be based on the daily life experience of the black man, it overtly associated itself with the black working class. Yet, it was the workers, who finally proved to be 'irrelevant' blacks, since many of them could simply not afford to pursue the resistance philosophy of BC.

Those critics, who suppose that the BCM fulfilled its historical task through the Soweto uprising, do not regard BC as a movement of 'physical' but 'psychological liberation.' BC's negation of the dominant system of 'white-defined' beliefs generated a revolutionary situation and a new historical horizon. Yet, the road to liberation remained blocked by the repressiveness of the white state. Black Consciousness enhanced an ideology of emancipation that provided the potential basis for the emergence of political organisations and grassroots protests. It thereby exposed a power potential, which revealed the vulnerability and exhaustion of the apartheid system. The militancy required by the state to suppress the protests gave rise to the idea, that it was just a matter of time until the increasing social confrontation would finally lead to a violent transition of the society.<sup>696</sup> In retrospect, the objective of the Soweto uprisings was not to dismiss the state power itself but to negate the ideological hegemony of the ruling class. But the events in Soweto also demonstrated the limitations facing protesting groups in the intention of realising their aspirations. The 'psychologically liberated' youth of Soweto launched a kind of protest movement that apartheid society had never before witnessed. Due however, to the absence of professional revolutionary leaders, military equipment and training, there was never a realistic chance in which to prepare for and implement the 'physical liberation.' As a result of this, more and more activists considered militancy as the only valid means to respond to the intransigence of white power. In the aftermath of the Soweto uprising more than 4000 former BC activists went into exile to receive guerrilla training in military camps, mainly in those of the ANC.<sup>697</sup>

By the time the Black Consciousness Movement had formally reached the end of its legal existence in 1977, it had obviously changed the attitude of the oppressed population. Urban Africans were shaken out of their paralysis of fear. Attitudes of dependence and defeatism

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<sup>696</sup> R. Fatton: Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 145.

<sup>697</sup> K. Mokoape, T. Mtintso and W. Nhlapo: 'Towards the Armed Struggle', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, pp. 137-142.

gave way to aggressive new assertiveness. Former BC activists had learned from the failures of previous protest actions and used their knowledge to establish alternative resistance movements or joined the various trade unions. In the aftermath of the Soweto uprising, many students continued their struggle in political organisations. The late 1970s and 1980s witnessed the radicalisation of a political awareness once incited by the philosophy of Black Consciousness.

### 5.3. The post-Soweto era: resisting the revolution from above

The 'Total Strategy', initiated by the government to suppress African resistance in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising, indicated that apartheid was increasingly deprived of its validity and legitimisation. It was supposed to be a strategy embracing all levels of politics to 'defend' the white South Africa against the 'total onslaught' launched by blacks. Many of the BC leaders were arrested, harassed or banned. The wholesome bannings of 19 black organisations in October 1977 covered student and youth movements, welfare organisations, charitable and church groups, associations of writers, journalists, cultural organisations and black newspapers.<sup>698</sup>

The increasing militancy of the state power did not only evoke an increasing criticism on the international level. Within South Africa, many whites recognised the social conditions of blacks for the first time and realised that the 'grand design of apartheid' no longer provided a valuable basis that could prevent the complete transformation of the society. Security concerns intensified as Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, Angola and Rhodesia gained their independence and hence deprived South Africa of its buffer against guerrilla incursions. To prevent further uprisings, the South African society had to be adjusted to the new social environment. The government launched a process of reformation from above, based on the terms of white supremacy. It was considered to divide the black opposition through the implementation of a 'passive revolution.' In order to prevent blacks from forming a revolution on the basis of their common oppression, the government enhanced its policy of separate development *within* the black population.<sup>699</sup> The elaboration of elitist tendencies and reformist aspirations among the oppressed population, has always been an effective policy,

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<sup>698</sup> See N. Worden: The Making of Modern South Africa, pp. 121-125.

<sup>699</sup> R. Fattouh: Black Consciousness in South Africa, pp. 71-73, pp. 92-93.

by which colonialist governments managed to channel the desire for change within oppressed groups. As bell hooks remarked:

*Since most privileged-class blacks are not committed to radical and/or revolutionary politics they can effectively police the voices of those of us who speak from dissenting standpoints, making it difficult for us to gain a wider public audience.*<sup>700</sup>

Whereas Africans were to be divided along class and ethnic lines, Coloureds and Indians would be partially integrated. On the surface, the racial segregation was increasingly lessened by the end of the 1970s. The social standard of the black middle and upper class was enhanced, the boundaries of job reservation were reduced and blacks were allowed to organise within trade unions. This served tactical and economic needs since the demand for skilled workers had steadily stripped the supply thereof. In November 1983, the white electorate adopted new constitutional proposals for the hegemonic de-racialisation of the apartheid society. On the surface, this policy implied that apartheid could finally be abandoned through collaboration and gradual integration. Nevertheless, the strategy of ‘black embourgeoisement’ deliberately sought to prevent any rise of economic or political competition between the races which would finally lead to the empowerment of blacks.<sup>701</sup>

After the effective banning of the BCM in 1977, BC activists gravitated in many political directions. Some joined the ANC or PAC, others organised within trade unions and civic associations, many were imprisoned or exiled.<sup>702</sup> BC activists who were imprisoned on Robben Island established close contacts to prisoners with a PAC or ANC background, which often resulted in their ideological realignment.<sup>703</sup> In relation to the entire black population, it was a relatively small number of former BC activists who continued their struggle by forming radical organisations or alternative forms of popular struggle. The number of former BC activists who formed new BC-orientated organisations was considerably small. The most influential and radical organisations emerging from the BCM were the Azanian Peoples’ Organisation (AZAPO) and the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania (BCMA). Since both gravitated towards the view that ‘race meant class’, they sought to reconcile exclusivist black nationalism with Marxism.<sup>704</sup> Both organisations were committed to anti-imperialism

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<sup>700</sup> b. hooks: *Killing Rage*, p. 168.

<sup>701</sup> See N. Worden: *The Making of Modern South Africa*, pp. 124-129.

<sup>702</sup> C.R.D. Halisi: ‘Biko and Black Consciousness Philosophy’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 100.

<sup>703</sup> A. Marx: *Lessons of Struggle*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>704</sup> A. Marx: *Lessons of Struggle*, p. 324.

and anti-capitalism. Since they viewed the black working class as the most oppressed group in the South African society, they implied that it would be a struggle based on scientific socialism, black solidarity as well as the historical, political and organisational experience of black workers. In 1980, the Black Conscious Movement of Azania enunciated the most radical 'Declaration of Principles' in the history of the national liberation struggle. Their ultimate political objectives were the attainment of democratic rights as well as the redistribution of land among the black population.<sup>705</sup>

AZAPO's policy was based on the philosophy of a socialist class struggle, as well.<sup>706</sup> Yet, given the reality of apartheid, this class struggle was claimed to manifest itself in racial terms. In later years, BC's initial analytical focus on 'culture', 'identity' and 'value systems' gradually shifted to define the struggle in terms of racialism and capitalism.<sup>707</sup> At the 1983 AZAPO conference in Hammanskraal, the Azanian Manifesto was approved in which a more direct correlation between racial domination and capitalist exploitation was claimed. This was primarily due to the changing political context: In terms of the implementation of the homeland policy and its newly emerging 'elite', the logic of separate parliaments being planned for the Coloured and Indian Communities as well as the 1973 worker strikes and the subsequent strengthening of the working class through the emerging trade unions.<sup>708</sup>

Operating within the ideological framework of BC, AZAPO did not admit any white members and rejected a gradualist integration. Non-collaboration, as championed by the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM)<sup>709</sup>, remained the BCM's most consistent political stance.<sup>710</sup> In opposition to the Freedom Charter, BCM theorists advocated exclusively black coalitions as a means of assuring black leadership in the national liberation struggle. Many BCM adherents proved hostile towards the 1955 Freedom Charter, which they considered to

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<sup>705</sup> T. Sono: Reflections on the Origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa, pp. 114-115.

<sup>706</sup> Ibid., pp. 117-130.

<sup>707</sup> K. Moodley: 'The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 149. A. Marx: Lessons of Struggle, pp. 87-92.

<sup>708</sup> L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 75.

<sup>709</sup> B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies (eds.): South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, pp. 313-314. The NEUM was founded in 1943. Its policy was based on non-collaboration with governmental organisations. Another important feature of the NEUM's philosophy, different from BC, was that of non-racialism. Non-racialism was not only supposed to forge unity between Coloureds and Africans. The NEUM's conception of non-racialism implied regarding the race as irrelevant. Race was seen as a non-entity, a product of false consciousness.

<sup>710</sup> C.R.D. Halisi: 'Biko and Black Consciousness Philosophy', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 104.

be the outcome of the influence white socialists exerted on the ANC.<sup>711</sup> Many of the former BC activists moved to the ANC because of rational rather than ideological considerations. A large number felt drawn towards the ANC since the latter provided an organisational base, the material sources and the international connections necessary for the transition to armed violence. Exclusive black organisations emerging from the Black Consciousness Movement, such as AZAPO and the National Forum (NF)<sup>712</sup>, lacked the popular basis to enhance a broad African resistance movement. On the international level, the ANC acted with a paternal authority towards resistance organisations and thereby exerted a considerable influence within the country. Leading BC activists such as Biko and Barney Pityana, accepted the ANC as the leading party of the South African resistance, despite the ideological divergences between the ANC and BCM.<sup>713</sup> After Pityana, former SASO's Secretary-General, had left South Africa in 1978, he supported the BCMA in its effort to establish working relationships with the ANC and PAC, in order to unify the exiled national liberation movement.<sup>714</sup> Both, the ANC and the BCM dismissed the concept of separate development completely. Yet, the ANC was strongly committed to an 'ethos of equality' and intended alliances with whites, the democratic franchise and tribal elites. It expected an internal erosion of the racist political system by linking the ruling black classes to the resistance movement, by radicalising them and using their legal status.<sup>715</sup> The South African left-wing intelligentsia remained divided over the race-class question. Disputes about BC and neo-Marxism were expressions of power relations within a highly radicalised multiracial intelligentsia. Although neither of them had adopted Marxist ideology during their days of legal existence, the PAC and ANC took up the anti-imperialist rhetoric of their eastern bloc sponsors once in exile.<sup>716</sup> Most representatives of the black intelligentsia favoured a policy that sought to initiate as many popular alliances as possible.

Although the ANC was not directly linked to the Soweto uprisings, it had played a limited but effective role through ANC underground cells in which the students prepared the protest

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<sup>711</sup> S. Buthelezi: 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 119.

<sup>712</sup> B.J. Liebenberg and S.B. Spies (eds.): *South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, p. 479, 500. The NF was formed in June 1984 by Saths Cooper and Neville Alexander and claimed a membership of 200 organisations. Most of the organisations supported BC as embodied in the Azanian Manifesto, whereas the United Democratic Front (UDF), established in August 1984 under the leadership of Allan Boesak, strung together organisations supporting the ideas of the Freedom Charter. Both organisations rejected the 1983 constitution and urged coloureds and Indians to boycott the August 1984 election.

<sup>713</sup> A. Marx: *Lessons of Struggle*, p. 82.

<sup>714</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): *From Protest to Challenge*, vol. 5, p. 342.

<sup>715</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 140-141.

actions. The failure of Soweto had also been due to the ANC's incapability to guide and control the uprisings. The ANC's view of the Black Consciousness Movement proved ambivalent. On the one hand, ANC leaders referred to the fact, that many of the BC's thematic expressions showed a close resemblance to the early Africanist period of the ANC's history. They regarded the BCM as a transitional social phenomenon which served to unify the oppressed groups and which would inevitably integrate into the ideological and organisational fold of the ANC.<sup>717</sup> There also seemed to be a kind of mutual relationship between the ANC and BCM, since the latter proved to exert a certain impact on the ANC's ideology and language during the 1970s. The BCM even led to ideological divisions within the ANC. In general, the ANC was rather suspicious of the BC ideology, its emphasis on Africanism and its rejection of white liberalism. It was feared that BC would become a manifestation of reactionary, nationalistic or chauvinistic tendencies.

Considering the actual success of BC, there appeared to be a contradiction between its psychological and physical effectiveness. Indeed, BC laid the foundations for a cultural regeneration and intellectual reformation. It became a slogan and was thus converted into a kind of political programme which, in turn, could not measure up with the philosophical promises of the doctrine. If Black Consciousness identified a special way of life, then black solidarity was its political strategy to empower blacks for a struggle whose ultimate objective was the abolishment of the structures from which BC had derived. Fatton hence suggests to regard the BCM as an 'ethico-political philosophy of praxis whose ultimate end was its own annulment through the achievement of the task it had set out to accomplish.'<sup>718</sup> Black Solidarity became the doctrine through which BC defined its ideology of self-definition and affirmation. BC endorsed the return to the principles of African communalism, which respected the black world by means of the philosophy of *ubuntu*.<sup>719</sup> The latter played a major role in helping individuals, groups and communities to emerge with dignity, integrity, self-

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<sup>716</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>717</sup> R. Fatton: *Black Consciousness in South Africa*, p. 135.

<sup>718</sup> *Ibid.*, p.77.

<sup>719</sup> See Driver's reflection on this widely quoted African proverb, meaning '*a person is a person because of another person*' in D. Driver: 'M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng: The Child's Mother Grabs the Sharp End of the Knife' in M. Trump (ed.): *Rendering Things Visible: Essays on South African Literary Culture*, p. 234.

respect and determination in their relationship with others.<sup>720</sup> As Dilly Naidoo wrote in 1972, black people had to

*strive and reaffirm our belief in the worth and possibilities of the Black man; to strive for the black man to grow in self-knowledge and to make him fully realise his capabilities; awaken the Black man to discover his own identity – this identity which has been beaten out of shape by racism; make him conscious of his dignity and stature as a **man**.*<sup>721</sup>

The positive impact of BC on the black population is widely acknowledged among academics. Criticism focuses generally on the contradictions between ideological proclamations and political activity, the BCM's organisational weakness in the struggle for physical liberation, its lack of comprehensive economic analyses, its dependence on but exclusion of whites as well as its limitations in transforming an academic ideology into a broad mass movement that could have effectively mobilised black labourers and rural communities. These considerations have already been made by contemporary observers. Retrospectively looking, however, there appears another crucial point which questions BC's ultimate proclamation of 'true liberation' through the concept of black solidarity, based on the idea of 'the black community.' It is a critical approach of social analyses, which emerged in the 1980s and was entirely ignored – if not unheard of – in the 1960s and 1970s: the emancipation of black women and their specific role in a movement that claimed itself to respond to the actual conditions of black people's lives and the complexity of oppressive forces that apartheid had generated. The following chapter hence analyses how BC viewed women and what kind of roles it provided for women to participate in the organisational structure of the movement as well as on the community level. Another question is whether women could identify with the proclaimed philosophy of the 'black man's liberation.' What was their perspective of women's roles in both the national movement and the wider society? Do women's retrospective considerations of the BCM's treatment of them reveal significant changes in this perspective? Did the egalitarian impulse of Black Consciousness neglect changing gender relations? What caused the silence on women in BC writings? A lack of political commitment on the part of the women? Or an ignorance toward women's political participation on the part of contemporary observers? The chapter on womanism already

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<sup>720</sup> M. Ramphela: 'Empowerment and Symbols of Hope', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 155.

<sup>721</sup> D. Naidoo: 'The Role of Black Organisations in the Life of the Community' (SASO Newsletter, vol.2, no.1, January/February 1972, p. 18.).



showed how contemporary female academics transmit the former non-theme of gender dynamics in the national liberation struggle onto present political agendas. Until now, little research has been conducted on the role of women within the BCM. Yet, the eloquent way in which former BC female activists retrospectively name the matter of women's silence, foreshadows the amount of research still to come on this former 'non-theme.' AZAPO member Asha Moodley, presently calling for a redefinition of BC in terms of gender considerations, states in retrospect:

*Mention was made of the writings on the history of the Black Consciousness Movement which will always of course, tell you about Steve Biko, Harry Nengwekhulu, Barney Pityana etc - in short the founding 'fathers' of the Movement. There is barely any mention of the very dynamic women who played a prominent role in building up this movement in its early days – women like Debs Matshoba, Nomsis Kraai, Mamphela Ramphele, Bridgette Mabandla, Vuyi Mashalaba etc. How many people know and remember that the first president of the Black People's Convention was a woman – and a very able one at that – Winnie Kgwane?*<sup>722</sup>

At the time of her active participation in the BCM, however, Asha Moodley seemed having been unaware of the fact that BC might have proved patriarchal to gender dynamics taking place in the BCM.<sup>723</sup> Did she and her female comrades view gender issues as less important or unimportant? Did the revolutionary approach of Black Consciousness not contradict traditional, patriarchal gender relations in the black community? Did the different cultural and economic positions of Coloured, Indian and African women not question BC's ideal of 'the black community'? The following chapter not only seeks to find answers to these questions, but also considers whether, why and how these questions should be raised at all.

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<sup>722</sup> A. Moodley: 'Black Women you are On Your Own' (*Agenda*, no. 18, 1993, p. 46).

<sup>723</sup> See A. Basu (ed.): *The challenge of local Feminisms*, p. 138.

## Chapter 6

### The role of women within the BCM

Who would deny that the silent agreement “political forums are ‘naturally’ male dominated” still exists? It does today as much as it did in the nationalist movements of the past – with one difference: the agreement did not need to be silent, as it was unequivocal.

As transgressive as national movements are, they bear many contradictions. They need to have an innovative, progressive outward appearance, although their intention might be rather conservative considering the aspired re-establishment of traditional social structures. More so, if the movement takes place in a time when the international stage bears a social atmosphere of transgression: when, for example, movements around the world seek to approach social transformation through the application of psychological rather than physical analyses. When political progressiveness is intended to combat the political apathy of the parental generation and transgression implies the abolishment of obsolete conventions and customs. Or, as Mafika Pascal Gwala wrote with regard to the anti-apartheid movement:

*[W]hen a man begins to negate he is refusing to see himself as a commodity. This is when the consciousness of contestation emerges. The contestation will bear an essentially black character. Black in its doubts about white superiority, its criticism of white values and its challenge of White right. This is when Black Consciousness takes form. Black Consciousness calls for a redefinition of concepts. Cultural, economic, social and theological concepts as seen by the Black and seeing them through his own Black self.<sup>724</sup>*

The male-dominated outlook of the philosophy of Black Consciousness as demonstrated by Dimza Pityana’s view that ‘Women were involved in Back Consciousness as blacks but not

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<sup>724</sup> M.P. Gwala: ‘the black thing...is honest...is human’ (*SASO Newsletter*, vol. 2, no.1, Jan/Feb. 1972, p. 13).

as black women'<sup>725</sup> led to the critique of the movement for seeking the destruction of one system of domination while simultaneously reinforcing another. Indeed, Black Consciousness proved very insensitive, if not entirely ignorant, about women's issues. Looking from a feminist perspective, the BC language and philosophy appears as a mirror of patriarchal attitudes, employed to objectify women and to deny their individual agency within the struggle. Yates refers to patriarchy as a system of power established by men in their own interests, sustained by women the upholding of its standards and ideals. 'If women were not complicit, patriarchy could not exist.'<sup>726</sup> But one can hardly evaluate theories in terms of their ideological outlook without analysing the social structures from which they derived their legitimisation and authority.

Any analysis considering 'The role of women within the BCM' has to reflect on the social and political motivations of female activists in the first place. It has to be considered, in what way the masculinist discourse impacted on women, how they viewed themselves in relation to the psychological liberation of *the black man* and how they defined the nature of their own political activity. Any attempt to answer these questions from the women's perspective is impeded by the awesome silence in both contemporary and past literature. Interpretations have to be drawn in part from the historical silence on women. Until now, Mamphela Ramphele is the only woman who has written an autobiographical work about her active involvement in the BCM. Considering the question of historical silence on women, Ramphele writes:

*I think it's a reflection of several things. First, Black people just don't write – period!...And it's partly because there wasn't a culture of writing ... So it's a kind of a general lack of focus on the written word, which I think is fair to say Black South Africans are only now waking up to that...The second thing is that obviously there were few women who had the public platform to speak, let alone write. But also, women don't create space for themselves to write because they don't have wives ... And thirdly, there are a lot of women who even today disagree with the fact that I have written my autobiography, because they think that there are certain things that shouldn't be said publicly.'*<sup>727</sup>

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<sup>725</sup> Dimza Pityana, as quoted in L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 36.

<sup>726</sup> K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own*, p. 78.

<sup>727</sup> Interview by K. Yates and P. Gqola with M. Ramphele, in K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own*, p. 137.

### 6.1. The nexus of gender and race in BC

Apartheid sought to convince Blacks of their natural inferiority in the same way as patriarchy works to convince women of their role as social minors. Both sexism and racism are justificatory ideologies, serving to legitimise a system of historical objectification. The incapacities and inequalities attributed to innate genetic difference include qualities such as a deficient ability for abstract thought and logical argument. According to Brittan and Maynard, Western definitions of masculinity appear to celebrate male ‘civility’ while simultaneously denigrating the natural as the province of women and people of colour.<sup>728</sup> Historically, the white man has always been the measure for human civilisation.

*The male epistemological stance becomes everybody’s stance. Women and other objectified groups define their realities through the perspective of their oppressors.*<sup>729</sup>

Both gender and race oppression are based on superior notions of those in power who establish a systematic suppression of people regarded as decidedly less than fully human. Afrikaner nationalism and its mystification of the Afrikaner manhood based on purity and piety exhibits a history of self-defence through self-definition. Symbols of success such as material comforts, scientific and literary achievements are principally presented from a Eurocentric perspective and associated with whiteness.<sup>730</sup> Until the era of Black Consciousness, being black simply meant being ‘non-white’ or ‘non-European.’ It implied a life far below the standards set by the white man and denied the own subjectivity to evaluate the world in ‘black’ terms.

*For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white<sup>731</sup> ...Ego-withdrawal as a successful defence mechanism is impossible for the Negro. He requires a white approval.*<sup>732</sup>

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<sup>728</sup> A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): Sexism, Racism and Oppression, p. 197.

<sup>729</sup> Ibid, p. 204.

<sup>730</sup> C.D.T. Sibisi: ‘The Psychology of Liberation’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 133.

<sup>731</sup> F. Fanon: Black Skin, White Masks, p. 12.

<sup>732</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

Femininity, in addition, is historically associated with everything masculinity is not.<sup>733</sup> The English language, for instance, misses expressions indicating a woman's deprivation of her femininity, which would be synonymous to men's physical or psychological 'emasculatation.' Supposedly, the English language reflects a historically masculine conception of the world according to which women have been denied the status of self-responsible, accountable citizens.<sup>734</sup> Blackness is only understood in relation to whiteness, femininity only in relation to masculinity. In these bipolar systems, femininity and blackness are both meant to be subordinate terms.

Invisibility became a survival tactic for blacks, for speaking freely asserts a level of subjectivity and equality blacks were not supposed to obtain. In this regard Biko stated:

*Black people under the Smuts government were oppressed but they were still men ... but the type of black man we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the 'inevitable position'. Deep inside his anger mounts at the accumulating insult, but he vents in the wrong direction – on his fellow man in the township, on the property of black people ... In the privacy of his toilet his face twists in silent condemnation of white society but brightens up in sheepish obedience as he comes out hurrying in response to his master's impatient call ... his heart yearns for the comfort of white society and makes him blame himself for not having been 'educated' enough to warrant such luxury...All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity.*<sup>735</sup>

The loss of the black man's manhood, his mental 'emasculatation', manifested apartheid's notion that blacks would be incapable to take care of themselves, to make decisions, to analyse their social conditions, to write their own history themselves. The ideology of apartheid did not only illustrate these prejudices as cultural traits, but as natural, almost genetic predisposition.<sup>736</sup> Apartheid created a culture of alienation that undermined views of what formerly constituted black masculinity. Biko's words seemed to suggest a clear image of the black man with which all men could identify.<sup>737</sup> According to apartheid, black people were imprisoned in a perpetual childlike state. Black women, legally conceived as perpetual minors, were not supposed to act as agents in their own right at all. This was notwithstanding

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<sup>733</sup> S. Felman: 'Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy', in C. Belsey and J Moore (eds.): The Feminist Reader, pp. 119.

<sup>734</sup> J. Penelope: Speaking Freely, p. 102.

<sup>735</sup> S. Biko: We Blacks, in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, p. 28.

<sup>736</sup> N. Manganyi: Being-Black-In-The-World, p. 11

the fact, that an increasing number of households were either female headed or the woman was the only breadwinner. An African woman was subjected to her nearest male family member, her guardian, who himself was 'emasculated.'

Physically, the conditions under apartheid generated defeatism and poverty. The psychological results were moral degradation and self-hatred. The black colour became a symbol of sin, the black history was said to be a story of barbarism, the black culture a badge of backwardness. On the very bottom of this 'emasculated' society lived its reproductive force, namely the black woman.

*In the life experience of the African, there is hardly any situation in his life in which his sense of self-esteem is nourished. His wife and children may have been forced by conditions beyond his control to lose the modicum of respect which they had for him as an effective, self-steering agent in his psychic status in a phenomenological way, we could say that his subjective experience is one of feeling emasculated.*<sup>738</sup>

Black men living under apartheid were denied access of the possession to any means of production. Forced to live a life as a single work unit of a huge cheap black labour force, denied any rights of citizenship and security in terms of accommodation and residential rights, black men could not define themselves and their masculinity in terms of what they could own or provide for their families.<sup>739</sup> According to African tradition, a man was not only supposed to be the guardian and protector of his family – he factually owned them. As Yates stresses, the claim to the ownership of his family was the only thing left to demarcate his masculinity.<sup>740</sup>

From the context of dehumanisation, discouragement and de-masculation, there came a plea to women on behalf of men.

*Outside the family one could be dehumanised and degraded even by the smallest white child. In this situation, the woman played an important part in re-encouraging the man*<sup>741</sup>

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<sup>737</sup> K. Ratele: 'The end of the black man' (*Agenda*, no. 37, 1997, p. 62); N. Manganyi: *Being-Black-In-The-World*, p. 15.

<sup>738</sup> N. Manganyi: *Being-Black-In-The-World*, p. 10.

<sup>739</sup> F. Wilson: *Migrant Labour in South Africa*, p. 184.

<sup>740</sup> K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own*, p. 72.

<sup>741</sup> A. Stubbs (ed.): *Steve Biko: I write what I like*, p. 79. See also D. Driver: 'M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng' in M. Trump (ed.): *Rendering Things Visible*, p. 236.

Black Consciousness meant the physical and psychological liberation from the constraints of oppression, a 'result of 300 years of deliberate oppression, denigration and derision.'<sup>742</sup> It implied the emancipation, the mental re-masculation, of the black man. But while Black Consciousness purposed the emancipation of *all* blacks, it ignored the interaction of class, race and gender oppression and failed to explore differences within the black community. Especially in its earlier years, it acknowledged race as the only oppressive force, as confirmed by Biko's statement that '*Black Consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression- the blackness of their skin.*'<sup>743</sup>

## 6.2. An interpretation of BC philosophy and terminology in terms of gender objectification

The absence of women in the discourse of the BCM is not trivial but pivotal in understanding how their social positions and political activism was viewed by the movement. The patriarchal outlook appeared to be a determined force in the process of the *black man's* definition of *his* social standing and power. A simple examination of the way women were objectified by the BC language, however, would prove too narrow and misleading. It would misinterpret the actual reasons and causes of contemporary attitudes both women and men had internalised. A terminological investigation of the BC philosophy is nevertheless of significant importance in order to look at the nature of black women's oppression. Yet, it must be considered in the context of the contemporary conditions in general and the history of the Black Consciousness Movement in particular.

Racial and sexual oppression does not only exist in the material, practical organisation of economic, social, medical and political structures, but also in the very foundations of logos, reasoning and articulation – in the subtle linguistic procedures and in the logical process through which meaning itself is produced.

Black Consciousness' emphasis on positive images of blackness was seen as a tool to prepare people for equal participation in the upcoming transformed society. Ironically, the medium of communication had to be the language of the initial counterpart of Black Consciousness,

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<sup>742</sup> S. Biko: 'Black Souls in White Skins', in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, p. 21.

namely the English liberal. All publications related to Black Consciousness were published in English: the SASO newsletter, Biko's column "*I write what I like*" and journals such as the *Black Review* produced by Black Community Programmes (BCP).<sup>744</sup> Black activists around the world chose English as the language to conduct the business of black nationalist movements. The writers on Négritude<sup>745</sup>, the Black Power Movement or the Black Consciousness Movement - all of them employed English, the language of a capitalist, male-dominated, white supremacist Western colonial power.<sup>746</sup> In a country with ten African languages, English was the only language commonly spoken "Not to any degree of sophistication, but to some degree."<sup>747</sup> Afrikaans was generally regarded as the language of the oppressor. It did not provide a basis for international communication, either. African languages, on the other hand, had served the government to legitimise the establishment of 'separate development', the Bantustans and the 'tribal colleges', which were supposed to divide blacks along ethnic lines. Despite its emphasis on African tradition, the BCM proved sceptical towards indigenous literature which had been utilised by the Bantu Education system to permanently reinforce the very pattern of apartheid.<sup>748</sup> As Gqola points out, the choice of English had its advantages in that it did not allow for the connotations regarding difference and division which apartheid legislation had made synonymous with African languages.<sup>749</sup> BC writings were supposed to reflect and reinforce an innovative ideology based on personal experiences. Yet, due to the inadequate way English was taught at high schools, very few Blacks possessed the required language skills. It proved difficult for both

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<sup>743</sup> S. Biko: *The Definition of Black Consciousness*, p. 49. See also: P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>744</sup> In 1970, after Pityana had taken over the presidency of SASO, Biko started editing the SASO Newsletter, including his column '*I write what I like*', signed with Biko's pen-name 'Frank Talk.'

<sup>745</sup> L. Kuper: *Race, Class and Power*, pp. 91-92. Initially, 'négritude' developed as a reaction to colonialism, as dialectical opposition to the cultural values imposed by whites. It attests to the quality of being black, having a black soul, and implies a complex of values. L.S. Senghor, whose conception of the négritude has been the most elaborated, did not only regard it as dialectical opposition to white civilisation, but as a special contribution to civilisation in general. Négritude developed in the context of de-colonisation in countries such as Ghana, Algeria, Nigeria and Rhodesia. The philosophy of Negritude impacted the BCM and the Black Power Movement, although it was later criticised for referring to social rather than political attitudes. Frantz Fanon, Julius Nyerere and L.S. Senghor were the most prominent writers associated with Négritude.

<sup>746</sup> K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own*, p. 9.

<sup>747</sup> S. Sepamla: 'The Black Writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas', in M. Chapman (ed.): *Soweto Poetry*, p. 117. See also M. Arnold (ed.): *Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa*, p. 24.

<sup>748</sup> D. Brown: 'Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity: Ingoapele Madingoane's 'black trial'' (*Current Writing*, vol.9, no.1, Durban 1997, pp. 18-21).

<sup>749</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, p. 42.



author and recipient to express and define the self through a foreign language.<sup>750</sup> The way English was applied in BC writings was rather different from the English black students were taught in school. BC writers did not aspire to communicate through a sophisticated, eloquent ‘Oxford terminology.’ Their aim was to elaborate a BC readership among township people, especially the youth. Literature had to be written by, for and about black people. The terminology mirrored the psychological and physical states of their lives and reflected the way in which township life existed at the crossroads of Africanism, colonialism and American neo-colonialism.

Every language is inescapably linked to a certain culture which is laden with specific systems of domination. By entering into a foreign language, one automatically enters into the culture the language presents.<sup>751</sup> The English language defines the world predominantly in male terms. Unless otherwise specified, all persons are assumed to be male.<sup>752</sup> Penelope refers to the fact that most women remain unconscious of how language forces them to repeat structures that deny them independent stature and agency in society.

*Thinking about how we think is hard...While language makes thoughts communicable, thought remains unrepresentable. Language as a mirror, picture, system of signs can only represent concepts and objects.*<sup>753</sup>

Analysing the English language from a womanist perspective, Yates identifies three systems of domination, namely patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism. She focuses in particular on the way English was used in maintaining and perpetuating patriarchal oppression. In addition, she compares English to the Nguni and Sotho languages which lack the gender differentiation system for the third person pronoun.<sup>754</sup> In an interview with Yates, Ramphele agrees with Yates’ premise that English differs from African languages in its socio-linguistic manifestation of patriarchal attitudes. As African languages lack grammatical gender bias and equivalent ‘generic’ nouns (such as ‘man’ or ‘mankind’), it proves impossible to say “he” because the equivalent means ‘he’ or ‘she.’ Hence, the rallying BCM cry ‘*Black man you are on your own*’ would have been less exclusive in an African language, meaning ‘*Black person,*

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<sup>750</sup> M. Mzamane: ‘The Impact of Black Consciousness on Culture’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 182.

<sup>751</sup> See also Biko’s reflections about semantic distinctions between European and African languages in: M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, pp. 103-104, 200-201.

<sup>752</sup> J. Penelope: Speaking Freely, p. 103.

<sup>753</sup> Ibid, p. XIV.

<sup>754</sup> K. Yates: The Madness of the Black Man On His Own, pp. 14, 42.

*you are on your own.*<sup>755</sup> Beyond this terminological reflection, however, Ramphele refers to the fact that African societies indeed exhibit very male dominated structures, even if the latter might not be mirrored in terms of language.<sup>756</sup>

Both Gqola and Yates seem to agree with Penelope's assessment that the masculinist discourse of the BCM reflects the sentiment that political activity is assumed to be within the male experimental domain.<sup>757</sup> While this may be true, the evaluation of a Western terminology does not prove sufficient if one seeks to evaluate the inter-action between nationalism, African culture, English liberal and American influences and the very nature of political arenas in general. As already mentioned, most of the founders of the BCM descended from liberal student organisations. Although they developed their separatist theories in opposition to the latter, their political education was significantly influenced by the English liberal environment. Liberal student organisations served as role models in the establishment of SASO. Although they could not directly influence the agenda of the BCM, liberals continued to be its main financial contributors. Assessing the historical position of women in liberal environments, Amanda Gouws writes:

*Liberal political theorists believed that men were associated with rationality and reason and women with passion and emotion. Sexual difference translated into political difference. Citizenship became constructed according to male norms which constructed women as inferior inhabitants of the private sphere, while men were associated with the rule and justice of the public sphere. Men were associated with freedom and women with subordination.*<sup>758</sup>

Almost all languages reflect and reinforce sexist attitudes in a process of 'constant re-enactment' which perpetuates social attitudes as invisible forces. Whereas 'man' and 'he' generally symbolises humanity and power as norm, 'woman' is perceived as an exception, as passive, silent, the 'Other.' The terminology of Black Consciousness was certainly male dominated insofar as it was constantly burdened with masculine pronouns and references. In BC writings 'black' as a noun is continuously represented by 'he' and eventually becomes synonymous with 'the black man.' Juxtaposed with 'white' or 'white man', writings would refer to 'Black' or 'the blackman.'<sup>759</sup> While Biko mentioned 'manhood' almost

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<sup>755</sup> Interview by K. Yates and P. Gqola with M. Ramphele, in K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own*, p. 133.

<sup>756</sup> Interview by C. Lockett with Bessie Head in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): *Between the Lines*, p. 15.

<sup>757</sup> J. Penelope: *Speaking Freely*, p. 109.

<sup>758</sup> A. Gouws: 'Beyond equality and difference: the politics of women's citizenship' (*Agenda*, no. 40, 1999, p.50).

<sup>759</sup> See *SASO Newsletter*, vol.2, no.2, March/April 1972, pp. 18-19.

interchangeably with ‘man’, he seldom combined it with neutral terms such as ‘person’ and ‘people.’ This indicates, that ‘man’ was never supposed to be regarded as synonymous with ‘people.’ It is neither the equivalent of ‘people’ in English, nor is it equivalent in the discourse of the BCM.

Notably, the Black People’s Convention states the opposite:

*unless inconsistent with the context, words importing masculine gender shall also denote feminine gender*<sup>760</sup>

The importance of this notion is stressed through its position in the arrangement of orders about the ‘interpretation of clauses’: it is the second point, following directly the first and basic BC notion that

*‘black’ shall be interpreted as those who are by law or tradition, politically, economically, and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society, and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations.*<sup>761</sup>

The existence of a statement about gender terminology shows, that BC leaders were aware of the discriminatory character the BC discourse contained in terms of women. Yet, claiming a male discourse to be inclusive and universalist does not at all reconcile assumptions about the patriarchal character of the BC philosophy, but, in fact, confirms them. There is an enduring permanence of cases where words importing masculine gender do not include but directly exclude women. Biko showed black people’s suffering in the context of a man’s world – like most of the prominent black nationalist of his time, as the following quotation by Frantz Fanon confirms:<sup>762</sup>

*Toward new humanism...  
Understanding among men...  
Our colored brothers  
Mankind, I believe in you...*<sup>763</sup>

The cases of ‘striking inconsistency with the context’ dominate the most essential parts of BC. In contrast to the cultural ideal of a non-sexist black communalism, the male is

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<sup>760</sup> A. Buthelezi (ed.): The Black People’s Convention (BPC) – South Africa: Historical background and basic documents, p. 22.

<sup>761</sup> Ibid.

<sup>762</sup> K. Ratele: ‘The end of the black man’ (Agenda, no. 37, 1997, p. 69).

<sup>763</sup> F. Fanon: Black Skin, White Masks, p. 9. Born in Martinique, Fanon had studied medicine in France and practised psychiatry in the Antilles, where he wrote Black Skin, White Masks, a psychological and philosophical analysis of the state of being black as well as the Wretched of the Earth, which includes a theory on the colonising of the mind, based on his experiences gained when working in Algeria during the French Algerian colonial war.

constructed as the only empowered speaker. Even when inclusively referred to as ‘sister’, women were continuously presented as ‘the Other’ – included but powerless and voiceless.<sup>764</sup> What actually exhibits the male domination of BC is not the terminology of its writings but the content. The Black People’s Convention does not mention the special oppression of women at all. Neither did the process of historical re-writing include narratives about women.<sup>765</sup> According to Ramphele, women were involved in the BCM because they were black. Gender as a political issue was not raised at all.<sup>766</sup>

BC did not consciously enhance the incorporation of black women’s issues on the political agenda. It thereby trivialised and impeded the examination of Black women’s special oppression and exploitation, which would have been the prerequisite for the politicisation of women’s experiences. Patriarchal tendencies were in no way critically analysed as obstructing the process of true liberation, by contrast, according to Desiree Lewis:

*The gendered language here is not simply incidentally sexist; at the centre of Black Consciousness thinking was an emphasis on the emasculation of black men and their need to recover a positive masculine identity. It is this that explains the marginalizing of women in its rhetoric, and the ways in which women were appealed to mainly as psychological and material supports in male oriented struggles.*<sup>767</sup>

Asha Moodly maintains assumptions that women unconsciously safeguarded the male dominated social hierarchy, reflected and reinforced through the ‘generic male’

*As women we identified with this – the national liberation struggle was our struggle. In this concept we accepted Black Consciousness – “Black man” we interpreted as inclusive of Black women, Black youth, everyone who comprised the Black Community.*<sup>768</sup>

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<sup>764</sup> See K. Moodley: ‘The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 148.

<sup>765</sup> M. Ramphele: A Life, p. 57.

<sup>766</sup> M. Ramphele: ‘The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 215.

<sup>767</sup> D. Lewis: ‘Women and Gender in South Africa’, in V. Maphai (ed.): South Africa. The Challenge of Change, pp. 168-169.

<sup>768</sup> A. Basu (ed.): The challenge of local Feminisms, p. 138.

### 6.3. The female membership constitution: status, application and experiences

In her essay on the dynamics of gender within the BCM, Mamphela Ramphele pays special attention to the socio-demography of women attracted to the BC in its initial stages, as it shaped in an important way the nature of their participation and the impact they had on gender dynamics within the movement.<sup>769</sup>

Until 1977, Black Consciousness was predominantly represented by university students who popularised its philosophy on political forums, held leadership training campaigns among school students and initiated development programmes in deprived urban and rural areas. Resulting from this, it was mainly university students, who dominated the BCM's female membership in both their numbers and their outspoken views. Due to the male predominance at black universities, women always constituted a small minority in the BCM. Speaking retrospectively about the BCM, most women confirmed that the female membership did not play a very prominent role. Yet, the few women in leading positions were recalled as being even more articulate and vociferous than the men. Many of the women who later became prominent in the BCM, had been students at Wentworth medical school and helped set up the movement in its initial stages.<sup>770</sup> The most prominent women of the BCM have probably been Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, Deborah Matshoba, Sibongile Mthembu, Brigitte Mabandla, Thenjiwe Mtintso and Winnie Kgware.

The ANCWL and FSAW were constituted mainly by trade unionists and township women in their forties, who were primarily addressed as mothers and wives. Their political activity focused on the security of their family and the education of their children. SASO's female membership, however, represented the minority of black women privileged to pursue an

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<sup>769</sup> M. Ramphele: 'The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 215.

<sup>770</sup> Interview by Ernest Messina with Fatima Meer, Durban, 9.7.1992.

academic career.<sup>771</sup> Their lifestyle was rather blasé due to the lack of domestic responsibilities and the altering picture of women's social attitudes.

As Ramphele recalls, it could be argued that their privileged position in society gave them the space to play this role.<sup>772</sup> Siphso Buthelezi refers to the fact that, university students were more likely to become alienated from their own people in the rural or urban communities.<sup>773</sup> This refers particularly to female academics, considering women's traditional role for and within the community. Yet, there are a number of features on the part of the female studentship, that might have proved preventative in the elaboration of a truly non-sexist movement: Firstly, they were few in number. Secondly, many of them came from conservative family backgrounds which prevented them from taking an equal social standing in the academic environment, where male-female relationships were rather tense; especially, if the woman was single and therefore regarded as available to men. According to Dimza and Barney Pityana, both men and women had difficulties in accepting authentic male/female relationships without the presence of sexual overtones. Biko himself had the reputation of a 'womaniser' and apparently had not yet come to judge for himself the value of truly platonic relationships.<sup>774</sup> Universities provided the best ground to find a partner for marriage. Female students seemed least likely to jeopardise an academic education which meant a unique privilege and provided chances to transcend boundaries of race, class and gender oppression. Families exerted considerable pressure on their daughters to succeed either in the academic sphere or in the sphere of marriage, if they were granted higher education. The number of Indian women, educated under strict conventional norms, was relatively high among medical students. Many of the African women grew up in the customary surroundings of rural areas where patriarchy has always been deeply entrenched.<sup>775</sup>

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<sup>771</sup> S. Buthelezi: 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 113.

<sup>772</sup> M. Ramphele: 'The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 215 .

<sup>773</sup> S. Buthelezi: 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 113.

<sup>774</sup> L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 37.

<sup>775</sup> See F. Meer (ed.): Black-Woman-Worker, pp. 236-237. According to Meer, 50% of the black men interviewed in 1985 stated that they saw 'outside' as dangerous for women, as exposing them to sexual humiliation and harassment. It was feared that the public sphere would distort women's personalities, making them less woman-like, less caring and less respectful toward their men.

Although initiated by a relatively privileged category of blacks, BC drew an increasing number of adherents among high-school students and township youth since 1971. The formation of the South African Students Movement (SASM) and the Natal Youth Organisation (NAYO) already indicated the growing political awareness and radicalisation among the youth.<sup>776</sup> For the first time in the liberation history, it was the adolescent generation whose politicisation challenged the passivity of its parent's generation. Although there are no statistics available considering the gendered socio-demography of the SASM membership, it can be assumed that the sex-ratio was much less male-dominated. The students' struggle exhibited rather militant attitudes on part of the female students as well. Many of the girls and women who became involved in the students movement, took part in the Soweto uprising and went into exile to participate in political underground organisations or obtain guerrilla military training. This definitely brought a new surge of optimism about women's special place in the liberation struggle. Women were far more likely to find an equal place in the post revolutionary settlement if they fought side-by-side with men as equals in the armed struggle.<sup>777</sup>

Beyond the groupings of university and high-school students there was the category of professional women participating in the BCM. The involvement of the latter was at its peak between 1973 and 1977, encompassing nurses, teachers, social workers, medical doctors and ministers' wives.<sup>778</sup> The initial causes of women's motivation for participation in BC were rather divergent. Many had participated in community projects initiated by the BCP, others were members of self-help groups that cooperated with BCP. There were also large numbers of wives and female relatives who became involved through association with their 'male significant others.'<sup>779</sup> It proves problematic to distinguish women's positions and prospects in the BCM. Most of the BC organisations showed no strict hierarchy since their authority structure was participatory. It was claimed that each individual had the potential to make a worth while contribution.<sup>780</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, the term 'democracy' did not really play a significant part in the BC language. Instead, there was a great emphasis on

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<sup>776</sup> T.G. Karis, G.M. Gerhart (eds.): From Protest to Challenge, vol. 5, p. 124.

<sup>777</sup> S. Anfred: 'Lessons from Mozambique' (Agenda, no. 10, 1991, pp. 45-47).

<sup>778</sup> M. Ramphela: 'The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 216.

<sup>779</sup> Ibid.

<sup>780</sup> L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 27

African communalism.<sup>781</sup> The blurred lines of authority required a real sharing of responsibility. Women participated alongside men in leadership training workshops, political forums, development projects and social gatherings. Officially there were no discriminating gendered distinctions in the organisational structure. The number of women occupying leading positions in development projects was significant. Innovative as these projects were, BC activists did not have examples they could model their activity on. The responsibility associated with the projects was high, as black communities were taught to initiate, control, evaluate and interpret development efforts relevant to their own needs.

In December of 1973, Winifred Motlalepula Kgware, a 54-year-old teacher who had helped sway the Orlando conference to support SASO's stand, was elected national president of the BPC.<sup>782</sup> She was the first black woman to head a national political organisation in South Africa. According to Buthelezi, her age and respectability gave the BPC a boost amongst adult blacks.<sup>783</sup> According to Mangena, she was generally referred to as 'Mama.'<sup>784</sup> Kgware was the only member of the BPC's national executive committee who was not banned by the end of 1973. Mamphela Ramphele was the medical officer in charge of the Zanempilo Community Health Centre.<sup>785</sup> Voyo Mpumlwana managed the Njwaxa Home Industry, a leather goods home industry established in 1974 in order to create income-generating opportunities for the unemployed poor in Njwaxa.<sup>786</sup> Thoko Mbanjwa and Asha Rambally were official editors of the *Black Review*.<sup>787</sup> The number of women heading literary and theatre projects is specifically significant since BC activists regarded teaching not only as a kind of cultural value transmission but as a political activity.

Yet, as in all national movements, the majority of women occupied assistance posts such as secretaries and typists in BC organisations.<sup>788</sup> The roles of female comrades proved to be contradictory – particularly within the upper ranks of SASO. At political conferences, they were expected to both 'stand their man' in political debates as well as to provide the

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<sup>781</sup> A. Rambally: *Black Review*, 1975-6, pp. 122-125.

<sup>782</sup> M. Arnold (ed.): *Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>783</sup> S. Buthelezi: 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 126.

<sup>784</sup> M. Mangena: *On your own*, p. 39.

<sup>785</sup> M. Ramphele: 'Empowerment and Symbols of Hope', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, pp. 164-166.

<sup>786</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 166-167.

<sup>787</sup> *Ibid*, p. 162.

<sup>788</sup> Numbulelo Mkefa in an interview with Ernest Messina, Cape Town, 29.11.1993.



catering.<sup>789</sup> In her autobiography, Ramphele recalls how a group of similarly inclined women, consisting of Vuyelwa Mashalaba, Nomsisi Kraai, Deborah Matshoba, Twenjiwe Mtintso and Ramphele herself, soon became a force to be reckoned with at annual SASO meetings. According to Ramphele, what determined the group ‘was not a feminist cause at that time – feminism was a later development in my political consciousness – but an insistence on being taken seriously as activists in our own right amongst our peers.’<sup>790</sup>

Ramphele recalls, that a major part of becoming socialised into activist ranks was to become ‘*one of the boys*’, meaning, to liberate oneself from the traditional framework of femininity by adopting patterns of behaviour, generally associated with men such as smoking in public, attending late night parties with alcohol consumption and having platonic relationships.<sup>791</sup> She states that ‘As a woman, an African woman at that, one had to be outrageous to be heard, let alone taken seriously.’<sup>792</sup>

Although this symbolic manifestation of anti-feminine attitudes rendered them ‘*better comrades*’, they were regarded as ‘*less woman*’ at the same time. Facing up to a female comrade, who overtly repudiated conventional features of femininity, could also prevent men from taking her seriously in political discussion, notwithstanding the actual value of her argumentation. This was specifically the case when female SASO delegates represented their organisation outside the BCM.<sup>793</sup> Ultimately accepted by male comrades as ‘*honorary men*’, transgressive women tended to disregard female colleagues performing conventional roles. Female BC activists seemed to occupy a dual position as women and as blacks, being torn between feelings of solidarity on the one hand and uniqueness on the other.

The process of self assertion was not restricted to women’s role within the black community but required a translation into inter-active systems within a multiracial environment, as well. In order to transgress the narrow framework of racially gendered disabilities, many female BC activists felt compelled to exhibit an unconquerable self-confidence - especially towards white men. This was a novelty in the South African context, as Donald Woods recalls:

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<sup>789</sup> Interview by K. Yates and P. Gqola with M. Ramphele, in K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own*, p. 134.

<sup>790</sup> M. Ramphele: *A Life*, p. 66.

<sup>791</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>792</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71

<sup>793</sup> M. Ramphele: ‘The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, pp. 218-220.

*Pitifully few white South African males have ever met a black female who could communicate with them on any basis of racial and sexual equality. For them, black women are either unobtrusively performing domestic chores in the kitchen or hurrying by in school uniform, with heads deferentially lowered. Few white males in South Africa have met a Dr. Ramphele who could say quite casually, "Now you're really talking nonsense – here, let me get you another drink."*<sup>794</sup>

Eventually, the phenomenon of women transgressing traditional pattern remained at an individual base.<sup>795</sup> Most women recall their social emancipation and their view of 'the role of women within the BCM' as very personal experiences. Reflecting on the question of solidarity among the women of the upper BCM ranks, Ramphele recalls that:

*It was a solidarity that was rather loose and fragile, and there were no real continuities because you must understand that there wasn't really a theoretical understanding of what was going on with us, or a theoretical understanding of Gender Equity or inequity. It was all a question of experiencing things and trying to interpret them as best as we could. I only got to read feminist literature in the 1970's long after my activist days were gone. So then I could retrospectively understand why I felt the way I did and some of the arguments I could have used instead of screaming and telling them they're talking rubbish.*<sup>796</sup>

As the establishment of the Black Women's Federation would prove, traditional patterns were still deeply entrenched within male/female relationships. On the surface, the organisational structure of the BCM was supposed to be non-hierarchical. The young movement nevertheless depended heavily on a few male leading representatives, particularly its main initiator, Biko. Thenjiwe Mtintso, who used to be active in the BC branch of King William's Town, recalled that Biko himself never questioned the traditional division of labour between men and women. The women surrounding him were expected to support the movement – and its male activists – through the performance of women's duties, meaning, housework. According to Mtintso, the expectations of BC men frequently led to conflicts with female activists as they wanted 'women to be political, to be active, to be everything but they still need a complement of women who are subservient.'<sup>797</sup>

Traditional attitudes and prejudices assuming men's superiority in terms of rational thinking and work performance were overtly endorsed. Nevertheless, most of the female comrades

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<sup>794</sup> D. Woods: *Biko*, p. 68.

<sup>795</sup> M. Mangena: *On your own*, p. 69.

<sup>796</sup> Interview by K. Yates and P. Gqola with M. Ramphele, in K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own*, p. 136.

<sup>797</sup> Thenjiwe Mtintso as quoted in L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 60.

state that these patterns predominantly referred to the social level. If women made important contributions and occupied leading positions in the establishment and performance of community projects, they were accepted as equal and capable colleagues by men.<sup>798</sup> The activist BC circle of King William's Town before 1976 is usually illustrated as a peaceful, highly productive political community, centred around Biko's guidance. Supposedly, women's attitude towards male domination changed significantly after 1976. Femininity proved in no way protective when they had to meet the consequences of their political activity. In terms of political action, women were required to be militant, assuming roles similar to men. In terms of detention and harassment, women's special vulnerability proved provocative rather than preventative to the security police. Their special vulnerability was frequently used in interrogations and cross examinations.<sup>799</sup> In the late 1970s and 1980s, women accounted for approximately fourteen per cent of those detained under security legislation and emergency regulations. This is surprisingly low considering the number of women activists. Perhaps it can be explained by the low percentage of women in leadership positions. Women's organisations were generally less effected by detentions. Moreover, statistical information about women prisoners are hardly reliable.<sup>800</sup> The South African regime has long fostered the illusion that it gave preferential treatment to women. But the reality looked different. Sexual harassment, even rape, were frequently used as methods of interrogation. The utilisation of women's relations to family dependants was another way of psychological torture in cross-examinations. Medical treatment was rare. There are many reports about pregnant women who miscarried, being left alone in the cell.<sup>801</sup> Women were especially used as state witnesses if they occupied secretarial positions or stood in kinship relation with activists.<sup>802</sup> After these interrogations, women had to fear being rejected on return to their communities.<sup>803</sup> The lives of the women surrounding Biko in King William's Town prove representative of the fate of the BCM in the post Soweto era. Although they were detained, banned or had to go into exile, they continued their BC activities either through political organisations or community work. Mtintso, who suffered shocking

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<sup>798</sup> M. Ramphele: 'The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 217.

<sup>799</sup> Sechaba, October /November/December 1974, p. 34.

<sup>800</sup> M. Turok: 'Women political prisoners' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 4).

<sup>801</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>802</sup> N. van Vuuren: Women against Apartheid, p. 74; M. Turok: 'Women political prisoners' (Paper presented at Malibongwe Conference, Amsterdam, 13.1-18.1.1990, p. 6).

<sup>803</sup> E. Mashinini: Strikes Have Followed me all my Life, pp. 75-85.

treatment and torture in prison, went into exile, joining the armed struggle in Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and later became the ANC ambassador to Uganda. Others, such as Mamphela Ramphele, found themselves banned to the most remote places without any contact with family members, lacking any kind of human or financial support.<sup>804</sup>

By being suddenly thrown into another social environment, people realised, often for the first time, to what extent their self-consciousness and self-image had been shaped by their domestic culture and personal relationships. In many cases, this changing self-perception went along with the renegotiation of social relationships.<sup>805</sup> The experience of physical banning through geographical separation corresponds to the experience of being transgressive while lacking sounding boards. Many female BC activists had to experience both at once.

*There is something frightening about being in 'non-space' – unknown and amongst people with whom one has no real contact...Many narratives of ex-detainees and ex-prisoners attest to the same overwhelming sense of not feeling like a complete human being until one has made some contact with those to whom one is connected, those who in a sense define one's humanity.*<sup>806</sup>

The reports of South African women in exile display very divergent perceptions of the altering role models. Exile communities in Southern African countries provided little space for women's emancipation. Traditional gender relationships and stereotypes were deeply entrenched. The tendency to romanticise and mystify the African identity is especially evident in the writings of nationalists living in the diaspora, where traditional patterns served special mentally affirmative functions.<sup>807</sup> Few in numbers and dependent on their communities, exiled women could hardly take the risk of challenging male domination on an individual basis.<sup>808</sup> A large number of activists went to the USA, to Western European countries, the German Democratic Republic or the Soviet Union. The life in societies where the sexual division of labour had been increasingly lessened, impacted on both black men and women in terms of gender relations.<sup>809</sup> Yet, as Koglia Moodley recalls, basic assumption about womanhood and femininity dominated both societies, viewing women as being

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<sup>804</sup> M. Ramphele: 'The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 223.

<sup>805</sup> Ibid.

<sup>806</sup> M. Ramphele: A Life, p. 123.

<sup>807</sup> See 'Repossessing African Space: Self-Healing and Self-Retrieval in the Diaspora' in: M. Kolawole: Womanism and African Consciousness, pp. 181-192.

<sup>808</sup> Interview by Ernest Messina with Christine Qunta and Vuyisa Qunta, Harare, 11.1.1992.

predominantly occupied with “domestic roles, child care, moral education and socialisation ... health, nutrition and making clothing”<sup>810</sup>

Retrospectively, female activists gained an increasing self-reliance in times of political harassment, imprisonment and banning. In the first place, however, the circumstances of the time imposed a need for solidarity within the ranks of black people in order to inspire, build and consolidate resistance. As the government systematically sought to destroy the movement, there was a permanent need to regroup and rebuild cadres and organisations. Hence, the ongoing process of obliteration and reconstruction requested a solidarity among BC activists that prevented any kind of systematic confrontation of gender issues.<sup>811</sup>

#### 6.4. Black Consciousness as an attitude of mind and a way of life

Although the period of BC’s active work through community programmes was very limited and largely restricted to urban areas, it exerted a very positive impact on the lives of blacks in general. According to Mamphela Ramphele, the programmes served as

*Important affirmative statements to the oppressed people – a concrete way of saying that they mattered because they were people. It was argued that people who had known nothing but scorn and humiliation, needed symbols of hope to lift them out of despair and to empower them to liberate themselves.*<sup>812</sup>

The rising awareness among black people of exploitation and oppression has also been reflected in their changing perception of consumer identity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, black women were gaining an increasing importance in the consumer economy. Since the 1950s, the advertising industry placed a growing emphasis on female sexuality as a means by which commodities were promoted for sale. Yet, it was an economy based on white beauty norms. Biko argued:

*When you say, “Black is Beautiful” what in fact you are saying to him is: Man, you are okay as you are, begin to look upon yourself as a human being. Now, in African*

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<sup>809</sup> M. Ramphele: A Life; p. 154; M. Ramphele: ‘The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, pp. 223-224.

<sup>810</sup> K. Moodley: ‘The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 147.

<sup>811</sup> Asha Moodley as quoted in A. Basu (ed.): The challenge of local Feminisms, p. 138.

<sup>812</sup> M. Ramphele: ‘Empowerment and Symbols of Hope’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 157.

*life especially it also has certain connotations, it is the connotation of the way women prepare themselves for viewing by society. In other words, the way they dress, the way they make up and so on, which tends to be a negation of their true state and their in a sense a running away from their colour.*<sup>813</sup>

This statement already implies the BC's ambiguity towards the liberation of black women.<sup>814</sup>

Slogans such as 'Black is Beautiful' reflected the abandonment of conventional, meaning white, perceptions of living and beauty standards. The assertion to see the black man as the measure of all things approached both men and women. The Afro-American style of the Black Power Movement inspired the Black Consciousness Movement as well. Black women could liberate themselves from 'white' body images and find pride in their typical black features in terms of hair, body shape and particular dress style. By divesting themselves of distressing beauty tools such as skin-lightening creams, hot-oil combs and wigs, they also dissociated themselves from the white consumer industry. In her autobiography, Ramphele draws on the manifold ways in which black women freed themselves from 'white' norms:

*I shed the wig I used to wear whenever I felt I needed to look more 'respectable' than my short boyish hair suggested. The 'black is beautiful' slogan of the time had its desired impact on all of us. Some of us switched over to the use of our African names instead of our 'slave names' we had hitherto used. I also became more daring with my outfits, taking advantage of my figure and fashion trends at that time.*<sup>815</sup>

As mentioned previously, women occupying positions in the upper ranks of SASO held the status of 'honorary men', a term supposing that their participation contradicted conventional attitudes associated with femininity. By becoming 'one of the boys', they sought to liberate themselves from the social boundaries of femininity, which they were already transgressing in terms of their political activity.<sup>816</sup>

Black Consciousness implied the transmission of a positive picture of *all* blacks. Looking retrospectively, however, it was still the man who was the measure of all things.

*It took me three years to fully understand that Stokely [Carmichael] was serious when he said my position in the movement was "prone", three years to understand that the countless speeches that all began "the Black man..." did not include me...and as I pieced together the ideal that was being presented for me to*

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<sup>813</sup> Biko as quoted in M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, p. 22. C.D.T. Sibisi: 'The Psychology of Liberation', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 133.

<sup>814</sup> P. Gqola: Black Woman, You are on Your Own, p. 25.

<sup>815</sup> M. Ramphele: A Life, p. 58.

<sup>816</sup> See also J. Prinsloo: 'Cheer the beloved country?' (Agenda, no. 40, 1999, p. 47).

*emulate, I discovered my new found freedoms being stripped from me, one after another. No I wasn't to wear my makeup but yes I had to wear long skirts that I could barely walk in. No I was not to go to the beauty parlor but yes I was to spend hours controlling my hair. No I was not to flirt with or take shit of white men but yes I was to sleep and take unending shit of Black men. No I was not to watch television or read Vogue or Ladies' Home Journal but yes I should keep my mouth shut. I would still have to iron, sew, cook, and have babies.<sup>817</sup>*

This statement implies the degree of women's objectification by men. It indicates that black women, on the surface freed from imprisoning beauty standards, were not yet supposed to determine the way they wished to look and behave. Women's beauty norms are supposed to reflect contemporary notions of development and civilisation. The vastly reduced advertising and sale of bleaching creams indicates the success of Black Consciousness. The number of reports about African men in Natal who had beaten African women for straightening their hair or using bleaching creams, reveal the painful irony of black women's liberation.<sup>818</sup> Again, femininity became a commodity which had to suit the present definition of masculinity. Significantly, BC writers such as Manganyi elaborated their theories on racial emasculation in relation to the institution of femininity, being viewed as a form of social de-personification.<sup>819</sup> Yet, Manganyi describes the phenomenon of corporal alienation and body depersonalisation through social standardization solely by drawing references to 'white consumer conventions.' Like Mangena, he compares characteristic features of gender and race oppression without combining them in order to reflect critically on the utilisation of womanhood in the context of the national liberation movement. Writing on 1977, he draws on women as black mothers, as 'institutions' for therapy, creating space for the regeneration of the men and the following black generation.<sup>820</sup> 'Femininity' serves nothing more than an example Manganyi draws on in order to reflect on the black man's emasculation and the need to return to 'natural', traditional concepts of African societies, freed from oppression. BC generated a significant reevaluation of customary institutions such as lobola.<sup>821</sup> It thereby elaborated a rising pride in African traditions and positively redefined black masculinity. As men were still standing in a dominant relation to women, the enhancement of masculine

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<sup>817</sup> K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own*, p. 20 (as quoted from: M. Wallace: *A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood*, p. 6).

<sup>818</sup> K. Moodley: 'The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 147.

<sup>819</sup> N. Manganyi: *Being-Black-In-The-World*, p. 70.

<sup>820</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-97.

<sup>821</sup> M. de Haas: 'Is there anything more to say about Lobolo?' (*African Studies*, vol. 466, no.1, 1987, pp. 49-51).

ideologies and identities proved in many ways detrimental to women's growing independence.<sup>822</sup>

The impact of BC on black people's life styles varied from region to region, although. The Coloured Labour Preference policy of the Western Cape, for instance, successfully impeded the development of BC. Due to the 'interracial' competition within the urban socio-economic sphere of the Western Cape, Africans from this area were least likely to free themselves from the negation they experienced. Furthermore, it was widely criticised that the position of educated black men was essentially characterised by middle class bias.<sup>823</sup> Black intellectuals in particular remained alienated from their community by class.

### 6.5. Black Power and Feminism

Rising in the spirit of the 1960s, the Black Consciousness Movement witnessed the struggle against colonial rule around the world. Although the context of African national movements proves incomparable to the uprisings in the Western world, they were definitely influenced by the world wide emerging protest movements that generated a lifestyle which eventually resisted oppression on a massive scale. There were anti-colonial movements all over the African and Asian continent. The Black Power Movement opposed the social discrimination of blacks in the United States. In Europe, students were dissenting from the political apathy of the parental generation, seeking to reconstruct the social structure in rather socialist terms. Black Consciousness drew its inspiration largely from the Black Power Movement in the USA, whose militant representatives such as Stokely Carmichael rejected the pacifist approach of the Civil Rights Movement in favour of a radical resistance to white racism and liberalism alike.<sup>824</sup> In the light of the acknowledged influence of the Black Power Movement on BC thinking in South Africa a comparison between the discourse of BC and Black Power

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<sup>822</sup> See C. White: "'Close to Home in Johannesburg: Oppression in Township Households' (*Agenda*, no. 11, 1991, p. 85); A. Brittan, M. Maynard (eds.): *Sexism, Racism and Oppression*, p. 188.

<sup>823</sup> M. Ramphela: 'Empowerment and Symbols of Hope', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 156-7,

<sup>824</sup> K. Moodley: 'The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 143.



writings is relevant for a better understanding of the role of women in BC in South Africa. With regard to the divergent political context, BCM leaders made a clear distinction between the BCM as part of the South African national movement and the development of Black Power in the USA. Unlike the Afro-American movement, Black Consciousness did not have as much of a need to become a revivalist movement, reconstructing a distant past and golden heritage, since African linguistic and cultural traditions have continued as a way of life in the South African society. The political conditions of both countries were entirely different as well. Blacks in the United States, already enfranchised, opposed their social oppression as a black *minority* in a white society.<sup>825</sup> BC, in contrast to that, fought for the national liberation, the economic, political, social and legislative emancipation of blacks who constituted the overwhelming majority of the population. Their psychological liberation did not focus on the *revival* of a lost culture but on the *return* to African values of communalism, shared decision-making and more personal communication styles – values, which were seen as opposing the impersonal individualism of white consumer societies.<sup>826</sup> The BCM was nevertheless influenced by Black Power whose definition of blackness, as Halisi states, was meant to imply an internationally unifying force:

*Black Power politics does not limit itself to identification with a particular nation-state or even to Africa as a continent; people of African descent are called upon to seek empowerment wherever they find themselves and to fight racial oppression wherever it exists. Black power represents the internationalisation of black nationalism*<sup>827</sup>

According to Koglia Moodley, the degree of self-doubt has generally been lower in South Africa than among US blacks, since the latter's racial discrimination was rather informal and hidden behind American laws of equality. In contrast to black South Africans, who were openly and collectively discriminated against, black Americans were not likely to blame the social system, but rather themselves for their low social status.<sup>828</sup> As shown in the first chapter, South African womanism developed in many ways under the influence of black American feminism. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, America not only witnessed the emergence of a strong black national movement, but also a wave of Western inspired feminism. In order to evaluate the gender dynamics within the BCM and the emergence of

<sup>825</sup> M. Arnold (ed.): *Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa*, p. 99.

<sup>826</sup> K. Moodley: 'The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, pp. 146-7.

<sup>827</sup> C.R.D. Halisi: 'Biko and Black Consciousness Philosophy', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 106.

the womanist movement in the aftermath of apartheid, it proves interesting to consider the way American women identified themselves as blacks and as women with the philosophy and terminology of the Black Power Movement at the climax of its emphasis on black nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Female and male BC activists acknowledge the influence American black activists such as George Jackson, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X (the BC counterpart to Martin Luther King's liberal integrationist stance) exerted on BC. Some of BC's most significant slogans such as '*black is beautiful*' were actually 'imported' from the USA. Popular female exponents of the Black Power Movement, however, remained largely unheard of. Ramphele writes about political meetings where activists listened to the tapes of Black nationalists like Malcolm X or read out his scripts.<sup>829</sup> She mentions the difficulties to obtain these banned documentations and describes how they impacted upon her and her colleagues. Among all the names that are mentioned in context with Black Power, Ramphele never refers to a black female activist. She only retrospectively points to BC's ignorance towards the phenomenon of black feminism in the USA.<sup>830</sup> Considering her missing interest in feminism as a BC activist, both Ramphele and Asha Moodley refer to the lack of information and the negative attitude towards feminism in general.

*Whatever we read supported the race and class aspects of our struggle. Internationally it appeared that all Black people (people in the Third World) were primarily engaged in this kind of liberation struggle. News of feminist struggles in Western countries that filtered through sounded alien – burning one's bra to declare one's liberation as a woman did not connect psychically<sup>831</sup>*

Apparently, there was no forum for female American activists in South Africa - neither as black feminists, nor as black nationalists.

Black American women speaking about the 'Women's question', sought to integrate the female side into the Black Power Movement without challenging the latter in any way. They did not see any historical male supremacy within the black American community and consciously rejected initiating a gender struggle within the Black Community. Considering gender relationships within the black slave community, Angela Davis writes:

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<sup>828</sup> K. Moodley: 'The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 143.

<sup>829</sup> M. Ramphele: *A Life*, p. 58.

<sup>830</sup> Interview by Carien du Plessis with M. Ramphele, in C. du Plessis: *Spellbinding Fighter*, pp.7-8.

<sup>831</sup> Asha Moodley, as quoted in: A. Basu (ed.): *The challenge of local Feminisms*, p. 138.

*Excepting the woman's role as caretakers of the household, male supremacist structures could not become deeply embedded in the internal workings of the slave system. Although the ruling class was male and rabidly chauvinistic, the slave system could not confer upon the black man in the appearance of a privileged position vis-à-vis the black woman. The man slave could not be the unquestioned superior within the 'family' or community, for there was not such a thing as the 'family provided' among slaves. The attainment of slavery's intrinsic goals was contingent upon the fullest and most brutal utilisation of the productive capacities of every man, woman and child. They all had to 'provide' for the master. The Black woman was totally integrated into the productive force.<sup>832</sup>*

A comparison between the discourse of BC, Négritude and Black Power writings exhibit a striking resemblance in terms of their male-dominated outlook. The actual motivation for the overt emphasis on the black man's manhood emanated from a social reality that deprived black men even within the most basic institution of society: his own family. The Moynihan Report, conducted in the United States in 1965, found that black American husbands held unusually low positions of authority in their families. The loss of social prestige of men living in the 'Negro American subculture' was mainly the cumulative result of discrimination at work, segregated housing and poor education.

*In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole ...Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it.<sup>833</sup>*

A chief concern of the report was the increasing power of the women in black families. According to the report, the percentage of black women in skilled jobs was higher than that of black men. Girls were rather successful in school as well, although the black male population outnumbered black women by the ratio of 4 to 1.<sup>834</sup>

*The Negro wife in this situation can easily become disgusted with her financially dependent husband, and her rejection of him further alienates the male from family life. Embittered by their experience with men, many Negro mothers often act to perpetuate the mother centred pattern by taking a greater interest in their daughters than in their sons.<sup>835</sup>*

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<sup>832</sup> A. Davis: Reflections on the Black Woman's role in the Community of Slaves' (The Black Scholar, vol. 3, December 1971, p. 7).

<sup>833</sup> L. Rainwater and W.L. Yancey (ed.): The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy, p. 75.

<sup>834</sup> Ibid.

<sup>835</sup> Thomas Pettigrew as quoted in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, p. 34 in L. Rainwater and W.L. Yancey (ed.): The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy, p. 80.

Since an outward expression about his social conditions would have been followed by fatal consequences, the black man had to turn his rage and torment inward. In turn, the moral degeneration found its outward expression in criminality, alcoholism and a high rape rate. Considering the issue of domestic violence, Martin Luther King asserts that the black man, humiliated by society, turned

*at those who would be less likely to destroy them. He beat his wife and his children in order to protest a social injustice, and the tragedy was that none of them understood why the violence exploded.*<sup>836</sup>

It is against this background that Black Power writings have to be read and women's notions on the empowerment of men have to be understood.

*If the Negro women has a major underlying concern, it is the status of the Negro man and his position in the community and his need for feeling himself an important person, free and able to make his contribution in the whole society in order that he may strengthen his home.*<sup>837</sup>

In terms of the political discourse of Black Power, women were more indirectly objectified. According to Cone, the focus on manhood was one of the main reasons for the low visibility of black women in civil rights and black nationalist organisations. Identities with names and titles, were given to the men, but the women were rendered invisible even although their number was larger.<sup>838</sup>

With regard to the writings of the most prominent representatives of Black Power, one does not have to read between the lines to realise their conscious adherence to patriarchal attitudes. The issue of women's emancipation was not only ignored, but, in fact, overtly opposed. Occupying an even more inferior social position than the 'downtrodden black men', women were presented as 'the Others' men had to distinguish themselves from. Women's objectification was thereby sought to serve the self-definition of the black man. Women are either indirectly referred to through the emphasis on men and their manhood - or they are manifestly mirrored in the most stereotypical ways, as illustrated by the following quote from George Jackson:

*She (my mother) was saying that I should be indifferent about being used and abused like a goat or milk cow or something. I understand her and all black*

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<sup>836</sup> Martin Luther King: An Address by Martin Luther King, Jr., reprinted in L. Rainwater and W.L. Yancey (ed.): *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, p. 406.

<sup>837</sup> Dorothy Height, as quoted in: *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, p. 34 in L. Rainwater and W.L. Yancey (ed.): *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, p. 80.

<sup>838</sup> J.H. Cone: *Martin & Malcolm & America*, p. 277.

*women over here. Women like to be dominated, love being strong-armed, need an overseer to supplement their weakness. So how could she really understand my feeling on self-determination. For this reason we should never allow women to express any opinions on the subject, but just to sit, listen to us, and attempt to understand. It is for them to obey and aid us, not to attempt to think.*<sup>839</sup>

Nationalist movements thought to legitimise the oppression of women in the same way as whites sought to substantiate their social and economic supremacy: Assuming that Black women would passively enhance their political silence, economic dependency and social inferiority, resembles Western notions of blaming Africans for their own victimisation.<sup>840</sup> Where black men were taught that their feelings of inferiority were not natural but a result of their historical oppression, black women were supposed to occupy subordinated positions as men's assistants, exhibiting deferential attitudes. Although Martin Luther King recognised and referred to women's growing independence, he did not seem to consider an official reconstruction of social structures on the grounds of changing gender relations. By contrast, he regarded the 'matriarchal' family as an obstacle to liberation which was to be solved by the reinstatement of patriarchy.

*The Negro man in this country ...has never been able to be a man. He has been robbed of his manhood because of the legacy of slavery and segregation and discrimination, and we have had in the Negro community a matriarchal family ... In the midst of a patriarchal society ... and I don't think any answer to that problem will emerge until we give the Negro man his manhood by giving him the kind of economic security capable of supporting a family*<sup>841</sup>

Malcolm X's writings exhibit the minimal degree of gender awareness which male nationalists were prepared to commit to at that time. His statements used to be perfect examples of women's objectification as the 'other.' Towards the end of his time of activism, however, Malcolm X changed his view of women as agents in the struggle significantly. Following the split with the Nation of Islam and his subsequent trips to the Middle East and Africa, Malcolm X made an about-face regarding his view on women's rights, as he began to consider the issue not only in the context of religion and morality, but, from the standpoint of mobilising the forces needed to revolutionise society.<sup>842</sup> But although he realised the important potential nestling in the mobilisation of women, he did not consider them as agents

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<sup>839</sup> G. Jackson: *Soledad Brother*. The prison letters of George Jackson, p. 125.

<sup>840</sup> J. Barrett, A. Dawber, B. Klugman, O. Obery, J. Shindler and J. Yawitch (eds.): *Vukani Makhosikai: South African Women Speak*, p. 169.

<sup>841</sup> J.H. Cone: *Martin & Malcolm & America*, p. 277.

<sup>842</sup> *Ibid*, p. 279.

in their own right who could formulate their own pleas according to their position in the struggle. However he definitely acknowledged their role as cultural custodians. But the emphasis Malcolm X placed on the passive notion of 'giving' a woman freedom, education, implying, 'giving her emancipation', again exhibits the stereotypical feature of female passivity. Eventually, Malcolm X continued to ignore women in the masculinist language and devaluated associations with femininity while privileging associations with masculinity.<sup>843</sup>

### 6.6. The Black Women's Federation (BWF)

*It was not a scenario which encouraged the confronting of gender issues, nor did they appear anyway as the major issues of the time within the country*<sup>844</sup>

In 1974 a Women's Division was established as part of the Black Community Programmes. Seen in retrospect, the Women's Division was a predecessor of the Black Women's Federation. Its main branch at Wentworth medical school was led by some of the leading female BC activists such as Ramphela and Matshoba.<sup>845</sup> It was an organisation consisting of self-help groups that intended to teach women domestic and marketable skills including nutrition, child care, knitting, sewing, crocheting, cookery and gardening. Hence, women organised themselves in terms of traditional sex-division of labour, within the fields of 'women's work.'<sup>846</sup> The intention was to encourage and co-ordinate women in their 'supportive' roles and positions. Women involved in BCP did not envisage any rearrangement of social gender conceptions. The fact, that it was the women themselves who defined their life through traditional gender roles, became specially evident when the Black Women's Federation (BWF) was launched in Durban in December 1975.<sup>847</sup> According to Fatima Meer, one of the founding members and the BWF's first national president, the conference was not only successful but also very representative of the South African national liberation movement in general. Since the BWF was supposed to be a national umbrella body, the 200 delegates from 58 townships represented a broad picture of political, social and religious organisations. More than forty-one organisations were represented. Seventy-four

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<sup>843</sup> G. Breitman (ed.): Malcolm X. By any means necessary, Paries interview, 1964, p. 216.

<sup>844</sup> Asha Moodley as quoted in A. Basu (ed.): The challenge of local Feminisms, p. 138. Asha Moodley speaking about the BCM in the 1970s.

<sup>845</sup> D. Lewis: 'Women and Gender in South Africa', in V. Maphai (ed.): South Africa. The Challenge of Change, p. 169. Interview by Ernest Messina with Fatima Meer, Durban, 9.7.1992.

<sup>846</sup> M. Arnold (ed.): Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa, pp. 93-94.

<sup>847</sup> A. Rambally (ed.): Black Review, 1975-1976, p. 133.

women were members of women's groups, thirty were members of mixed organisations and one hundred and six indicated no organisational affiliation.<sup>848</sup> The conference was also attended by highly prominent representatives of parties, whose political course differed considerably from the BCM. According to Fatima Meer, long discussions preceded the final decision to apply the term 'black' to *all* members and to confine the membership to black women only. As did most of the women attending the first conference, Fatima Meer adhered to the principle of multiracialism and proved rather critical of BC's exclusion of whites.<sup>849</sup>

The BWF's ultimate aim was to support the liberation movement by mobilising women as a political force. According to the preamble of the BWF, women were responsible for the survival and maintenance of their families, and were largely accountable for the socialisation of the youth through the transmission of black cultural heritage. The preamble stated the need to present a united front and to re-direct the status of motherhood towards the fulfilment of the black people's social, cultural, economic and political aspirations.<sup>850</sup>

The main function of the BWF was to coordinate and consolidate the efforts and activities of black women and black women's organisations in South Africa. Common problems were to be defined in order to delineate priorities necessary for effective community action that enhanced political awareness and self-reliance. The BWF also intended to co-operate closely with black organisations with similar aims and objectives.<sup>851</sup>

The First National Conference of the BWF centred on issues such as self-help projects in deprived communities and the establishment of a committee on education to disseminate factual material and work out programmes for an alternative and positive system of education relevant to the needs of the people. The BWF intended to establish branches throughout the country in order to initiate development programmes on a large scale. In fact, the BWF was the first national women's union that focused on the rural areas as well.<sup>852</sup> A call for more technical schools and open universities was made. Furthermore, it was decided at the conference to support families of political prisoners.<sup>853</sup> The BWF members committed themselves 'to work together as women to attain self-reliance and independence as black

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<sup>848</sup> A. Rambally (ed.): Black Review, 1975-1976, p. 133.

<sup>849</sup> Interview by Ernest Messina with Fatima Meer, Durban, 9.7.1992.

<sup>850</sup> A. Rambally (ed.): Black Review, 1975-1976, p. 134.

<sup>851</sup> Ibid.

<sup>852</sup> Interview by Ernest Messina with Fatima Meer, Durban, 9.7.1992.

<sup>853</sup> A. Rambally: Black Review, 1975-1976, p. 135.

people.’<sup>854</sup> The women of the BWF gave scant regard to their position as individuals in their own right. Gender issues were not on the agenda. It is questionable, as to whether they were deliberately rejected, in order to preserve the united black front. It may well be that they were not even thought of, due to the general lack of gender consciousness. A woman’s attitude towards the national liberation movement was supposed to be nothing but supportive. The seventies witnessed the emergence of the urban black youth as a new political force. As the state’s repression increased, family policy became a highly valuable resistance strategy. Hence, it was not only the mothers who occupied important assistance positions in the struggle; the loss of patriarchal authority on the part of elder male relatives rendered the latter the role of ‘significant associates’, as well. During the Soweto uprisings, it was especially the BWF and the Black Parents’ Association (BPA)<sup>855</sup> which played a supportive auxiliary role in arranging medical and legal services as well as funerals for victims of police action.<sup>856</sup>

The Federation was very short lived. Following her banning in August 1976, Fatima Meer was succeeded by the BWF’s vice president, Mrs D. Mabiletsa. The majority of the BWF’s national executive was imprisoned after the Soweto uprising. The BWF’s funds and the majority of its documents, including the blueprint of a black women’s magazine were confiscated. While the main executive was imprisoned, the BWF started cooperating closely with the liberal organisation of Women for Peaceful Change, headed by Ms Oppenheimer.<sup>857</sup> Since many BWF members descended from socially orientated, multiracial organisations, they were more likely to sympathise with white organisations and preferred reformative to revolutionary approaches, rejecting militant attitudes in general. In the short period after the executive had been released and before the BWF was banned as an organisation, it had its second and last conference. The BWF was the only BC organisation which remained banned until the end of apartheid.<sup>858</sup>

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<sup>854</sup> A. Rambally: Black Review, 1975-1976, p. 133.

<sup>855</sup> T. Lodge: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, p. 329. The BPA represented an older generation of community leaders, most of them professional people and churchmen. Although the BPA, an affiliated organisation of the BCM, took no political action itself, all its members were detained by mid- August 1976.

<sup>856</sup> E. Mashinini: Strikes Have Followed me all my Life, p. 37.

<sup>857</sup> Interview by Ernest Messina with Fatima Meer, Durban, 9.7.1992.

<sup>858</sup> Ibid.



## 6.7. Black Solidarity: an ambiguous strategy

*Survival dictated that we viewed gender contradictions as non-antagonistic ones, which meant that their existence was acknowledged but for the time being would not be taken to issue.*<sup>859</sup>

It took a long time for black politicians to eventually acknowledge that black men's daily experiences provide the most valuable basis for a liberation philosophy that could motivate a mass movement. According to the BC philosophy, it was the *most oppressed* who had to stand up in order to lead the liberation. The realisation of the loss of his manhood was supposed to make the black man fight. The special oppression women were subjected to was known but not acknowledged as worthwhile enough to enter political forums. Considering BC's proclamation of and reliance on black solidarity, it refused to acknowledge that the Black society had never been monolithic. Difference was seen as a kind of incompleteness and was hence not explored as a potential area of strength. Gender, age, geographical location, sexual orientation and, until a later stage, even class were not perceived as consequential enough to warrant inclusion into the discourse of doctrine. Assuming that uniformity equals unity, the BC discourse negated the diversity of viewpoints of Black women in all classes and working class people of both genders. Asserting BC's identification with female oppression, male activists maintained their privilege to speak on women's behalf and claimed to show them the path to liberation. The relations between men and women within the BCM exhibited features similar to those of blacks and whites within liberal organisations: their presence was acknowledged, even welcomed, as it reflected the democratic, pluralistic basis of the movement.<sup>860</sup> Nevertheless, sexist prejudices considering women's rhetoric, intellectual and organisational talents were permanently present, at least in a subtle way. A radical social transformation of gender relationships was no matter for open discussion. Women were seen as silent observers rather than as political activists. The majority of women involved in the BCM played rather ancillary roles, occupying positions that were supposed to be supportive and less influential. The stereotypical division of labour along gender lines was never systematically challenged.<sup>861</sup> Women were relegated to traditional domestic roles, responsible for child-care, health, nutrition, the making of clothing, moral education and the socialisation of the children in terms of black cultural

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<sup>859</sup> Asha Moodley in A. Basu (ed.): The challenge of local Feminisms, p. 138.

<sup>860</sup> The parallels drawn between BC and feminist separatism in this chapter are not supposed to identify their ideological content or their way of separatism and solidarity.

<sup>861</sup> K. Moodley: 'The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 147.

heritage. Ramphela recalls how her political activity determined her personal growth in the public sphere. This however did not alter her adherence to rather traditional roles within the family.

*My feminist consciousness was still fairly under-developed. I had not yet acquired the sophistication which would have enabled me to negotiate an equitable partnership. I had been content to play the traditional women's role in the domestic arena, provided it did not clash with my public role, and did not involve abuse and disrespect. Even during my King William's Town days, my approach to gender roles in the domestic arena had largely been traditional.*<sup>862</sup>

The era of Black Consciousness witnessed significant changes in women's images, behaviours, attitudes, social conventions, outward appearance and beauty standards. These, however, were not indications of an emerging women's movement, which intended to challenge the very patterns of a male dominated society. By contrast, female activists sought to express their emancipation by distinguishing themselves from the broad mass of women, allegorically transcending from 'non-white women' to 'black honorary men.'

The tendency of BC authors to privilege race and to romanticise community life and gender relations reveals the contemporary desire for unity among blacks to combat white power and prejudice. Any analysis of the socio-political context in which BC emerged, shows, that its 'male favouring' philosophy was inadequate in the contemporary empowerment of black women. Interpreting Black Consciousness merely in terms of its masculinist discourse, might lead to the assumption that BC consciously worked towards the perpetuation of male supremacy in the transformed society. This would even suppose, that it never considered jeopardising the social authority of men in order to access a truly democratic society.<sup>863</sup> Accordingly, BC would have envisaged a future society structured in terms of African patriarchy rather than a democratic society in which women would be fully emancipated. Reflecting on 'Some African Cultural Aspects' Biko states

*One of the most fundamental aspects of our culture is the importance we attach to Man. Ours has always been a Man-orientated society.*<sup>864</sup>

Here, what is actually meant, is a referral to the intimacy of inter-personal relations among Africans in general. But it is often and easily misinterpreted as a declaration of patriarchy. Of

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<sup>862</sup> M. Ramphela: *A Life*, p. 154.

<sup>863</sup> K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own*, p. 77.

course, inter-personal relationships among Africans are largely male dominated. An acutely narrow interpretation in terms of gender relationships, however, would prove ignorant towards the basic notions of BC. That is, to help every oppressed person to realise his/her potential to view the world in his/her own terms, to exhibit his/her subjectivity. A subjectivity which perceives the self as meaning 'a person is a person because of another person'.<sup>865</sup>

*We must seek to restore to the black man the great importance we used to give to human relations, the high regard for people and their property and for life in general; to reduce the triumph of technology over man and the materialistic element that is slowly creeping into our society.*<sup>866</sup>

How reasonable is it to retrospectively accuse men of their authoritarian course, if female activists themselves might not even have sought to direct women's organisations towards women's emancipation and empowerment? According to BC, it was the responsibility of the oppressed themselves to realise and challenge the oppression no one else could recognise and identify with. Realising the very structure of someone's oppression might be more problematic than challenging it. Criticising someone for the very invisibility of his oppression, is a delicate matter considering its psychological dimension. But doing this retrospectively is even more difficult. Ramphela, for instance, criticises the BCM for its lack of gender consciousness. She critically discusses, how gender relations were structured within the movement, how attitudes were rooted in patriarchy and in what way she was personally confronted with notions about women's social and intellectual inferiority. Yet, she only does this retrospectively. Ramphela started considering gender relations in an analytical way when she got into contact with Western inspired feminist literature, and that was only in the late 1970s.<sup>867</sup>

The article *Women's Liberation: A Black South African Women's View* published by Zanele Dhlamini in *Sechaba* in 1972 revealed that the conceptualisation of black women's triple oppression was not unknown in South Africa. Yet, none of the dimensions of this multiplied oppression was ever directly related to gender roles *within* the black community. It was frequently thought that principles of male dominance had been taught by missionaries, defined by legal statutes, and were institutionalised through the economic relations of

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<sup>864</sup> S. Biko: Some African Cultural Concepts, in A. Stubbs (ed.): *Steve Biko: I write what I like*, p. 41.

<sup>865</sup> D. Driver: 'M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng: The Child's Mother Grabs the Sharp End of the Knife' in M. Trump (ed.): *Rendering Things Visible: Essays on South African Literary Culture*, p. 234.

<sup>866</sup> S. Biko: The Quest for a true Humanity, in A. Stubbs (ed.): *Steve Biko: I write what I like*, p. 96.

<sup>867</sup> Interview by Carien du Plessis with M. Ramphela, in C. du Plessis: *Spellbinding Fighter*, pp.7.

colonialism.<sup>868</sup> Similar assumptions were articulated with regard to the American society. As shown in the discussion on women in the Black Power Movement, American female activists identified with black nationalism rather than with Western inspired feminism. The loss of social prestige and economic self-sufficiency on the part of black men transferred a kind of social power to the women of the 'Negro American Subculture' that was undermined by the overt political disabilities black women experienced in South Africa. Yet, the majority of women active in the Black Power Movement gave scant regard to their position as women. Many advocated the enhancement of men's social authority rather than their own. Even in the 1980s, prominent American black feminists referred to the 'ironic contribution' slavery made to male-female equality.

*Labouring in the fields or in the homes, men and women were equally dehumanised and brutalised. The rape of black women and the lynching and castration of Black men are equally heinous in their nature. Today, the Black man carries scars from his slave experience as much as the Black woman carries her scars. We use no measuring stick for the oppression suffered by Blacks.*<sup>869</sup>

The Black Women's Federation, whose membership included the most influential female representatives of the national liberation struggle, deliberately lacked a clearly defined political or feminist orientation. Its political function was rather indirect, since it sought to join women in order to support the movement. It served as a space in which women could freely gain self-consciousness as blacks, but only as black 'significant associates.'

Although it did not accomplish any social analyses exclusively considering the position of black women, BC was not meant to be entirely detrimental to the liberation of women. The masculinist discourse of the BCM was in no way omnipotent in its exclusion of Black women. Comparing the institutional set-up and outlook of both the FSAW and BWF, the latter appeared to reinforce women's social disabilities whereas the FSAW sought to confront them in the political arena. It would be misleading to assume that this indicated a declining political consciousness on the part of women. The membership of the BWF was largely constituted by young women with a BC background as well as former members of the FSAW. During the 1960s, a decade of political apathy and fearful deference, women like Winnie Mandela and Albertina Sisulu had continued the fight their imprisoned husbands began. Many of the 'political widows' were themselves detained, harassed or banned. With

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<sup>868</sup> G. Joseph: 'The Incompatible Marriage à Trois: Marxism, Feminism and Racism', in L. Sargent: Women and Revolution, p. 99.

<sup>869</sup> . Joseph: 'The Incompatible Marriage à Trois: Marxism, Feminism and Racism', in L. Sargent: Women and Revolution, p. 94.

regard to their political commitment, they were respected agents acting in their own right. Organising women as ‘significant associates’ did not necessarily imply a lack of activist commitment which militant organisations like the women’s division of FRELIMO in Mozambique displayed. Looking back, progressive gender proclamations on part of FSAW or FRELIMO members hardly resulted in action, anyhow. Women who identified with BC became more liberated as individuals. The changing perception of blackness as a unifying political force probably changed the hierarchical structure of black women’s organisations as well as challenging the elitist view leading black women politicians used to exhibit, as illustrated in the following quote by Nokhukanya Luthuli, wife of Chief Luthuli:

*The tragedy of our day is that the White man who boasts of centuries of civilisation now wishes that the Christian missions had never brought light to Africa for he now speaks of the Christian missions as having ‘spoiled the Native’ and in various ways his Government is using its political power to send back the African to the wilderness of past darkness.*<sup>870</sup>

The concern for their children’s education always proved to be a driving force in black women’s protest movements. Yet, it was no longer a question of what whites were prepared to give but what blacks were prepared to take. It were no longer the mothers who demonstrated for their children’s future, but the children themselves. Remarks on missionary education as means of rescuing blacks from barbarism exemplified an elitist attitude which BC activists sought to combat in both the movement’s structure and outlook.<sup>871</sup> Multiracial women’s organisations used to have a twofold effect on the political attitudes of black members. Indeed, the vociferous way in which black women entered the political stage through national organisations such as the FSAW or community organisations such as the People’s Food Council in Johannesburg and the Women’s Food Committee in Cape Town were unique in the history of the national movement. The upper ranks of these organisations were predominantly occupied by white or well educated black women with a Christian background. The way BC liberated women as black individuals through their association with the movement is probably best demonstrated by Ramphele Mamphela’s life story. Donald Woods testified to the influence of this liberation in reference to Ramphele:

*I knew from the name that Dr. Ramphele was black, and I pictured an elderly grey-haired medico with an Uncle Tom deference. No image could have been further from the reality ...This was a new breed of black South African – the Black*

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<sup>870</sup> Nokhukanya Luthuli, wife of Chief Luthuli, quoted in *New Age*, 22.12.1955, p. 1.

<sup>871</sup> S. Biko: We Blacks, in A. Stubbs (ed.): *Steve Biko: I write what I like*, pp. 28-29. *No wonder the African child learns to hate his heritage in his days at school. [...] His heart yearns for the comfort of white society and makes him blame himself for not having been ‘educated’ enough to warrant such luxury.*

*Consciousness breed – and I knew immediately that a movement that produced the sort of personality now confronting me had qualities that blacks had been needing in South Africa for three hundred years.*<sup>872</sup>

For the first time many black women could fall in love with their dark complexions. Since they could hardly refer to any theory in order to explain the very structures of their objectification as women, female BC activists had to gain a standing that was more solid and individual than that of their male comrades. In her autobiography Ramphela describes how she became increasingly self-confident and vocal in student meetings and in national student forums.

*I had begun to understand the culture of public speaking and the idiom of political discourse. Mastery of the art of using the standing rules of conduct in meetings to neutralise and subdue political opponents in debates was an essential part of the culture.*<sup>873</sup>

The discriminatory barriers women faced within the national liberation struggle eventually forced them to pursue their political course in an even more determined way. While they were occupied with the ‘black man’s struggle’, they learned techniques for political debate as well as administrative and managerial skills which they could later apply to the gender struggle. Asha Moodley explained this behaviour and what it implied as follows:

*However, having taken on co-responsibility for waging the political struggle, for sustaining and conserving it when it was really embattled, there was no way women would continue their silence...their suspension of the gender struggle. When they said then that the liberation of women was “inextricably linked” with the liberation of the country, they did not mean that political liberation meant overall freedom for women. It was to imply a warning that at some time in the future, when they deemed it to fit so, there would be also a direct confrontation with patriarchy. Within organisations, within whatever new political dispensation came into being, within society as a whole.*<sup>874</sup>

Interestingly, the emphasis on patriarchy rose in accordance to its growing invincibility. Black women might not have openly referred to their actual empowerment, but black men did indirectly. At least, they endorsed their reliance on women to prevent men’s social, political and psychological emasculation.<sup>875</sup> Furthermore, it appears questionable, if a philosophical approach, which truly responded to changing gender relations, would have served the process of women’s liberation or, at least, would have obtained a considerable

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<sup>872</sup> D. Woods: *Biko*, p. 53.

<sup>873</sup> M. Ramphela: *A Life*, p. 58.

<sup>874</sup> Asha Moodley as quoted in A. Basu (ed.): *The challenge of local Feminisms*, p. 139.

<sup>875</sup> See also K. Ratele: ‘The end of the black man’ (*Agenda*, no. 37, 1997, p. 63).

audience. A lot of the BC writings were recited through speeches. Their discourse was intended to draw and motivate an audience in as high a number as possible. According to Barney Pityana, the students were challenged to identify their philosophy with the kind of language spoken by the people in the townships and rural areas.

*[W]hat needed to be on the agenda of black students was the language of liberation, the language of freedom, the language of independence.<sup>876</sup>*

Discussions concerning gender dynamics within the national movement or women's oppression within the wider society hardly corresponded with this positivist language and were most unlikely to stimulate an audience for the common liberation struggle. A philosophy that focused specifically on the liberation of the black women had to address the bulk of women living most isolated of all: the women in the homelands and the domestics in the white areas. Beside the fact that this indeed might have appeared irritating to the male population who constituted the main potential for mass action, there occur two other essential problems. Firstly, it could hardly be expected to draw a significant audience among these women, considering the harsh conditions they were living in as well as their low educational background. This leads to the second difficulty: BC claimed that self-reliance was needed to evaluate one's own people, to initiate and interpret the process of liberation for oneself. Writings that focused on black female workers' daily experience needed to be conducted by black women themselves.

The common black population was reached through the Black Community Programmes, not through Biko's writings. A black woman living in a township or rural area experienced the impact of BC in terms of respectful treatment at community institutions established by the BCP. The male-favouring terminology of BC might have proved rather indifferent to her – as it was no matter of discussion among female academics. Indeed, the patriarchal discourse of BC proved inadequate in the changing gender relations in black people's every life. But one should not forget that African women had been forced into a process obliterating traditional community life. The vast majority of women adhered to the African culture. They defined themselves through their husband's rank, through the 'black man's' oppression and *his* political action. African women who appeared independent and transgressive not only broke into the men's world. Their individualised standing also challenged traditional notions and

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<sup>876</sup> Barney Pityana as quoted in: S. Buthelezi: 'The Emergence of Black Consciousness', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 118.

patterns of hierarchical structures within the female constituency of black communities.<sup>877</sup> Like the majority of women, those in the upper ranks of the BCM adhered to the principle, that they were not supposed to transmit 'women's issues', meaning private issues, into the public sphere. Subjects of moral degeneration such as sexual harassment and domestic violence were considered to be a product of apartheid and generated by poverty. Women sought to fight the forces of apartheid which deprived the African family unit of its patriarchal basis by emasculating those who were supposed to be the protectors and guardians. Furthermore, the gender dynamics among the nascent intelligentsia were hardly representative of the common population. Most women had never experienced a life beyond being the 'significant associate.'

The centrality of mothering and supportiveness in women's self-perception was also related to the unusual dynamics of township resistance. The increasing state violence in the seventies and the growing resistance on part of the youth pushed both mothers and fathers into auxiliary political roles.<sup>878</sup> As already mentioned, it were in particular the Black Parents Organisation as well as the Black Women's Federation who actively supported the student riots of Soweto. In the aftermath of the Soweto riots, when mass detentions and an increasingly repressive state machinery determined the township life, the positive self-definition of the family unit became a political strategy. While a man's oppression was supposed to make him heard, a woman's double oppression restricted her to silence and invisibility. In terms of black women's liberation, the BCM appeared to be a paradox: black women were in fact *too oppressed* to realise and challenge the very forces of their oppression. Kadalie claims:

*Publicly, black women have blamed apartheid for robbing black men of their masculinity and dignity. For many black women, the abolition of apartheid has thus meant the restoration of male pride, dignity and masculinity to black men. This partly explains why, for a long time, the democratic movement tended to see the liberation of women as being secondary to and contingent upon national liberation.*<sup>879</sup>

The denial of alternative views proved to be a potentially divisive tactic.<sup>880</sup> The ignorance of BC towards gender inequalities evoked an even greater awareness of sexual control mechanisms when the reconstruction of the South African society was initiated. The womanist movement emerging in the 1980s, picking up momentum in the 1990s, drew special attention to the invisibility of women within the national liberation movement.

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<sup>877</sup> K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own*, pp.135-6.

<sup>878</sup> D. Lewis: 'Women and Gender in South Africa', in V. Maphai (ed.): *South Africa. The Challenge of Change*, p. 169.

<sup>879</sup> R. Kadalie: 'The F-word' (*Agenda*, no. 25, 1995; pp. 75-6).



Several scholars sought to voice and interpret the very silence on women in black politics. It was an attempt to analyse a historical ‘non-theme.’ The significance it has accounted today derives from the insignificance it had 30 years ago. While women’s emancipation was no matter of discussion in the political arenas of the 1970s, today’s black female academics insist on the incorporation of gender study in the process of historical research. Since the beginning of the 1990s, most of the scholars writing about Black Consciousness at least mention the invisibility of women in national liberation policies. The lack of in-depth studies is compensated for by a highly sensitive awareness of the gender factor. Themba Sono shortly mentions women’s marginalized status in the movement and states with reference to the movements context ‘Biko was not a sexist’.<sup>881</sup> In the 1991 version of his article *Black Consciousness – A Reactionary Tendency*, Neville Alexander states ‘the original is reproduced warts and all, including incidentally the male chauvinist language which I continued to use unproblematically at the time.’<sup>882</sup> Asha Moodley an active member of AZAPO, who perceived the male discourse as universally inclusive at the time of the BCM, actively works towards a rather gender conscious policy within AZAPO. In an article called *Black woman you are on your own*, published in *Agenda* in 1993, Moodley claims the need for a re-definition of the BC discourse in terms of gender terminology.<sup>883</sup> Statements of former female BC activists are few and far between. They are usually generalised, based on the common notion that a subtle gender oppression existed, although the latter was neither consciously exerted nor perceived as such. The most valuable contribution was made by Mamphela Ramphele with her critical examination of *The Dynamics of Gender Within Black Consciousness Organisations: A Personal View*, published in 1991. In their introduction to the 1996 Stubb’s selection of Biko’s writing, Malusi Mpumlwana and Thoko Mpumlwana, wrote:

*Today’s reader may be appalled at the way in which Biko’s writing and speech is totally insensitive to the exclusion of women in his Black Consciousness campaign as he stands up for ‘the black man’ and ‘his manhood’! Biko is a product of his time. However, some of us who shared his passion have since realised that our painful experience of being excluded and regarded as non-persons because we are black is no worse than being excluded because we are women. The present authors acknowledge that the struggle to reorder the*

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<sup>880</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, p. 35.

<sup>881</sup> T. Sono: *Reflections on the Origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa*, p. 88.

<sup>882</sup> N. Alexander: ‘Black Consciousness: A Reactionary Tendency?’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 139.

<sup>883</sup> A. Moodley: ‘Black Women, you are On Your Own’ (*Agenda*, no. 18, 1993).

*attitudes and relationships of women themselves, between women and men, and the socio-cultural and economical milieu of our existence, is as fundamental as the struggle ever was for the re-ordering of race relations for Blacks in South Africa and in the world.*<sup>884</sup>

In terms of both analysis and outlook, womanism grew largely out of the BCM. As discussed above, the BCM sought to make the black people's personal experiences political. The special dimensions women were subjected to, however, were not seen as imperative enough to be politicised. In order to trace the development of a womanist consciousness one must therefore look beyond the political sphere and consider alternative ways of voicing social dissatisfaction.

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<sup>884</sup> Malusi and Thoko Mpumlwana in in A. Stubbs (ed.): Steve Biko: I write what I like, p. XIII.

## Chapter 7

### **Media and Literature as mediums of resistance: Black women's presentation and representation**

#### 7.1. Women and the media until the late 1950s

The historical process of black women's absorption into industrialisation and the four dimensions of their function in the capitalist society have already been discussed in the previous chapters. In order to understand how women were (or rather, were supposed to be) seen at certain stages of their social transition from reproducers, to a source of cheap labour, to consumers and finally to products of consumption, it is essential to look at women's images transmitted by the contemporary media. As mentioned above, black women were hardly in the position to decide if and how their emancipation should be processed. Throughout the history of anti-apartheid struggles, liberation from patriarchy was nothing they consciously aspired and worked towards. The forces that perpetuated women's emancipation were side effects of the economic changes which transformed society and undermined many of the structures previously legitimising women's subordinate positions. Until the end of the 1970s, one searches almost in vain for articles written by black South African women, who consider the need to re-examine black women's oppressive images as reflected and reinforced through the media. Even more problematic than the deficient representation of women, is the lack of women in the very process of literary production. Due to the overwhelming silence on and of women in the media, it appears impossible to trace the development of black women's gendered consciousness.

In terms of scholarly texts, journalism and literature, there was a lack of women as both writers and recipients. Although the number of black female academics grew during the 1970s, they remained a peripheral group. The same era witnessed a considerable growth in the black newspaper readership in large urban areas. Yet, it was predominantly men who read the newspapers and held joint discussions in the public sphere.<sup>885</sup> The exclusion of women was mostly due to the informal sex-division of labour: Considering their domestic duties and lack of comfort in housing and living, black women could hardly afford to take time and

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<sup>885</sup> C. Charney: Black Power; White Press, pp. 2-5.

space to read – or even write – articles. Furthermore, the number of illiterates among women was far higher than among men. Needless to say, the number of women taking time to read the English liberal press was almost insignificant. Another explanation for the lack of female newspaper readership concerns their geographical separation. Living at the periphery of any market economy, it was literally impossible for rural woman to attain papers about the politics of the day. Obviously, the harsh struggle of living in these areas did not provide any space for the development of a reading culture among women. In 1940, A.C. Jordan, the first significant African woman writer, published the Xhosa classic *Inaqgumbo Yeminyanya* (The Wrath of the Ancestors). It was only in the 1970s that a black women's writing culture was initiated.

Interpretation of gender roles as portrayed by literature at the time, descended from perceptions of a man's world.<sup>886</sup> These presentations thus prove questionable in their truth in mirroring the changing status of women in the black society and are suspect in serving as instruments reinforcing the notion of patriarchal, national liberation ideologies. Since the 1930s, left wing institutions paid increasing attention to the position of women as workers. On the other hand, prevailing views on femininity and women's apolitical, domestic nature were tacitly endorsed. The regular 'Women's Page' feature of the *Guardian*, for instance, continued to be filled mainly with recipes, advices on nutrition and childcare, fashion and beauty hints.<sup>887</sup>

Also significant is the way in which women's anti-pass protests were reported on by white Afrikaner and English papers as well as 'black' newspapers and magazines. Afrikaner newspapers portrayed black women's campaigns as peripheral political issues. They recognised neither the number of protesters nor the motives for their campaigns. They reported on women's campaigns in a teasing way, presuming black women's status as perpetual minors.<sup>888</sup> Until the 1960s, black political journalism centred chiefly around *Drum* and the *Golden City Post*, both owned by the liberal millionaire Jim Baily. The pioneering style of leading *Drum* journalists with its witty observation, colloquial language, political comment and hard hitting expose became legendary known as the 'Drum school.'<sup>889</sup> It has to be recognised that *Drum* provided a valuable record in the 1950s on both cultural and political issues including those of women's campaigns. Its treatment of women as social

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<sup>886</sup> M. Kolawole: *Womanism and African Consciousness*, pp. 96-99.

<sup>887</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 48.

<sup>888</sup> *Ibid*, p. 187.

actors in their own right was inconsiderate, although. Since its readership was predominantly male, *Drum* often proved to be a mirror of sexist attitudes. When *Drum* asked its readership ‘Should women have equal rights with men?’ in 1954, 101 replies out of 159 answered ‘no.’<sup>890</sup>

On the pages of *Drum*, one can trace the growth of a township culture far removed from the traditional, tribal culture, which apartheid attempted to sell as the true African way of life. A brash and vigorous culture, with a considerable permissiveness, although in many ways more oppressive than tribalism- also in terms of its treatment of women. The complexity of reactionary and progressive, traditional and Western forces that shaped the perspectives of young African women living in the townships is perfectly exemplified in the way *Drum* stereotyped women as beauty queens, cover girls and social ornaments. In the 1950s, township women were increasingly victimised by new stereotypes defining women under mature capitalism – women as sex-objects, women as consumers. *Drum* promoted this trend and presented cover girls whose body types and fashions appeared progressively Westernised. Presenting Black women in terms of white beauty standards, *Drum* exhibited impossible dreams for the vast majority of the magazines readership.<sup>891</sup> The myth of consumer ease, pleasure and sophistication surrounding the cover girls directly contradicted the reality of poverty and violence in which the majority of women lived. Nevertheless (or perhaps because of that) the Westernised black cover girl became a powerful, popular model for women to aspire to and be judged by.

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<sup>889</sup> C. Charney: *Black Power; White Press*, pp. 7-12.

<sup>890</sup> C. Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, p. 149.

<sup>891</sup> *Ibid*, p.150.

## 7.2. BC and the liberal press

The repression of the 1960s brought down the curtain on the brief flowering of black journalism which began in the 1950s and centred predominantly around *Drum* and the *Golden City Post*. While the pioneers of black political journalism were banned or exiled, the 1960s generation of reporters reflected the agony of the whole decade.<sup>892</sup> Although the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a considerable growth of discriminative restrictions on black writings, liberal newspapers employed progressively more black journalists to report on black issues such as township affairs. The complements of black journalists at white, liberal newspapers such as the *Rand Daily Mail*, *The Star*, *Daily Dispatch* and *The World* were constantly growing - among them were a rising number of women. In 1977, 70 per cent of the black journalists were in their 20s. Many of them had just graduated from university. Naturally, their highly politicised thinking, influenced by the BCM, exerted a significant impact on their reporting. Most of them endorsed the importance of pride and self-consciousness which the BCM encouraged them to feel both as blacks and as professional journalists.<sup>893</sup> Hence, the impact of BC on black journalists was twofold. Firstly, it directly exposed them to new and challenging political ideas. Secondly, it promoted their psychological liberation.<sup>894</sup>

Although journalism had been one of the very few professions where whites and blacks worked side by side in the same job, blacks working for the liberal press remained exploited and discriminated against in terms of financial earnings, job security and career opportunities. The government expected journalistic institutions to conform in terms of social segregation, even although in many cases it was not performed in practice.<sup>895</sup> Since most of the English language press was owned by large press groups, it was tempered by its role as part of the white establishment, business and political organisations. The liberal press therefore walked a tightrope. In the late 1960s, several liberal newspapers such as *The World* went back to the levels of politicisation which had been their characteristic feature in the 1950s. Their discourse responded to that of liberal political institutions: blacks were supposed to have a right to citizenship, their capacity for mass struggle was recognised and the impact of apartheid on the economy was criticised. With the growth of Black Consciousness, liberal

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<sup>892</sup> M. Mzamane: 'The Impact of Black Consciousness on Culture', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, pp. 179-181.

<sup>893</sup> C. Charney: Black Power; White Press, pp. 15-16.

<sup>894</sup> L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness, p. 31.

<sup>895</sup> C. Charney: Black Power; White Press, p.9.

newspapers became rather distinctive and explicit in the definition of blackness as a political term. They were increasingly assertive in claiming black majority rule, articulating BC ideology and reporting on the activities of BC organisations. Nevertheless, the liberal press exhibited the same attitude of white supremacy which had led to the emergence of an exclusively black movement.

At the beginning of the 1970s, SASO started courting press coverage of its conferences and activities with befriended journalists, in particular those of the 'black papers.' The latter were increasingly drawn into the intense, bond-forming social gatherings of BC circles which reflected the 'zeitgeist' of the black intelligentsia in the 1970s.<sup>896</sup> Black Consciousness exerted a great impact on black journalism and, in turn, utilised the latter for its own policy. This was manifested by the foundation of *The Union of Black Journalists* (UBJ) in Soweto in 1973, with Harry Mashabela as president. Since the UBJ was officially affiliated with the BCM, its constitution was initially based on SASO's, with 'journalist' substituted for 'student'. In accordance with the BC's philosophy of black solidarity, the UBJ's paramount aspiration was to encourage a sense of black solidarity among black journalists. The UBJ also sought to help detained or banned journalists by launching projects at home and abroad, buying groceries and visiting families. With this combined effort, the UBJ enhanced a sense of comradeship and joint power in the otherwise anonymous world of journalism.<sup>897</sup> It was the first organisational outlet black journalists gained, since the membership of the South African Society of Journalists had registered as an union under the Industrial Conciliation Act in 1962.

One of the most representative black female journalists of this era was probably Thenjiwe Mtintso. After she had to leave Fort Hare in 1973 because of her participation in a student walk off, she was fervently involved in Biko's activist circles in King William's Town.<sup>898</sup> She found work as a reporter on the *East London Daily Dispatch* and was elected UBJ secretary in 1975.<sup>899</sup> According to Charney, who describes her as 'brassy and beautiful with a reputation as a hell-raiser', it was under Mtintso's initiative to establish cooperative systems between black journalists from the *Dispatch* and *Imvo* and Black Community Programmes in King William's Town. Mtintso, who had been a member of SASO and was actively involved

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<sup>896</sup> C. Charney: *Black Power; White Press*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>897</sup> M. Mutloatse: *Reconstructing – 90 Years of Black Historical Writing*, p. 16.

<sup>898</sup> L. Wilson: 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 49.

<sup>899</sup> D. Woods: *Biko*, pp. 109-110.

in BCP, embodied the political commitment of many young journalists who joined the profession after exposure to the BCM at university or high school. Although the UBJ remained rather weak in its organisational structure, it motivated a sense of black community in the anonymous world of journalism.<sup>900</sup> Mtintso recalls how her colleagues advised her in an effort to make up for her lack of formal professional training and how she was shown her first Freedom Charter in 1975 by Mapetla Mohabi, a journalist colleague and full time general secretary of SASO who later died in detention.<sup>901</sup> Shortly after his death, Mtintso herself was detained under Section Six of the Terrorism Act. During her own detention she found out about the actual causes of Mohabi's death. In the aftermath, she reported in detail on the inquest in Mohabi's death and the violent treatment she received during her own detention.<sup>902</sup> Mtintso was detained once more in March 1977, and again over the period of Biko's funeral later that year.<sup>903</sup>

### 7.3. Literary reflections on women's roles and status within the 'black man's' every-day struggle

*A negative image deligitmises [women's] struggle for fundamental rights and freedoms<sup>904</sup> ...the images of women as presently portrayed need examination in terms of their sources, their veracity according to women's experiences and their potential for positive transformation in the future. However, in this exercise, one cannot overlook the writers own input in the characterisation of these women and the reconstruction of their images.<sup>905</sup>*

The 1970s witnessed the rise of a black writing culture which challenged the literary streams of all previous decades. Women's participation and representation in these developments, however, remained deficient. In order to explore their social roles and status, one has to examine writings which were predominantly conducted by male authors. Black Consciousness claimed to recognise every black person with his individual experience of apartheid. Referring to black women's role and status, BC seemed to perform a tenuous

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<sup>900</sup> C. Charney: Black Power, White Press, pp. 12-13.

<sup>901</sup> Mohabi was arrested on 15 July 1976 and detained at Kei Road police station under the Terrorism Act. He died in detention three weeks later on 5 August, allegedly having hanged himself with a pair of jeans. See Black Review, 1975-76, p. 95.

<sup>902</sup> C. Charney: Black Power, White Press, p. 15.

<sup>903</sup> International Defence and Aid Fund: To Honour Women's Day, p. 28.

<sup>904</sup> R.B. Gaidzanwa :Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature, p. 8.

<sup>905</sup> Ibid, p. 10.



function in mirroring the actual social structures of the Black Community on the one hand and seeking to reinforce the patriarchal patterns of the nationalist movement on the other. It is hence interesting to explore, how BC writers internalised and interpreted the experience of colonisation in the way they formed images of women.<sup>906</sup>

The rise of a new kind of liberation movement went along with the emergence of an innovative literature, inspired and highly politicised through the BC philosophy. The new generation of authors had little to model their writings on, since the work of former generations was literally inaccessible. Authors had been detained or exiled, their works were banned. The Sophiatown renaissance in Johannesburg had died with the destruction of the area between 1955 and 1958. The District Six school was equally under siege, with blacks of mixed ancestry facing similar removals in Cape Town.<sup>907</sup>

Black Consciousness was based on the realisation by blacks that the most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor was the mind of the oppressed. Inspired by ideology on the black man's self-definition, identity and experience, a new generation of authors emerged that claimed to be undergoing a self discovery as a people. Academic critics often tend to misinterpret township poetry, since they ignore the status of African poetry in the wider context of the BCM, processing toward the psychological liberation through self-definition. They pay very little attention to the host of oral poets working within the Soweto milieu during the 1970s. They regard poetry as a 'product' rather than 'process', as an 'object' rather than 'practice'. Poets like Madingoane sought to reclaim black identity and reassert the importance of individual forms of oral poetry.<sup>908</sup> Mthobi Mutloatse illustrated the intention to transform literary conventions in provocatively vulgar terms:

*We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through; we are going to kick and pull and push and drag literature into the form we prefer. We are going to experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critic have to say. We are not going to be told how to relieve our feelings, pains and aspirations by anybody, who speaks from the platform of his own rickety culture. We will write our poems in narrative form: we'll write journalistic pieces in*

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<sup>906</sup> A. Davis: *Women, Culture & Politics*, p. 53.

<sup>907</sup> M. Mzamane: 'The Impact of Black Consciousness on Culture', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.): *Bounds of Possibility. The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*, p. 179. See also Bloke Moisané's autobiography *Blame me on history*, published 20 years earlier. Unlike the BC literature of the 1970s, it exhibits black people's passively accepted victimisation, their alienation between two worlds and their desire to be accepted into white society.

<sup>908</sup> D. Brown: 'Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity' (*Current Writing*, vol.9, no.1, Durban 1997, p.3).

*poetry form; we'll dramatise our poetic experiences, we'll poeticise our historical dramas.*<sup>909</sup>

BC artists were as critical of liberal artists as they sought to contradict apartheid literature and its caricatured presentation of black people. Mafika Gwala, proclaimed the establishment of 'black standards.'<sup>910</sup> Ways of writing had to be found that differed from the liberalist literature in style and content.<sup>911</sup> English was utilised as a particular bond between reader and writer: Several poets such as Mzamane and Serote employed a 'non-standard' African English, to convey the message implicit in their works in the most authentic manner.

*If the situation requires broken or 'murdered' English, then for God's sake one must just do that. If other people come to the sad conclusion that writer so-and-so does not know English, then we should not even offer prayers for thus misguided people.*<sup>912</sup>

The English language proved foreign to the majority of black South Africans and, beyond that, it implied the alienation of the black person under Western colonisation and capitalism. In its relationship between white employers and black employees, English was thought to be instrumental in the denial of the African identity. Through an 'Africanised' version, however, BC writes made English an instrument of identity, experienced and expressed in the day-to-day life of the urbanised black working class.<sup>913</sup>

Many poems incorporated elements from the oral literary tradition of pre-capitalist societies to celebrate the cultural heritage of Africans as well as to reach the uneducated masses.<sup>914</sup> There have been many reasons why poetry was chosen as the chief genre by which the message of Black Consciousness was extended. Firstly, the symbolism of poetry allowed the latter to effectively illude censorship. It also provided opportunities to circumvent the publishing industry through oral dissemination. In the wake of the Soweto uprising, there was only one black-owned publishing house and two black-owned literary magazines, *New Classic* and *S'ketsh*, both edited by Sipho Sepam. Most poets hesitated to publish their works at all, due to the intense oppression and covert organisation of the security police. Many

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<sup>909</sup> M. Mutloatse: 'Introduction', in *Forced Landing*, p. 5.

<sup>910</sup> D. Brown: 'Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity' (*Current Writing*, vol.9, no.1, Durban 1997, p.8).

<sup>911</sup> S. Christensen: *Women Write Back: The Literary Responses of Miriam Tlali and Ellen Kuzwayo to Black Consciousness*, unpublished MA Thesis, p. 8.

<sup>912</sup> S. Sepamla: 'The Black Writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas', in M. Chapman (ed.): *Soweto Poetry*, p. 117.

<sup>913</sup> See also: J.P. Eakin: *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, p 262.

<sup>914</sup> S. Christensen: *Women Write Back*, pp. 9-10.

literary works of BC poets, like for instance Madingoane's *africa my beginning* and *black trial*, were banned by the Publication Control Board shortly after their first publications. The effect of the bannings was undermined, since poets distributed their works through powerful performances in the townships. Many black poets had large township followings, while remaining virtually unknown to white audiences. As poets widened their audience through performances at gatherings, meetings and funerals, a black oral tradition was re-established in a largely urban environment.<sup>915</sup> Poets no longer acted merely as community spokesman, but as participants of the struggle.<sup>916</sup> The turn to performances rather than publication also showed the desire to avoid the 'gate-keeping' of white owned literary magazines and publishers.<sup>917</sup> The fictional narrator was thought to act as an African storyteller, recipients were addressed as 'brothers', 'sisters', 'friends' or 'comrades.' African literary styles, 'Americanisms'<sup>918</sup>, even jazz rhythms were employed for oral presentation.<sup>919</sup> Performances were often accompanied by flutes and drums.<sup>920</sup> Poetry mirrored and highlighted the search for new roots in old values of African tradition as sharing African communal ways of life, marriage tradition and ancestor worship. Critical debates about Soweto poetry and its oral challenges in literary and academic institutions centred around the question of appropriate aesthetic models and evaluative paradigms.<sup>921</sup> Obviously, these poems appeared less amenable to discussion within conventional print paradigms.<sup>922</sup> Ulliyatt remarked in this regard:

*No doubt, the intention is to convey rage and bitter anger, but the regularity with which they repeat these words, the lack of artistic control, this easy*

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<sup>915</sup> S. Christensen: *Women Write Back*, p. 15.

<sup>916</sup> M. Chapman (ed.): *Soweto Poetry*, pp. 13-18.

<sup>917</sup> D. Brown: 'Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity' (*Current Writing*, vol.9, no.1, Durban 1997, p.11).

<sup>918</sup> M. Gwala: 'Black Writing Today', in M. Chapman (ed.): *Soweto Poetry*, p. 174. According to Mafika Gwala, the tendency to 'Americanism' did not derive from the influences of Black Power, but the influence of American capitalism: 'English, especially in the youth stage, is spoken with lots of American and Afrikaans slang. So where I had what sounded American in my poems it is not because of the influence of Black American literature, as Nadine Gordimer so readily concluded in her book *The Black Interpreters*. It's just that American movies, American comics and paperbacks, American advertisement came down on us in typical imperialist fashion. And we discovered ourselves to be part of it all, for the better or for the worse.'

<sup>919</sup> F. Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. 122-3. Fanon refers to the centrality of rhythm for re-asserting black identity.

<sup>920</sup> M. Chapman (ed.): *Soweto Poetry*, p. 16.

<sup>921</sup> A.G. Ulliyatt: 'Dilemmas in black poetry' (*Contrast* 44, vol. 11, no.4, December 1977, p. 53).

<sup>922</sup> D. Brown: 'Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity' (*Current Writing*, vol.9, no.1, Durban 1997, p.1.)

*sensationalism, and this over-ready willingness to pander to the worst aspects of mediocre versifying spoil many poems.*<sup>923</sup>

The topics of poetic and narrative writings reflected BC's notion of self-discovery in past and present: historical poems paying tribute to religious events, African heroes fighting colonialism, poems reflecting the life of the labouring people, poems celebrating the emergence of new liberalisation movements such as Black Power and Négritude.<sup>924</sup> Where the pre-colonial era was illustrated as a golden age, writings illustrating contemporary conditions were deliberately lacking in tendencies which idealised or romanticised the conditions under which blacks lived in the towns and homelands. The writings reflected the perspective of the most downtrodden people of the South African society.

The black writer himself assumed a role in the social conflict, as he portrayed blacks as fully fledged human beings and full citizens in their country. The illustration of the Black man's individual experience was thought to provide a complex picture of the manifold forces the black community was discriminated against. Since every black person was thought to draw his strength and identity from the community he lived in, BC criticised the materialistic value system which was slowly pervading Black Society, and satirised the black petite bourgeoisie by exposing its hypocrisy and acquisitiveness. Black Consciousness criticised scholars and artists from Western societies for their unconscious dependence on conventional definitions, seeing the white man as the measure of all things. Due to the lack of literature conducted from black female perspectives, BC poets and writers unconsciously perpetuated the patriarchal attitudes through their one-sided perception of a man's world.<sup>925</sup> A prime example gives Madingoane's Africa My Beginning:

*i talk about me  
i am Africa  
i am a man  
Ogun's image  
made from the soil  
abibman*

...

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<sup>923</sup> A.G. Ulyatt: 'Dilemmas in black poetry' (Contrast 44, vol. 11, no.4, December 1977, p. 53).

<sup>924</sup> A.G. Ulyatt: 'Dilemmas in black poetry' (Contrast 44, vol. 11, no.4, December 1977, p. 53), p.18.

<sup>925</sup> *In the traditional African cultures, literature was supposed to be the men's domain. Certain kinds of poetry are typically delivered or sung by women (particularly dirges, lullabies and songs to accompany women's ceremonies or work) and each culture is likely to have certain genres considered specifically suitable for women. However, references to men seem to occur even more often and, with a few striking exceptions, men rather than women tend to be the bearers of the poetic traditions.* R. Finnegan: Oral literature in Africa, p. 98. As quoted in M. Kolawole: Womanism and African Consciousness, p 75.

*roots of man*  
*man son of africa*<sup>926</sup>

As revealed in the above extracts of the poem *africa my beginning*, published in 1979 by the Soweto poet Madingoane, Black Consciousness saw a god like black man, created by a manlike god, at the centre of all measures. Madingoane's work, which comprises a sequence of twenty-one English poems, called *black trial* and the short title piece *africa my beginning*, proves exemplary of the shortcomings most BC writings reveal in their presentation of women. *Black trial* traces the spiritual, ideological and historical development of its speaker – a communally defined 'Blackman' - from the state of self-loathing and passivity to that of self-assertion and social commitment.<sup>927</sup> The actual exclusiveness of the term 'black man' is revealed whenever women are spoken about. While the poet describes the destruction of the black man's dignity as the 'castration' of his 'manhood', he perceives the woman as the supporting, reproductive force in the process of male recreation, as the following extract illustrates:<sup>928</sup>

*Call to me that african woman*  
*To tend my wounds*  
*With the gentle hands*  
*Of womanhood*  
*I have for so long been deprived of*  
*And to bring back the sense*  
*Of a family complete*  
*'cause my African woman*  
*will always remember*  
*to call me*  
*man.*<sup>929</sup>

Women are not identified as social agents but as female associates, unambiguously loving and supportive. Their own sorrows are entirely identified with those of their men for whom they are mourning. The inside cover of the book carries the photograph of a black woman crying over a coffin. The dedication of '*africa my beginning*' reads:

*I did not know but I had to know, that we in Africa are black men, born of*  
*women who love us in bondage*<sup>930</sup>

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<sup>926</sup> I. Madingoane: *Africa My Beginning*, pp. 19-21.

<sup>927</sup> I. Madingoane: *Africa My Beginning*, pp. 10-11. See M. Chapman (ed.): *Soweto Poetry*, p. 16.

<sup>928</sup> D. Brown: 'Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity' (*Current Writing*, vol.9, no.1, Durban 1997, p.5, p. 21.)

<sup>929</sup> I. Madingoane: *Africa My Beginning*, p. 7.

Women's alienation from political action was reinforced through their physical separation from places defined as sites of struggle.<sup>931</sup> As they remained estranged from the public sphere which discussed and interpreted apartheid's impact on black life, women's understanding of oppression was to be mediated through their sons' and husbands' experiences. Hence they were only politicised as 'significant others.'

BC authors often conveyed *her* political awakening as a consequence of *his* life action which *she* supportively but passively watches from the perspective of *his* private sphere. Black women were supposed to show their political commitment as reliable, faithful, supportive and ever present 'significant associates.'<sup>932</sup> In many BC writings, a female character only enters the political scene in order to provide the catering, which she usually does in a silent observing way, intimidated by the political thoughts that subdue her educational and intellectual capability.<sup>933</sup> Female characters' attendance at political demonstrations are often motivated by concern and fear for their involved male associates, having nothing to do with their own political conviction. The wives left behind by men who join the struggle, are often portrayed as having little understanding of their situation. The political awakening of a 'non-white' women is frequently illustrated in the following way: initially she accuses her husband, who joins the struggle in an altruistic way, for being self-centred and unconscious of the family conditions. After the female character has been told about her husband's motives, she understands the urgency of this situation.

There are two significant features in the way female characters are portrayed. Firstly, a woman's consciousness is hardly, if at all, explored in detail. Furthermore, a woman's experience is hardly ever told through her own voice but always by a third person narrator.<sup>934</sup> Black writings showed women in their roles as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, single parents, bread-winner and cultural custodians. Yet, while Black women occupy many of these positions simultaneously, black writing of the 1970s tended to create an artificial separation of these positions. In order to uncover the mutual reinforcement of gender, race and class and their separated illustration in literature, one has to analyse the most stereotypical portrayals black woman were identified with.

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<sup>930</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

<sup>931</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>932</sup> D. Lewis: 'Women and Gender in South Africa', in V. Maphai (ed.): *South Africa. The Challenge of Change*, pp. 168-9.

<sup>933</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, p. 76.

<sup>934</sup> *Ibid*, p. 100.

### 7.3.1. Mother Africa trope

According to the tenor of contemporary political writings, artists and authors viewed women predominantly in the position of the silently suffering and inevitably supportive female associates of (male) activists. The stereotypical illustration of women as the ever-loyal, compassionate and faithful relatives, providing their men the basis for their daily struggle, remained present in both media and literature. The major recurring image in protest literature proved to be the 'Mother Africa' figure which 'symbolises strength, beauty, the capacity to love and the ability to survive.'<sup>935</sup> Desiree Lewis relates the social portrayal of black women as self-sacrificing nurturers to the way in which white South Africans traditionally stereotyped domestics servants as ever-dutiful black mothers of white children.<sup>936</sup> Since black women care for both black and white children, the mother trope personifies the well being of the entire South African population. In their mother trope capacity they are however not recognised as agents in their own right by either the black or the white world. As Gqola states: Their sons and husbands put them on a pedestal while white South Africa confined them to invisibility.<sup>937</sup>

Black motherhood appears to be an essentially contradictory position.<sup>938</sup> In patriarchal ideologies, motherhood is usually described as a mysterious and powerful status. Frequently endorsed by black women themselves for the positive attributes it relates to female associates, the mystifying illustration of the maternal figure as 'burdened with the traits of the continent', in fact contributed to the marginalisation of women. The African continent takes on the perceived characteristics of a black woman.<sup>939</sup>

Based primarily on biological or sexual functions, the image manifests an ideology that views women as the property of men and glorifies motherhood as the highest aspiration of all women. Many feminist scholars therefore argue that the 'Mother Africa' trope in fact operates against the interests of women, excluding them, implicitly, if not explicitly, from authorship and citizenship. Since all her power derives from her being mother and wife, a

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<sup>935</sup> S. Christensen: *Women Write Back*, p. 10.

<sup>936</sup> Lewis, Desiree: *Constructing Lives: Black South African Women and Biography*, p. 7.

<sup>937</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, p.100.

<sup>938</sup> P. Collins: *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 116.

<sup>939</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, p. 7.

woman hardly has any legitimised power for her individual existence. It is assumed that women's strength is derived from the female ability to reproduce: bearing and rearing children as well as unambiguously supporting their men who attempt to gain strength and find their identity in the struggle. They themselves, however, are supposed to be self-sufficient in terms of their physical and psychological condition.<sup>940</sup> According to Collins, black men inadvertently foster a different controlling image for black women when portraying them through attributes solely associated with archetypal motherhood.<sup>941</sup>

The mother figure is always present when needed. According to the African tradition, she is not only mothering her own children but also the children of the extended family or community. Her actions are determined by her community sense, not by her individual needs and aspirations – which are virtually non-existent. Her individual world, her thoughts and outlooks are generally illustrated in relation to her family, particularly the politically active male members.<sup>942</sup> Being portrayed as a passive recipient of painful emotions, black women's representation is one-sided and continuously negatively related to the demise of the country.<sup>943</sup>

Indeed, the romanticised notion of the 'Mother Africa' trope disguised the reality most Black women were and are suffering from. It proved entirely ignorant towards the very special impact apartheid exerted on them. It pre-supposed that women principally defined their social role and status through their husband's rank and the oppression *he* suffered. Due to the growing number of female headed households, however, less women actually had a husband they could identify with. They were forced to lead the life of a single mother, to be bread winner and decision makers in one person. The lack of a husband in attendance not only made their role as the ever-present, supportive wife redundant, but it also forced them to leave their children behind in order to take waged labour in urban areas. Many women were thus also denied the ability to assert their role as mother.

The African tradition holds the status of women as mother and wife in high regard. Traditionally, old women occupy authoritative positions in the African extended family. But this social status was now being coupled with a kind of female sovereignty which was previously unheard of. Women were more frequently entering men's traditional spheres. As

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<sup>940</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>941</sup> P. Collins: *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 116.

<sup>942</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, p.14.

<sup>943</sup> *Ibid*, p. 75.



mentioned in the previous chapters, until the mid- 1970s, the emphasis on men's political and social leadership hindered the actual independence women gained. Furthermore, many women questioned and challenged attitudes and behaviours which were traditionally seen as taboos in a woman's life. Tlali assumes that the mother trope in fact reflects men's fearful recognition of the maternal power.<sup>944</sup> According to Driver, the mother embodies the main angle of a man's life: she is the woman from whom the man separates in order to define himself and the world in masculine terms.

*Mother, socially constituted as the place of nature within culture, as the matrix out of which the child's subjectivity is developed, and as the object of the other's desire, assumes a marginal position in culture, perpetually alienated from her own subjectivity.*<sup>945</sup>

Mothers enter the political stage indirectly through the reproduction of activists. In terms of their supportive roles as female associates, they do not *act* but only *react*. Their role is identified with suffering. They are not supposed to be critical of their men's activities, since the illustrated characters lack the comprehensive understanding of the politics their men are engaged in. Due to the central role of adolescents in the Soweto uprising, both parents were forced into more auxiliary roles.<sup>946</sup> *Staffrider* stories featuring the Soweto uprisings exhibit a symptomatic absence of the father figure and an emphasis of the solitary mother.<sup>947</sup> Nevertheless, in the overriding portrayals of mothers, the lives of single mothers are denied full actualisation.

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<sup>944</sup> Interview by C. Lockett with M. Tlali, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): *Between the Lines*, p. 74.

<sup>945</sup> D. Driver: 'M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng' in M. Trump (ed.): *Rendering Things Visible*, p. 239.

<sup>946</sup> D. Lewis: 'Women and Gender in South Africa', in V. Maphai (ed.): *South Africa. The Challenge of Change*, p. 169.

<sup>947</sup> P. P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, p. 54. The magazine *Staffrider*, established in March 1978 in response to the 1976 Soweto uprisings, was strongly aligned to the Black Consciousness ideology. The magazine challenged censorship laws and institutionalised literary conventions. It was named after the commuters who rode illegally ("ride staff") on the trains between the townships and the city of

### 7.3.2. Socially transgressive women

Not conforming to the Mother trope image in society was a risky business for black women. Yet, choosing this path did have its rewards. Mamphela Ramphele's experience in this regard was that

*A non-subservient black woman is by definition a transgressive – she is the ultimate outsider. But political activism, with its infusion of a purpose higher than oneself, and the steeling effect of having had to break most of the rules in a society desperately in need of transformation, have added an important depth to my adult life.*<sup>948</sup>

Studying BC writings, it soon becomes apparent, that prevailing views on femininity and women's apolitical, domestic nature were tacitly endorsed. Women who refused to identify with the role of a mother and faithful wife were principally condemned by both male and female authors.<sup>949</sup> Socially transgressive characters such as single women who failed to confine their sexuality within the institution of marriage, who 'interfered' in traditional men's spheres or copied men's behaviour such as drinking alcohol, had to expect severe sentences in the form of intimidation from both women and men in their community. Another psychological and physical form of punishment for social transgression appeared to be rape. Significantly, those who were placed in the role of the rapist were usually white men. There are no positive illustrations of relationships between black women and white men. Either the woman, herself in an alcoholised condition, gets raped or she is forced to prostitute herself.<sup>950</sup> Positive approaches to interracial love relationships are deliberately avoided in order to preserve the positive image of the black man. Black women committing themselves to sexual relationships with white men are not supposed to have a non-racial attitude. In terms of Black Consciousness, they lack the basic feature which distinguishes blacks from non-whites: the pride in their own blackness. Cases, where black women fall victim to sexual harassment conducted by white men, are usually supposed to exemplify black women's special vulnerability to racial discrimination. The female character is often held responsible for having attracted her rapist in one or the other way. Regarded as a woman, who proved to be unfaithful, she injured the family's reputation and has to face the condemnation of the whole

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Johannesburg. Many of those who contributed to *Staffrider* identified themselves as proponents of BC, some others were white and can therefore hardly be regarded as proponents of BC.

<sup>948</sup> M. Ramphele: *A Life*, p. 181.

<sup>949</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, p. 9.

<sup>950</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

community.<sup>951</sup> The following scene from Miriam Tlali's Muriel at Metropolitan describes such a situation:

*That's the trouble with you women. We allow you to come into the towns and work. The next thing you bring us babies with hair like that of the mane of a horse, and blue eyes. There is only one woman I can really trust, and that is my mother. In this work of repossessing that I do, my sister, there are many temptations. In most cases when I call at a house to repossess goods, the woman cries and begs me to leave her furniture and asks me not to disgrace her in front of her neighbours. In some cases, where the husband is not present, she will even push me into her bedroom and offer to sleep with me rather than lose her goods. It's pathetic.*<sup>952</sup>

Significantly, the sexual dimension of black women's oppression under apartheid proves paramount in their fictional portrayals. Contradictive issues that would irritate the narrow characterisation of a female character were constantly avoided. Socio-economic factors that lead women to prostitution, are hardly ever mentioned.<sup>953</sup> But, the *black man's* racial oppression in the work place is a dominant theme in BC which is usually clearly spelt out.<sup>954</sup> The racial dynamics at domestics' working places are hardly ever openly discussed, although the relationship between black domestics and their white employers would provide a perfect basis for social analysis, since it is, as Cock claims, 'in a very real sense...a microcosm of the exploitation and inequality on which the entire social order is based.'<sup>955</sup> Black women's portrayals as domestic servants prove pretty similar to the illustration of the mother Africa trope. She remains passive, supportive, ever present for nurturing. Her portrayal only intends the exhibition of her exploitation. Her silent, passive suffering is illustrated as a virtue, glorified as a strength.<sup>956</sup> She is usually portrayed as permanently exerting self-control. Her ability to forgive and renounce anger in the face of trials and tribulations is supposed to be her fundamental ability.<sup>957</sup>

On the one hand BC claimed to contradict the romanticised white liberal literature by exhibiting the Black man's every day struggle. It romanticised the basic relationships within the black community by portraying black women's relations to their sons and husbands without any ambiguities. A black woman's character was rarely explored from within her

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<sup>951</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, pp. 70-72.

<sup>952</sup> M. Tlali: Muriel at Metropolitan, p. 22.

<sup>953</sup> M. Kolawole: Womanism and African Consciousness, pp. 80-81.

<sup>954</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, pp. 70-72.

<sup>955</sup> J. Cock: Maids and Madams, p. 231.

<sup>956</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, p. 74.

<sup>957</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

consciousness, even if her sorrow and her fate may have been described in detail.<sup>958</sup> Her own voice and thoughts remain silent as she behaves appropriately within the approved constraints of the white and black world she is subjected to.<sup>959</sup>

These constraints also served to downplay many of the socio-economic factors that led women to prostitution. The racial discrimination of men, however, is illustrated in manifold quantitative and qualitative terms. This implies two notions. Firstly, men were thought to be *more* discriminated against than women. The emphasis on men's affliction also shows that their victimisation was given far more importance.<sup>960</sup> The BC ideology envisaged the most victimised to lead the liberation. Those who would finally transcend from passivity to activity, were obviously viewed as being male.<sup>961</sup> Women's attitude towards men is generally passive and supportive. Neither are they portrayed as individuals with contradictory features nor do they act as agents in their own right. According to Gaidzanwa, these images were consciously intended to discourage women from questioning the stereotypes and expectations placed on them.<sup>962</sup>

#### 7.4. Women writing within the male domain

With regard to the general ignorance towards women's writings, special notice has to be given to Mutloatse's book Reconstruction – 90 years of Black Historical Literature. Published in 1981, the book includes journalist articles, prose texts and poems from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early years of the ANC, *Drum* articles of the 1950s as well as BC writings. Since the compilation seeks to remain in the tradition of African story telling, Mutloatse dedicates his book to his female relatives, the custodians of oral culture, whereas his male ancestors remain nameless. Although the great majority of authors are male, Mutloatse introduces the writings with a special reference to the four women who contributed to the book: Fatima Dike, Bandi Mvovo, Nokugcina Mhlope and Miriam Tlali. Significantly, Mutloatse refers to the women solely in the context of Western inspired feminism. Thereby,

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<sup>958</sup> S. Christensen: *Women Write Back*, p. 12.

<sup>959</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, p. 7.

<sup>960</sup> J.H. Cone: Martin & Malcolm & America, p. 276.

<sup>961</sup> S. Christensen: *Women Write Back*, p. 17.

<sup>962</sup> R. Gaidzwana: Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature, p.10.

he does not present the female authors in terms of their emancipation as women but as defenders of the principle of black solidarity against any form of white, Western influences, as illustrated by the following quotation:

*Equality among women...How many white women honestly regard their black counterparts as equals? Come on, now let's be truthful with ourselves. Very few indeed. And I dare anybody – whether male or female to dispute the South African fact that white women do not, and have never even thought about accepting black women as their equals, let alone their companions in the male-dominated and dictated society. Silly talk, huh?*<sup>963</sup>

Since Mutloatse links the authors and political leaders together, mentioning them in the same line, it could be said that he regards writing as a political activity. He overtly encourages women to participate in the struggle, yet, simultaneously prescribes the role they are expected to take. He closes his reference to women in the same manner he dedicated his book to women as cultural custodians, claiming his

*hope that more literature by black women will come forth for, as the saying goes in Africa, any house without a woman has no seriti – and that dignity at this point in our quest for freedom is upheld mainly by the MaNgoyis of the world...To remember MaNgoyi is to remember the living continuity of our struggle*<sup>964</sup>

The first story written by a woman is called 'On the Eve.'<sup>965</sup> It tells about a 'political widow' who visits her imprisoned man on Robben Island. The wife exhibits her commitment to the struggle indirectly, through the burden she has to bear because of her husband's imprisonment. Although the story gives an impression of black women's changing attitudes, exhibited for example through changing dress styles, the political widow presents herself and the other wives of prisoners in apolitical terms. The solidarity she feels with the wives of political prisoners is based on their 'unity in sorrow, in deprivation, in our longings for our loved ones.'<sup>966</sup>

'My Dear Madam' tells about the humiliation a black domestic has to bear during the first and only month she stays with her employer. According to Mutloatse, the author Mhlope presents the

*insight into the person behind the white mask; the frightened little woman who thinks blackness is God's punishment to the black race; who naively thinks that*

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<sup>963</sup> R. Gaidzwana: *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature*, p. 3.

<sup>964</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>965</sup> M. Kwadi: 'Fate', in M. Mutloatse: *Reconstructing – 90 Years of Black Historical Writing*, pp. 73-77.

<sup>966</sup> *Ibid*, p. 74.

*black sister 'Gcina is sorry and apologetic for having been born black! Little reasoning how black sister pitied her – especially her annoying childish behaviour in general, let alone when this is directed at black people.*<sup>967</sup>

Indeed, Mhlope tells the story of a master-servant relationship, which challenges the conventional picture of dependency and superiority. In order to survive, 'Gcina has to exhibit the differential attitude of a little girl towards her white employer whose narrow mind she realises, even feels sorry for - but stays silently on.<sup>968</sup> Their relationship proves antagonistic as 'Gcina's 'madam' exhibits the attitude of both a friend and master. Ignorant of the actual impact apartheid exerts on blacks, she either performs the part of a good-minded supervisor:

*You must forget that you are black and life will be not so difficult*<sup>969</sup>

or speaks as an agent of the very system she lives in

*I am warning you about your behaviour, my girl. You must be careful about what you are saying, I am telling you. South Africa is not a very lovely country for a black person if you do not learn to be respectful.*<sup>970</sup>

'Gcina knows that 'being an intelligent black girl' implies being apolitical, acting differential and silent. She does not only experience this in her relationship with whites, but also with black men who insult her overtly. 'Gcina does not defend her womanhood against either of the parties. But while she cannot bear the humiliation directed by the white employer and leaves her without any attempt of open confrontation, she discusses and finally defends the black men's rude attitude towards her black womanhood.

*One thing I know is that these people have taught themselves to be rude. Why? They are forced to do the kind of work they are doing and they are always called boys. This has made them unsure of themselves. They feel inferior – even to women. The whole thing hurts and strips them of their manhood. To get rid of the humiliation and frustration that dominates them they spit words that hurt. At first I was angry but not anymore. I felt sorry for them because I understood their situation. I only wish that they understood too that we, as women, do not look down on them as boys. They are our men.*<sup>971</sup>

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<sup>967</sup> M. Mutloatse: Reconstructing – 90 Years of Black Historical Writing, p. 4.

<sup>968</sup> Mhlope, Nokugcina: My Dear Madam, in M. Mutloatse: Reconstructing – 90 Years of Black Historical Writing, pp. 180-198.

<sup>969</sup> Ibid, p. 185.

<sup>970</sup> Ibid, p. 185

<sup>971</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

The poem of Fatima Dike ‘*For a Black Woman*’ does not only tell about the pain of black women’s living conditions but also about the will to eliminate self-victimisation. It implies thinking ‘personal is political’ as it tells about the personal pain of being a perpetual minor, caused by political circumstances and the need to, in turn, politicise that pain in order to motivate women for the struggle on the basis of their own experiences, their very own lives as historical actors.<sup>972</sup>

*Pain is old  
Pain is deep  
Pain is personal  
Tooth-ache at 4  
Heart-break at 16  
Birth pains at 24  
And now the pain of still being a girl at 64  
Patience has its limits taken too far its cowardice<sup>973</sup>*

The last of the four female authors speaking about women’s lives under apartheid is Miriam Tlali. In an interview titled *No Shelter for Cleaners*, Tlali tells about the working conditions she faced as an office cleaner in Johannesburg.<sup>974</sup> Mutloatse introduces Tlali with reference to her politicised novel *Amandla*, published shortly before the interview. In the interview, however, Tlali remains within the context of women workers’ daily struggles. She hardly ever refers to the political movement and does not mention the role of female activists at all.

It is significant that these one-sided classifications pervade a literary movement which claims the psychological liberation of *all* blacks in order to establish a democratic society, freed from any kind of racial or sexual discrimination. The sexism which featured in the BC literature sustained existing inequalities while promoting new hierarchies.<sup>975</sup> Women writers as Manioc NCH, showed an awareness of gender inequality and articulated the need to overcome the latter:

*At present we must encourage self-discovery and free expression in our women.  
The myth of female inferiority should be completely discouraged. The ideology of*

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<sup>972</sup> F. Dike: *For a Black Woman*, in M. Mutloatse: *Reconstructing – 90 Years of Black Historical Writing*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>973</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>974</sup> M. Tlali: ‘No Shelter for cleaners’, in M. Mutloatse: *Reconstructing – 90 Years of Black Historical Writing*, pp.199-206.

<sup>975</sup> P. Gqola: *Black Woman, You are on Your Own*, p. 3.

*women's liberation is not yet clearly understood by a great number of our women and how this ideology combines with our distorted culture.*<sup>976</sup>

Yet, Nchwe does not expect women writers to challenge men's social authority.

*A woman writer must take a valiant self-reliant stand which in no way shall be taken to overthrow men ... Women's liberation is beyond the relationship between men and women. It is beyond being freed from man's oppression, but it is the first phase of our struggle to reaffirm our role in the struggle for total liberation.*<sup>977</sup>

The late 1970s witnessed a glance at the horizon of men's literary world: female voices focussing on the exhibition of women's perspectives. Of course, these pioneering female authors were few and far between. And it was only in the course of the 1980s that female authors became more conscious of the discriminative forces denying women their agency as social actors. Yet, they started a movement of women writers which eventually continued to grow. Writers such as Tlali and Kuzwayo, demonstrated that Black Consciousness could be *expanded to accommodate womanism*, by giving voice to the concerns of women and documenting their accomplishments. Tlali and Kuzwayo were concerned with conveying to their readers the fact that oppression was being shared between both men and women, whose sufferings had equal significance.

Most of the women's writings referred to in the remainder of this chapter, were in fact accomplished during the 1980s. Those which were written in the late 1970s, such as Muriel at Metropolitan and Amandla, reveal a fairly conventional BC understanding of social and political issues. The development of black South African feminist or womanist thought hence, post-dated the BC writings referred to above.<sup>978</sup> Until the beginning of the 1980s, male writers did not even seem to pay attention to the absence of female colleagues. The first panel on feminism in literary studies was only introduced at the annual Association of University English Teachers of Southern Africa (AUETSA) conference in 1982. None of the contributors to Michael Chapman's casebook Soweto Poetry, published in 1982, raised any significant questions about the presentation of women. In the introduction to the book,

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<sup>976</sup> Interview by Boitumelo Mofokeng with Manokwe Nchwe, in M. Boitumelo: 'Women writers speak' (Staffrider, vol.2, no.4, November/December 1979, p. 61).

<sup>977</sup> Ibid., pp. 60-61.

<sup>978</sup> D. Brown: 'Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity' (Current Writing, vol.9, no.1, Durban 1997, p.23).



Chapman speaks only of the ‘spokesmen’ of the BCM, namely Steve Biko, Nyameko Pityana and Onkgoptse Tiro.<sup>979</sup>

### 7.5. Women’s writings

*The African woman writer is generally not a hater of men, but a woman singing her song and the song of the society as she sees it. She may sing a dirge of a war song every now and then, but she sings songs of hope, love, redemption and the possibility of justice, coalition, self-respect and empowerment for her gender as well.*<sup>980</sup>

Notably, some black women writers indeed interspersed their novels with songs, verse and reiterated phrases, thereby recalling women’s traditional mission of cultural custody, predominantly performed through singing and story-telling. Yet, as much as they played on historical features, they also wrote in accordance with the political climate in which their writings emerged. The classics of South African womanist writings came after the heyday of Black Consciousness and took for granted its ideological backing. This, however, proved also true with regard to the gender dynamics presented by female writers. Speaking about the ‘heroines’ of her writings, Miriam Tlali said:

*They play a subordinate role because they are not allowed to come to the forefront. If they were allowed by the system – and by the men – they would.*<sup>981</sup>

This statement, given at the end of the 1980s, reflects on many pioneering works of black South African women. On the surface, they mirrored the very patriarchal structures of society. Female characters were portrayed in roles which often appear subordinate and peripheral. Most significantly, the female characters themselves support the negation and denial of their individuality in the men’s world. It seems as if the female protagonists were projects of the authors own unconscious adherence to patriarchal structures. The writings can nevertheless be seen as ground-breaking in that they challenged the traditional silence of Black women. It was the very act of writing that proved the social transgressiveness of a female author. Miriam Tlali illustrates the social and legislative disabilities black women had to surmount in order to publish their works as follows:

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<sup>979</sup> M. Chapman (ed.): Soweto Poetry, p. 17.

<sup>980</sup> M. Kolawole: Womanism and African Consciousness, pp. 85-86.

<sup>981</sup> Interview by C. Lockett with M. Tlali, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): Between the Lines, p. 75.

*The publishers – Ravan Press – were faced with the question of how they were to draw up a contract of agreement with me because I was (and still am) considered a minor. My husband would not sign the contract because he had not written the book and did not see why he should do it for me when I was in full control of all my mental faculties.<sup>982</sup>*

Many women writers describe their life as authors as being full of contradictions between ‘fighting, being mothers and writing.’ For Ellen Kuzwayo, the question had been ‘whether to abandon my job and starve and write.’<sup>983</sup> After years of consideration, she eventually decided on writing. The very fact that Tlali wrote at all in the early 1970s was a great step forward for black women’s writing. It broke the silence black women had been imprisoned in, whether state, culturally or self imposed.

### 7.5.1. Semi-autobiographical writings: Miriam Tlali – pioneering womanism

Miriam Tlali set up a new generation of women writers. Her writings span personal and political events from the beginnings of the forced removals in the 1950s until the end of apartheid. Although Tlali showed the interaction of class, race and gender subjugation even in her earliest works, she never directly discusses gender oppression or calls for its dismissal. It is often argued that Tlali’s illustrations of women’s deferent attitudes towards men in fact reflected her own adherence to gender roles as defined by BC.<sup>984</sup> According to Tlali, however, it had been the anger about her social marginality which motivated her to compose her socio-economic protests in the form of the semi-autobiographical fiction Muriel at Metropolitan, published in 1975. Muriel at Metropolitan was based partly on Tlali’s experiences as a worker in the ‘Mayfair Radio’ departmental store, which she described as follows in an interview with Rosemary Jolly:

*I worked in this store, all the time striving for a better position, fighting hard and so on. It was so painful – to see what was happening, and to experience also what was happening to the black customers and other black workers in the store... And to be part of it. By that time I knew that all the intricacies were legal, because I had studied African Administration and I had had a lot of reading about this...The*

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<sup>982</sup> M. Tlali: ‘Remove the Chains. South African Censorship and the Black Writer’ (Index on Censorship, no 6, 1984, p. 26) See also: M. Tlali: ‘In search of Books’, in M. Chapman (ed.): Soweto Poetry, pp. 44: To a black person, a book is a luxury item ... of course I always wanted to read books by Nadine Gordimer and André Brink and black writers from here and all over Africa, but could not. The Johannesburg public library has only recently been open to all races. I dared not even step into the Pretoria State Library which, in 1975, had requested me to grant permission for my book to be read there!

<sup>983</sup> Interview by C. Clayton with E. Kuzwayo, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): Between the Lines, p. 65.

<sup>984</sup> S. Christensen: Women Write Back, p. 16.

*store was like a kind of stage where the whole of the South African scenario was being played out.*<sup>985</sup>

Muriel, the protagonist, is a black working mother employed in the secretarial office of Metropolitan Radio, a white owned firm in Johannesburg. The firm sells a wide variety of items ranging from electronic appliances to furniture and coal-fired stoves. Most of it is sold on hire purchase and when the customers fail to pay, the merchandise is re-possessed, overhauled and re-sold again. In a highly sensible and detailed way, Muriel describes minor occurrences in her every-day life, eventually revealing the complexity of the different characters and the relations amongst each other. Muriel at Metropolitan is not a political statement but the mindful narrative of a skilled black working mother, caught 'between two worlds'; working in a white-owned firm, dealing with black customers, checking the latter's passports and writing them reminders.<sup>986</sup> She knows her personal values and exhibits a rising black consciousness towards her white colleagues. Yet, this inner rebellion seldom finds outward expression. According to Alvarez-Pereyre, Miriam Tlali does not seek to 'get a message across', but simply shows human relationships as truthfully as possible as she sees them around her.<sup>987</sup> This, however, only proves true on first sight.

Christensen, who analyses Tlali's work under the premise of a missing feminist consciousness, argues that Tlali's black women characters remain too reluctant to assert gender equality and challenge men's capacity. Analysing 'Muriel and Metropolitan', Christensen refers to the fact that the protagonist, herself prevented by tradition from challenging the male sex, does not relate her low social status and economic exploitation to the actual exploiter, her male employer. Instead, she blames her white female colleagues, who are privileged in racial terms, but still oppressed in terms of patriarchy. Whereas Black female characters are usually addressed as 'women,' white female characters are frequently called 'ladies', which identifies their privilege to move without restriction, to take care of their appearance and to possess money and power. The fact that it is not the employer but the privileged employees who are blamed, is supposed to reveal a lack of class consciousness on the part of the protagonist – and, perhaps, the author as well.

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<sup>985</sup> Interview by Rosemarie Jolly with Miriam Tlali, in D. Attridge and R. Jolly (eds.): Writing South Africa. Literature, apartheid and democracy, 1970-1995, pp. 143-44.

<sup>986</sup> Interview by Rosemarie Jolly with Miriam Tlali, in D. Attridge and R. Jolly (eds.): Writing South Africa. Literature, apartheid and democracy, 1970-1995, p. 143. 'Between Two Worlds' was the title Tlali had initially chosen for her work.

<sup>987</sup> Alvarez-Pereyre, J.: Images of Power in the South African Novel. The Novels of Miriam Tlali' (Matatu, vol. 2., no. 3,4, 1988, p. 113).

Indeed, there are no signs of solidarity among women of different colours in Muriel at Metropolitan. By contrast, the white women, overtly exhibit the very patterns of apartheid, perfectly exemplify the notion of 'female parasitism.' It is the white women who endorse apartheid on the individual level and thereby prescribe any feeling of solidarity for the sake of femininity. Muriel's adherence to traditional gender relations becomes apparent in her relations with black men.

*'Would you like me to bring you anything from the shops, my child? Don't be afraid to send me.?' 'No, thanks Johannes' I said. I was reluctant to send him. How could I? He was a man and I was a woman. According to our custom, a woman does not send a man. We reserve a place, an elevated place, for our men.'*<sup>988</sup>

With regard to their racist attitude, it would be misleading to interpret Muriel's hostility towards her female colleagues as a sign of lacking gender or class consciousness.<sup>989</sup> By contrast, it proves Muriel's rejection of acting 'non-white' and can be interpreted in terms of womanism.<sup>990</sup> In an Interview with Rosemary Jolly, Tlali states, that the very intention of the didactic she used was, in fact, the call for a revolution.

*I was creating my own platform, it was deliberate...I didn't care to adhere to the so-called aesthetic ...It would waste my time. What I was interested in was to get anybody, any African who read the book, to be conscious of the system.'*<sup>991</sup>

Tlali's own life story leaves no space for the belief in a multiracial sisterhood, when she talks about her waged work as an office cleaner, her reflective vocation as a 'writing activist', preceded by the painful process of self definition as a human being.<sup>992</sup>

*I read to learn all the time those books that instil me in the sense of 'being'. Only those people who have rid themselves of the joke of political, economic and mental enslavement can afford to read for pleasure and escape. How can I escape from condemnation when it is perpetually with you?'<sup>993</sup>*

Tlali's later works exhibit a growing militancy and political commitment which goes along with a rising awareness of women's issues, particularly sexual discrimination. Amandla, published in 1980, gives evidence of Tlali's growing dedication to political resistance. As a

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<sup>988</sup> M. Tlali: Muriel at Metropolitan, p. 21.

<sup>989</sup> Ibid, pp. 42-22.

<sup>990</sup> M. Tlali. 'Remove the Chains. South African Censorship and the Black Writer' (Index on Censorship, no 6, 1984), p. 26.

<sup>991</sup> Interview by Rosemarie Jolly with Miriam Tlali, in D. Attridge and R. Jolly (eds.): Writing South Africa. Literature, apartheid and democracy, 1970-1995, p. 144.

<sup>992</sup> Ibid, pp. 141-145.

result of the events of 1976, deference is replaced by anger and the call for change. She also shows a growing womanist awareness.<sup>994</sup> This, however, does not deny the fact that Tlali used *Amandla* as a weapon in continuing the political struggle towards freedom, rather than analysing the problems of women. It is clear from her comment that:

*The system had become more oppressive. It had become, you know, openly so, almost trying to destroy us, and I decided to hit at it without any reservation at all. That is what this book is about.*<sup>995</sup>

The theme of power is evident from the very beginning of the book. *Amandla* is the Zulu word for 'power.' Beneath the title there is a black fist shown raised against barbed wire, foregrounded against the red background of the cover.

Her following works *Mihloti* (1984) and *Footprints in the Quag* (1989) bear testimony to the particular oppressions Black women were subjected to.

*The fact that our culture is being destroyed. Like with Paballo, the one who moves around the townships when she doesn't know where to go (after being maltreated by her husband and her sons-in-law.) Because the men are so frustrated [and] seem intimidated by the choices that are made by women ...Those are some of the things I left out in this book [Muriel at Metropolitan] [things that] emphasise the plight of women. There were cases, for instance, where a woman would want to buy a radio and the husband would resist ... she would have the money and she wouldn't be able to do anything with it.*<sup>996</sup>

*Mihloti* ('tears'), a collection of writings including journalism, interviews, travelogues and short stories, broke new ground for Black women writers in South Africa. It illustrated the sufferings of black women under the apartheid regime. 'Detour into detention', initially published in *Staffrider* under the title 'Soweto Hijack' reports on the experiences Tlali had alongside other women when she was violently arrested and detained on her way to Biko's funeral. The two interviews included in *Mihloti*, 'Leah Koae: The Dressmaker' and 'Lilian Ngoyi: A Gallant Leader', were forerunners of Kuzwayo's portraiture of heroic black women in *Call me women*. Ngoyi, the former president of the FSAW who organised and led both women's mass protests in Pretoria in 1955 and 1956, is presented as a people's patriot. Leah Koae, by contrast, is an unknown dressmaker who sews clothes for township women and

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<sup>993</sup> M. Tlali: 'In search of Books', in M. Chapman (ed.): *Soweto Poetry*, pp. 45.

<sup>994</sup> S. Christensen: *Women Write Back*, p. 34.

<sup>995</sup> Interview by Rosemarie Jolly with Miriam Tlali, in D. Attridge and R. Jolly (eds.): *Writing South Africa. Literature, apartheid and democracy, 1970-1995*, p. 145. J. Alvarez-Pereyre.: *Images of Power in the South African Novel. The Novels of Miriam Tlali* (*Matatu*, vol. 2., no. 3,4, 1988, pp. 115-116).

<sup>996</sup> Interview by Rosemarie Jolly with Miriam Tlali, in D. Attridge and R. Jolly (eds.): *Writing South Africa. Literature, apartheid and democracy, 1970-1995*, p. 146.

children. The conversation between Tlali and Koae is neither political nor sophisticated, it is merely a chat centring around everyday matters, and Koae's sewing job. By according the legendary heroine and the unknown dressmaker equal importance in black women's struggle for survival, Tlali emphasised the feeling and attitude of *ubuntu* among the female characters of her stories.<sup>997</sup>

Tlali's growing awareness of both political and gender issues did not directly prove contradictory. Tlali did not intend to challenge but to expand the BC ideology in order to incorporate gender policies. The overriding emphasis on unity between men and women reveals that gender issues were never supposed to undermine black solidarity. The semi-autobiographical status of Tlali's novels therefore seem to imply that she herself accepted her subordinate position in the black community. Tlali hence seemed to identify herself as a womanist in the sense defined by Chikenwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. According to the latter, a woman 'must accept a more lowly position in life, having a mate as mate a man in reduced circumstances, with whom she is equal'<sup>998</sup> and whom she must empower physically as well as psychologically.

Tlali openly stated her adherence to womanism and endorsed the principle of black solidarity that actually prescribed the separation of black women's issues from the national struggle.<sup>999</sup> What is strikingly significant, is her focus on the portrayal of black women as individual characters. The very significance of their oppression is not directly challenged but at least named.

*Without a way to name our pain, we are also without the words to articulate our pleasure. Indeed, a fundamental task of black critical thinkers has been the struggle to break with the hegemonic modes of seeing, thinking, and being that block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory. Without this, how can we challenge and invite non-black allies and friends to dare to look at us differently, to dare to break their colonizing gaze?<sup>1000</sup>*

Self-naming is very central to African world views as naming assumes an almost sacred status in many African societies. A child's name is not only determined by the African tradition but diverse considerations such as family traits and achievements, lineal

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<sup>997</sup> S. Christensen: *Women Write Back*, p. 38.

<sup>998</sup> C.O. Ogunyemi: 'Womansim: The dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English' (*Signs*, vol. 11, no.1., p. 66).

<sup>999</sup> S. Christensen: *Women Write Back*, p. 32.

<sup>1000</sup> b. hooks: *Black Looks*, p. 2.

peculiarities or divine guidance.<sup>1001</sup> Self-healing entails correcting the representation of African women as if they exist in some subterranean world, tongue-tied and demobilised.<sup>1002</sup> By naming the invisible forces and discovering the causes of women's victimisation Tlali also illustrates the factual *self-imprisonment* of women. Women's place in the community is no longer romanticised in terms of communal homogeneity and harmony but realistically illustrated as a position often at odds with the community's masculinist perspectives.<sup>1003</sup> Tlali thereby demonstrates how women themselves support the negation and denial of their individuality in the men's world. Writing about the 'invisible' barriers a female author faces within the black community, Tlali worded her experiences in this regard as follows:

*The unwritten perplexities facing an aspirant African woman writer are enormous. They are even more 'deadly' and much incapacitating because they are not easily discernible....No one really takes her moaning about the problems and inconveniences she suffers because no one (or very few people) expects her to say anything about her likes and dislikes, less still, about her very demeaned status right down there at the very base of the social pyramids.*<sup>1004</sup>

Throughout 'Remove the Chains', Tlali not only questions the ideological notion of Black Solidarity, but also that of black sisterhood, whose fragility she had to experience once she followed an individual, successful career.

In the 1980s, when the liberation struggle had gained momentum, Tlali was ranked alongside established Black writers such as Es'kia Mphahlele, Mtutulezi Matshoba and Mongane Serote. From its initiation in 1978, Miriam Tlali had a regular column in the *Staffrider*. Furthermore, she was a member of the board of the Skotaville Press. By the time Tlali's collection of short stories Footprints in the Quag was published in 1989, she had already declared herself a womanist writer. In an interview with Lockett she declared her rejection of being called a feminist writer 'in the narrow Western kind of way.'<sup>1005</sup> In her comments outside her fiction, Tlali had already moved towards a more militant position in terms of gender issues, reaching far beyond what she was prepared to show in the stories. In her stories, Tlali was prepared to recognise the damaged and distorted remnants of tribal culture as contributors to women's suffering. Yet, she proved unwilling to admit that only Black women would invoke necessary changes if they achieve positions of authority. Tlali does not

<sup>1001</sup> M. Kolawole: Womanism and African Consciousness, p. 26.

<sup>1002</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>1003</sup> D. Driver: 'M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng' in M. Trump (ed.): Rendering Things Visible, p. 252.

<sup>1004</sup> M. Tlali: 'Remove the Chains. South African Censorship and the Black Writer' (Index on Censorship, no 6, 1984, p. 26).

<sup>1005</sup> Interview by C. Lockett with M. Tlali, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): Between the Lines, p. 74.

attempt to reconcile the gender and race oppression simultaneously. Hence there remains an incompatibility between a truly liberating womanism and the desire for a black community that will stand united against racial oppression.<sup>1006</sup> The endings of most of the stories in Footprints in the Quag, are major examples of this attitude. Women's eventual illustration as helpless and defeated victims indicate that womanism will succeed in liberating women only if those remnants of Black tradition which forbid self-assertion in the presence of men, are discarded. Tlali's stories mirror the grim reality: the shortcomings of men may be discussed by women but the guilty parties may not be confronted directly. Women are reluctant to fight back, to say 'No.' They accept their social status by putting themselves in an even lower position. Significantly, womanist discussions generally take place in isolation from male characters in order to avoid their men's response. The reader is left with the sense that women as individuals are unlikely to change the lives of men with whom they associate. In her interviews, however, Tlali expresses a far more progressive attitude towards the emancipation of women.

*Liberation can never come without liberating women ....Many women protect their husband's egos by playing up to the fact that they are merely supportive, and they really know they are the very ones who are behind the forceful nature of the men.*<sup>1007</sup>

It is also difficult to say, if Tlali was aware of the BC's male-favouring discourse. She usually waves in and out, using 'black people' as well as the masculine pronoun. When she refers to her own experience, she utilises the neutral term 'black person.' The gender neutral 'black reader' is continuously referred to in the gender specific male pronoun.<sup>1008</sup> Apparently, Tlali accepted the masculine pronoun as universally inclusive – also in terms of her own person.

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<sup>1006</sup> S. Christensen: Women Write Back, p. 40.

<sup>1007</sup> Interview by C. Lockett with M. Tlali, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): Between the Lines, p. 75.

<sup>1008</sup> K. Yates: The Madness of the Black Man On His Own, p. 111.



### 7.5.2. Autobiographies

The considerable lack of literature conducted by and written about black women seems to indicate an overall absence of Black female activists. Vast evidence of women's participation is however given by the rising number of political autobiographies written by prominent women such as Winnie Mandela, Lilian Ngoyi, Ellen Kuzwayo, Mamphela Ramphele, Twenjwe Mtintso, Cheryl Carolus and Victory Mxenge. Black women writing their autobiographies were driven by various motives. According to Ellen Kuzwayo:

*The idea was to share my experiences in my practice as a social worker with as many people as possible – the experiences of black women I worked with during a period of about 12 years from 1963 to 1976. This was the real motif for writing this book. I tried to give a record of the lives of black women and the contributions they made to the development of this country, which people just close their eyes to.*<sup>1009</sup>

Ramphele Mamphela explains her motive by referring to the opposition to her attempt:

*There are a lot of women who even today disagree with the fact that I have written my autobiography, because they think that there are certain things that shouldn't be said publicly. I happen to disagree. Nobody thinks that there is anything wrong with Mandela writing his autobiography. Maybe they're right, I'm too young, but then I've done a lot for my age and I wouldn't be able to go on to the next stage of my life with the burden from the past. So many things had to be written.*<sup>1010</sup>

All of these autobiographical writings are transgressive in that they challenge the traditional silence of Black women. It is the very act of writing that unmasks the female autobiographer's desire for cultural and literary authority. The act of writing her own life story reveals both the sense of isolation and identification of a female autobiographer. On the one hand, the autobiographer believes in the self as a discrete, finite unit of society. Yet, a black woman's identity is significantly shaped through the sense of identification, interdependence and community.<sup>1011</sup>

*When the publishing process of the book was coming to an end, I noticed that the publishers had edited so many women out. I had to tell them to push me out of my book and put the women in because those were the people who inspired me to write the book. Those were the women who gave me support right through*

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<sup>1009</sup> Interview by C. Clayton with E. Kuzwayo, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): Between the Lines, p. 59.

<sup>1010</sup> Interview by K. Yates and P. Gqola with M. Ramphele, in K. Yates: The Madness of the Black Man On His Own, p. 137.

<sup>1011</sup> M. Daymond: 'Seizing Meaning – Language and Ideology in the Autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini' (Journal of Literary Studies, vol. 9, no.1, April 1993, pp. 24-27).

*the writing. Their lives became so powerful for me. Some of them have long been dead, but their lives are still very much felt in the community because of the impact and contributions they made.*<sup>1012</sup>

Considering the interpretation of a black person's, especially black woman's, autobiography, one has to keep in mind the significance of interpersonal relationships in black people's self-definition. By telling the narrative of her life, the black autobiographer claims her power to exist, doing so in a very African sense 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.'<sup>1013</sup> The self is always conceived as the member of an oppressed group. The 'self belongs to the people and the people find a voice in the self.'<sup>1014</sup> Autobiographies serve as sources of inspiration. The autobiographer's experiences are representative for those sharing his/her oppression. Attempts to reconstruct black 'herstory' pays special attention to the way women expressed themselves in their agency as cultural custodians of tales. According to Mohanty:

*The tale-telling tradition contains what is poetically true about our struggles. The tales are one of the places where the most subversive elements of our history can be safely lodged, for over the years the tellers concert fact into images which are funny, vulgar, amazing or magically real. These tales encode what is overtly threatening to the powerful into covert images of resistance so that they can live on in times when overt struggles are impossible or build courage in moments when it is. To create tales is a collective process accomplished within a community bound by a particular historical purpose ....They suggest an altering or re-defining of the parameters of political process and action. They bring to the surface factors which would otherwise disappear or at least go very far underground.*<sup>1015</sup>

The recipient of an autobiography is usually less interested in dates, names or places. It is significant that he can relate the individual story of another person to the way he himself perceives life. Both, the act of writing and reading an autobiography can be regarded as attempts to come to term with one's own life. According to Margaret Daymond, black women's autobiographies have to be read as instructive assertions of selfhood which triumph over the political negation of their power. Yet, as she also points out, language and interaction with cultural codes are essential means by which to create an understanding of social patterns. Writing in the language of another culture – the culture of ones own

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<sup>1012</sup> Interview by Adeola James with Ellen Kuzwayo, in A. James.: In Their Own Voices, p. 53.

<sup>1013</sup> M. Daymond: 'Seizing Meaning – Language and Ideology in the Autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini' (Journal of Literary Studies, vol. 9, no.1, April 1993, p. 25).

<sup>1014</sup> K. Yates: The Madness of the Black Man On His Own, pp. 106-7.

<sup>1015</sup> C.T. Mohanty: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism, p. 35.

oppression as such - may impede black women's attempt to illustrate how the meaning of their life is constructed.<sup>1016</sup>

Autobiographical writings are intended to entrench women's awareness in terms of the social position they hold and the special oppression they are subjected to. An autobiography can be regarded as both a communal work as well as a subjective testimony to the history of an individual. The autobiography is one part of the story of a collective.<sup>1017</sup> Dates, names, and places are significant to the autobiography as a historical testimony. In the foreword to Call me Woman, Bessie Head wrote: "a shadow of South Africa has been written [b]ooks like these will be the Bible one day for the younger generation."<sup>1018</sup>

#### 7.5.2.1. The trade unionist: Strikes have followed me all my life

Ellen Mashinini, a highly active trade unionist, published her autobiography in 1989. Strikes have followed me all my life tells the story of a woman who, despite her poverty and poor education, works herself up into the highest ranks of trade union work. Her story also tells of the price she had to pay for both her political activity and her existence as a black woman under apartheid. She illustrates her life as a mother, worker and wife, her personal growth in the political arena of trade union activity as well as her imprisonment, the torture she received and the impact it had on her personality. Born in 1929, Mashinini's story embraces 60 years, exemplifying the rise of a womanist consciousness as demonstrated by the following description of herself and her attitude:

*I resent being dominated by a man and I resent being dominated by white people, be they man or woman. I don't know if that is being politicised. It is just trying to say, 'I am human. I exist. I am a complete person.'*<sup>1019</sup>

There is a life story beyond the assertiveness exhibited in this notion. The beginning of Mashinini's autobiography reflects the psychological agony apartheid exerted on her womanhood and self-perception.

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<sup>1016</sup> M. Daymond: 'Seizing Meaning – Language and Ideology in the Autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini' (Journal of Literary Studies, vol. 9, no.1, April 1993, pp. 24).

<sup>1017</sup> K. Yates: The Madness of the Black Man On His Own, p. 105.

<sup>1018</sup> Bessie Head: Foreword, in E. Kuzwayo: Call Me Woman, p. XV.

<sup>1019</sup> E. Mashinini: Strikes Have Followed me all my Life, p. 24.

*This thinking that anything that is light skinned is beautiful has caused so much harm. I don't think anyone escaped it. I myself used skin lighteners when I was working ...Now black consciousness has saved us from hating the colour of our skin. We used to wear wigs, too, to help give us the appearance of being fair, and we used to have struggles with our own hair, to make its straighter. And when we had our photographs taken the negatives would be lightened for us, to make us look as much as white people as possible.<sup>1020</sup>*

An adherence to white norms is revealed, causing eventually the death of her child.

*Then, in my ignorance, I didn't see that anything was wrong with them. At that time black people wanted their skin to be lighter. Those children seemed to me to be beautiful, with their lovely light yellow complexions. An the jaundice was never diagnosed.<sup>1021</sup>*

Black women's refusal to transmit private matters into the public arena had been previously discussed in this thesis, particularly in context with feminist critiques. Mashinini indicates the insignificance of feminist demands when drawing upon the framework of power relations within the family.

*In our tradition, when a girl married, she was married, body and soul, into the family of her husband. After the wedding, before she went to live with her husband, all the elderly women...would convene a meeting where she was told what to do when she go to her new home. All the taboos were spelt out – how to behave to her husband, her parents in law. And especially she was told never to expose the dirty linen in public...wife battering was regarded as dirty linen and a woman would suffer that in silence and never admit to a doctor what was the real cause of her injuries...but she didn't mention divorce. That wasn't the language we spoke.<sup>1022</sup>*

Although she supervised both male and female colleagues at work and confronted white employers with the demands of the labourers, she never sought to negotiate domestic patterns with her husband at home. According to Mashinini, as a working mother

*You would be torn in two because you were at work and in your mind you were at home... My husband would not be rushing to come home...he would go wherever he wanted to and because he was a man it had to be so. I couldn't question him, or ask him, and anyway when he got home my time was interfered with because I had to have water to give him to wash hands...My husband would sit and read the newspaper and sometimes I would wonder if he really understood what he read, or if he just knew that the white boss sits when he comes home, and reads his newspaper.<sup>1023</sup>*

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<sup>1020</sup> E. Mashinini: *Strikes Have Followed me all my Life*, p. 9.

<sup>1021</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>1022</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>1023</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.

Mashinini's awareness of her triple oppression becomes evident when she portrays her life as the wife of an exploited labourer who himself is so victimised that he seeks to counteract the loss of his manhood through the consumer industry of the very system he is exploited by.

*That was something none of us could fathom about our men in those days, especially the uneducated ones, who would spend all their money on clothes imported from the USA. Perhaps they were trying to maintain their dignity, which they felt was stripped from them in the terrible oppression they suffered and they needed to look smart in those imported clothes as if to say...Look, I am human after all...because [at work] they may have screamed and shouted at him for some mistake anyone could have made.*<sup>1024</sup>

Her political work does not keep Mashinini from identifying with motherhood in the first place. Her entry into waged labour and trade unionism did not derive from her choice to pursue an individual career but rather to serve her family and her community. The notion of *ubuntu* determines her life at home and her agency for the black labour force. The degree to which she perceives herself as a member of her community is manifested in her fear of being rejected after her imprisonment.

*The community can never accept you having been a state witness...after all the trauma, to go back to the community and be rejected again. It means you are killing this person twice over.*<sup>1025</sup>

Mashinini's womanist consciousness has been shaped through the white women she came in contact with. Due to her confrontation with white police women who tortured her, white privileged colleagues and female security agents in the factories, she hardly views white women as birds in the golden cage but as active agents of apartheid. Accordingly limited is her association with mothers from the white world.<sup>1026</sup>

*White mothers have problems of their own, such as having to see one of their boys leave to fight on the border, we can understand them, because we also must lose our children – the security forces or to fight against apartheid. But white mothers in this country do not have to suffer anxiety over what we call breadline problems...No. Our problems are not the same.*<sup>1027</sup>

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<sup>1024</sup> E. Mashinini: *Strikes Have Followed me all my Life*, p. 11.

<sup>1025</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>1026</sup> M. Daymond: 'Seizing Meaning – Language and Ideology in the Autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini' (*Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 9, no.1, April 1993, p, 28).

<sup>1027</sup> E. Mashinini: *Strikes Have Followed me all my Life*, p. 40

### 7.5.2.2. The social worker: Call me woman

*We've always been stereotyped and I think it is this stereotyping that has given the black woman an extra burden as black and a woman*<sup>1028</sup>

Kuzwayo's autobiography Call Me Woman tells about the struggle of the black South African people in general - and about the trials, tribulations and triumphs of black women in particular. Call Me Woman is a direct response to Mtutuzeli Matshoba's Call Me not a Man, published in 1979, which illustrates the suffering of a male migrant worker and opens with the words: "For neither am I a man in the eyes of the law...Nor am I a man in the eyes of my fellow man"<sup>1029</sup> Kuzwayo, by contrast, does not portray her female characters as demoralised. She even states 'Women somehow seem to cope with the pressures more successfully than men.'<sup>1030</sup> Call Me Woman is the statement of a woman who refuses to be marginalized or subordinated. Kuzwayo's writings give voice to the way racism, classism and sexism work together.

*as I shall stress time and time again in this book, the majority of black women for too long have been discriminated against as women and as blacks*<sup>1031</sup>

Kuzwayo's writings are convenient contributions to the reconstruction of gender historiography. She challenges the lack of scientific documentation by shaping the materials of the past through memory, serving the needs of the present consciousness. In addition, Kuzwayo confirms the oral tradition by pictures of her family members and the family homestead, her aunt's documentation of the family history, the records of her father's educational and political achievements obtained from the archives at Lovedale and her assistance in making the film Tsiamelo – A place of Goodness.

Call Me Woman also includes a brief chronical history of women's political campaigns from 1913 to 1976. Well known female activists and political widows such as Winnie Mandela and Albertina Sisulu are accorded recognition in the same as women like Annie Silinga, who fought against pass laws all her life on an individual basis are. Kuzwayo's work supports the general claim of black gender activists to re-define and re-inscribe images of women as

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<sup>1028</sup> Kuzwayo in an interview with Adeola James, in James, A.: In Their Own Voices. African Women Writers Talk, p. 55.

<sup>1029</sup> M. Matshoba: Call Me Not a Man, p. 18.

<sup>1030</sup> E. Kuzwayo: Call Me Woman, p. 51

<sup>1031</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

complex human beings. She therefore needs to confront multiple levels of otherness, as Toni Morrison already stated

*We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and in no way coincidentally, in the experiences of those with whom we have come in contact ... And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare these centers with the 'raceless' one with which we all of us most familiar.*<sup>1032</sup>

Call Me Woman is a celebration of the resourcefulness of black women, and exhibits an anti-individualism that coheres with the philosophy of communalism.<sup>1033</sup> The way Kuzwayo evokes African community life and tradition indicates that she conceived two different groups of recipients. Firstly, black women to whom she dedicates this work, and secondly to white women whom she wants to educate on the life lead by black South African.<sup>1034</sup> The latter assumption becomes especially evident when Kuzwayo refers to the 'unwritten common code of ethics' which is respected as the basis of black communities' day to day activities. While Tlali's fictional characters are generally restricted to watch the struggle from the sidelines, because 'in reality they are not allowed to come to the forefront'<sup>1035</sup>, Kuzwayo shows the very reality of contemporary women's lives and stresses the strength these women obtain from the struggle of survival.<sup>1036</sup> Kuzwayo's writing is marked by a compassionate understanding of the lives of women in a profoundly difficult social context.<sup>1037</sup>

*My life as a social worker widened my horizons. It is easier to serve your community in that way. My aim is to serve my community.*<sup>1038</sup>

Although she focuses mainly on urban women, Kuzwayo seeks to incorporate female representatives from very different areas of the black community. She celebrates women who became professionals in fields from which women have previously been excluded such as Law and Medicine. She commends the resilience of shebeen queens, defends the actions of prostitutes and shoplifters. Kuzwayo, who received a Christian education in a missionary school, comments critically on the *famo* dances, in which women disrobe while dancing outrageously. She openly shows her disapproval of 'this ungodly' form of entertainment, but

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<sup>1032</sup> M. Kolawole: Womanism and African Consciousness, p. 169. (Toni Morrison as quoted in C. Wall: Changing Out Our Own Words, p. 1)

<sup>1033</sup> D. Driver: 'M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng' in M. Trump (ed.): Rendering Things Visible, p. 230.

<sup>1034</sup> Interview by C. Clayton with E. Kuzwayo, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): Between the Lines, p. 68.

<sup>1035</sup> Interview by C. Lockett with : Tlali, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): Between the Lines, p. 75.

<sup>1036</sup> Ibid, p. 230.

<sup>1037</sup> Ibid, p. 245.

<sup>1038</sup> Interview by C. Clayton with E. Kuzwayo, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): Between the Lines, p. 68.

exhibits compassion for the dancers she portrays as mothers who are earning money for their children and are being beaten up by their husbands.<sup>1039</sup>

Throughout her book, Kuzwayo refers to the high crime rate among black people as a product of poverty and state repression. Significantly, she often mentions rape. Although she never directly relates the high rape rate to the patriarchal African culture, she regards it as resulting primarily from the black man's degeneration under apartheid.<sup>1040</sup>

*I wish to invite the readers of this book to look without prejudice beyond such acts as rape, theft, murder, and others in the category of crime I would like to ask ourselves in all sincerity whether hereditary tendencies in individuals are the only explanation for degenerate human behaviour. Have we ever taken into consideration the effects of what we might call 'institutionalised crime' against the people in South Africa?*<sup>1041</sup>

She shows concern for the old age pensioner and the domestic servant who departed from her own children in order to raise those of her white employer but is nevertheless left without pension in her old age. Professional women such as the taxi driver Mrs. Seokelo, who enter a 'no-woman's land' in order to secure their children a living, gain Kuzwayo's respect for their profession.<sup>1042</sup> At the very end of her book, Kuzwayo includes a list of South African Black Women Lawyers who graduated between 1967 and 1982.<sup>1043</sup> Kuzwayo exhibits a high regard for women who, being caught between the duty to their husband on the one hand and social or political community responsibilities on the other, eventually prioritise *ubuntu*.<sup>1044</sup>

*The commitment of the women in my community is my commitment – to stand side by side with our men folk and our children in this long struggle to liberate ourselves and to bring about peace and justice for all in a country we love so deeply.*<sup>1045</sup>

Kuzwayo's political commitment does not derive from her wifely sense of supporting the men for their own sake but for the sake of the family, the community, the black society and,

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<sup>1039</sup> E. Kuzwayo: *Call Me Woman*, p. 30.

<sup>1040</sup> M. Daymond: 'Seizing Meaning – Language and Ideology in the Autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini' (*Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 9, no.1, April 1993, pp. 29-31).

<sup>1041</sup> E. Kuzwayo: *Call Me Woman*, p. 20.

<sup>1042</sup> *Ibid*, p. 51.

<sup>1043</sup> *Ibid*, p. 266.

<sup>1044</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99. Kuzwayo refers particularly to Winnie Nonyatsi, married to William Kgwere, Rector of the University of the North, who sacrificed "the security and peace of her own home" by engaging in student affairs apparently despite the wishes of her husband.

<sup>1045</sup> E. Kuzwayo: *Call Me Woman*, p. 263.



eventually, national liberation. Kuzwayo herself embodies the fusion of motherhood and political resistance. According to Daymond

*Kuzwayo turns on its head the Western usage of this cult (of motherhood) which would customarily signify the protagonist's willing subjugation of herself to the ideology of domesticity.*<sup>1046</sup>

Her communal activities as well her son's detention, earned her the titles 'Mother of Soweto' and 'Mother of Black Consciousness.'<sup>1047</sup> Her political activity as the only woman in the Committee of Ten in Soweto<sup>1048</sup> and the experience of being subsequently detained without charge or trial for five months in 1977-1978 give added dimension to her role as a mother. Moreover she acted as an expert witness at a 'terrorism' trial in 1978 and was a founding member of the Zamani Soweto Sisters Council and the Maggi Magaba Trust. Unlike Tholo, Kuzwayo does not hesitate to present the self as a stable and coherent subject in terms of Black Consciousness. She portrays herself in her maternal authority over the younger generation whose innovative status in the struggle she acknowledges and admires without fearing its high politicisation or militancy.<sup>1049</sup>

*I sympathise with these kids and I say, For goodness' sake, they have been traumatised ... If white children were placed in the same situation, would they probably not react the same way?*<sup>1050</sup>

By showing women as active opposition to the racist system, Tlali and Kuzwayo represent a generation of women writers, generating in the 80s, who challenged the ideologically limiting picture of black women as Mother Africa.<sup>1051</sup>

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<sup>1046</sup> M. Daymond: 'Seizing Meaning – Language and Ideology in the Autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini' (*Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 9, no.1, April 1993, pp.136-137).

<sup>1047</sup> B. Lipman: *We make Freedom: Women in South Africa*, p. 19.

<sup>1048</sup> T. Lodge: *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, pp. 353-55. The Committee of Ten was set up at a meeting initiated by the Soweto branch of the Black People's Convention in June 1977. Since the Urban Bantu Council (UBC) had been dismissed in the course of the Soweto uprisings, it was intended to establish a representative civic organisation reflecting popular aspirations in the township. Most of the Committee's members had been active in BC organisations as the Black Parents' Association. Although it pursued a reformist policy and worked through forums provided by the English press, it remained true to the non-collaborationist policy of BC organisations which originally sponsored the body. The imprisonment of the members in October 1977 was part of the government's reaction against the Committee's plan to set up a local municipal autonomy with legislative as well as revenue-raising and budgetary powers. Until 1979, the Committee predominantly functioned as a 'spokesman' body and provided a morally attractive form of community leadership. It then set up the Soweto Civic Association (SCA) in September 1979, whose campaigns primarily opposed rent increases.

<sup>1049</sup> D. Driver: 'M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng' in M. Trump (ed.): *Rendering Things Visible*, p. 238.

<sup>1050</sup> Interview by C. Clayton with E. Kuzwayo, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): *Between the Lines*, p. 61.

<sup>1051</sup> S. Christensen: *Women Write Back*, p.16.

Kuzwayo's motives are evident in the very beginning of her book when she quotes a letter from Debra Matshoba, a young mother who was detained because of her active involvement in the BCM.<sup>1052</sup> It is only towards the end of her writing that Kuzwayo reveals information concerning her own detention which parallels Matshoba's experiences.<sup>1053</sup> Kuzwayo thereby sets up her autobiography with a substitute self, a woman, whose experiences not only prove representative of Kuzwayo's own sufferings, but for the suffering of all black women, and eventually, for that of the entire black society.

*I shall tell my own story in detail in part 2 of this book. Now I should like to turn and look how other black women have managed to survive the horrible conditions thrust upon them.*<sup>1054</sup>

Kuzwayo's writing focuses far less on her individual self than is usually the case with autobiographies. In some parts she even proves reluctant to focus on rather intimate details of her life. Her self-assertion is subsumed into a general claim, asserting that the achievements of women within the black community have exceeded the limits set by patriarchy. She focuses on her own experiences only insofar as they prove valuable for 'a community deprived of its traditional moral code and values – a community lost between its old heritage and that of its colonisers.'<sup>1055</sup> She emphasises the sense of *ubuntu* her mother has taught her as well as the community support system, *matsema*, which prevented the rural community from starvation. In the text 'My life is my neighbours', Kuzwayo relates the loss of *ubuntu* in urban areas to a new kind of life that emphasised material needs rather than cultural and moral values.<sup>1056</sup> As a social worker she continuously faced poverty stricken single parent families in a society where great emphasis was placed upon the fertility of women and where the promiscuous nature of men was encouraged. Her longing for the recreation of *ubuntu* can be traced throughout her text. While recognising the impossibility of retrieving such a tradition entirely, Kuzwayo endorses the necessity of preserving traditional values in order to reconstruct them in the future. In order to provide the adolescent with moral guidelines for sexual behaviour and combat the high rate of illegitimate births, Kuzwayo suggests a return

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<sup>1052</sup> E. Kuzwayo: *Call Me Woman*, p. 3.

<sup>1053</sup> Kuzwayo was detained under Section 10 of the Terrorism Act when she was 63.

<sup>1054</sup> E. Kuzwayo: *Call Me Woman*, p. 21.

<sup>1055</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>1056</sup> Interview by C. Clayton with E. Kuzwayo, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): *Between the Lines*, pp. 59-61.

to the practices of the initiation schools and endorses customary institutions such as lobola.<sup>1057</sup>

Kuzwayo's longing for *ubuntu* appears to be motivated by the dismissal from her family in her childhood as well as the failure of her first marriage.<sup>1058</sup> Kuzwayo experienced the implications of her status as a perpetual minor in very extreme ways. According to Daymond

*Kuzwayo's narrative is pervaded by her conscious opposition to the state's control over her; it is probably why she separates her account of how apartheid legislation governed her actions as mother from her indications of what she suffered through her husband....By separating the racial and gender elements of her experience of constraints, Kuzwayo enables the narrative to suggest that her husband's behaviour was a single, personal aberration while the law's inhumanity enacts the deliberate, systematised intentions of an oppressor.*<sup>1059</sup>

She had to leave her children behind when she eventually escaped her first husband's brutality. As a divorced woman, she was prevented from being a resident and visible mother to her children. Although her husband caused her severe mental and physical harm, she dwelled neither on his treatment of her, nor on his failure in being a good father. For the sake of her children, she refused to 'expose dirty linen in public' although 'her wifely sense of what must remain private conflicts with her maternal guilt.'<sup>1060</sup> By arguing for an out-of-court settlement, she denied herself the court's power to obtain free access to her children. Her hope that her children would return to her voluntarily, eventually proved true. Like Tlali, Kuzwayo reports on oppression, but does not directly challenge it. Kuzwayo's reluctance to comment in detail on the effects patriarchy exerted upon her personal life, prevents her from making the decisions that would allow her to combat traditional practices which became obsolete and discriminative. Her energetic participation in women's organisations and women's causes can be regarded as an attempt to regain her temporarily lost motherhood. Furthermore, it might indicate that she had difficulties in being innovative and assertive in an environment where men were present.

Kuzwayo critically examines the migrant labour system and the way the white, patriarchal, capitalist government positioned black women on the basis of race and gender.

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<sup>1057</sup> E. Kuzwayo: *Call Me Woman*, p. 254.

<sup>1058</sup> D. Driver: 'M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng' in M. Trump (ed.): *Rendering Things Visible*, p. 241. Driver asserts that Kuzwayo's statements about African family frequently rather reflect a desire than historical truth, especially with regard to Kuzwayo's own story is one of homelessness,

<sup>1059</sup> M. Daymond: 'Seizing Meaning – Language and Ideology in the Autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini' (*Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 9, no.1, April 1993, p. 30).

<sup>1060</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.

*Black women who through the centuries had been viewed by the white state as unproductive in industry, as totally dependent on her male counterpart, as helpless, unintelligent to the point of being useless and stupid – the woman who much against her will had resigned herself to being labelled as ‘minor’ by the state – was suddenly plunged into a situation of accepting numerous roles of responsibility. Without warning, training or any sort of preparation, she became overnight mother, father, family administrator, counsellor, child-minder, old age caretaker and overall overseer of both family and neighbourhood affairs in a community which had been totally deprived of its active male population.<sup>1061</sup>*

Kuzwayo acknowledged the combined impact of the state’s racism on her life. She expressed outrage at being, by law, reduced to a child-like status in which she was patronisingly viewed as incapable of making responsible decisions regarding her life. When she applied for a passport to go overseas, she was asked to get official approval and permission from her next of kin, her oldest son, for the trip.

*He brushed aside my explanation that my son still lived with me at home, here I was in full control and responsible for everything, insisting that no progress could be made without my son’s permission and signature. In the frustration of having to be given permission by someone who usually needed permission from me, I was annoyed and very angry.<sup>1062</sup>*

By celebrating other women’s contributions to the community, Kuzwayo proclaims an anti-individualist position which accords to the BC notion of African community life. Kuzwayo refers to Black Consciousness as both a political commitment and a way of life.<sup>1063</sup> Like Tlali she seeks to expand BC in order to incorporate women. Thereby she understands ‘woman’ as one of the cultural terms which must, like the extended family, be re-evaluated as part of the national liberation.<sup>1064</sup>

As a BC adherent and a committed womanist, she apologises for seeing a white rather than a black doctor<sup>1065</sup> and for employing a male accountant in a woman’s organisation.<sup>1066</sup> Unlike her son, Justice Maloto, Kuzwayo herself was not directly involved in the BCM.<sup>1067</sup> She overtly states her commitment to BC and emphasis the responsibility related to being a ‘significant other’; a mother, whose son is imprisoned and banned because of his involvement in Black Consciousness.

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<sup>1061</sup> E. Kuzwayo: *Call Me Woman*, pp.12-13.

<sup>1062</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>1063</sup> D. Driver: ‘M’a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng’ in M. Trump (ed.): *Rendering Things Visible*, p. 230.

<sup>1064</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>1065</sup> E. Kuzwayo: *Call Me Woman*, p. 207

<sup>1066</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>1067</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47, p. 184.

*This spirit of victory and achievement came from the courage my son portrayed during our last sharing before he was taken away by the police. We had communicated mutual support, mutual understanding and commitment for the cause of the black man in South Africa. Much as we accepted all our shortcomings and limitations as individuals, we still believed that a contribution by every member of the black community, no matter how humble or small, can add to the efforts and contributions of many others<sup>1068</sup>*

Although Kuzwayo dedicates the book to the empowerment of women, she conforms to the masculinist discourse of the BCM, when she declares her full support of the national liberation struggle. She does not question the male favouring tendencies of the BCM, but views its terminology, social analysis and psychological approach as inclusive of all black South Africans, as is demonstrated by her remark:<sup>1069</sup>

*I emerged with a spirit of triumph. I went home with fresh determination to be committed to the struggle of the black man as long as I live.<sup>1070</sup>*

Like Tlali, Kuzwayo proves reluctant to challenge male dominance in her texts, but calls for the reconstruction of traditional gender relations in her interviews.

*But the black women in this country have had a raw deal at every point. You know, because they were women and there was this culture that discriminated against them.<sup>1071</sup> ... black women are making a tremendous contribution to their communities...and there seems to be a vendetta to stifle this; the men, somewhere, are not playing a fair game. They don't give the black women an opportunity to honestly realise their potential and to recognise that potential when it does come forth. They are doing everything to thwart it and the government has gone further: it has capitalised, in the legislation of this country, on the tradition and customs which all communities have had.<sup>1072</sup>*

Kuzwayo is not a feminist but a committed womanist as she refers the significance of black women's oppression to the legacy of apartheid in the first place.<sup>1073</sup> Kuzwayo argues that some of the sexist attitude and behaviours handed down through the African cultural tradition would have changed with the time had the white government not enforced them.<sup>1074</sup>

Call Me Women is a positive response to the marginalisation of women by BC in that it insists on women's achievements and their centrality in the black community. Nevertheless,

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<sup>1068</sup> E. Kuzwayo: Call Me Woman, p.189.

<sup>1069</sup> K. Yates: *The Madness of the Black Man On His Own*, p.115; D. Driver: 'M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng' in M. Trump (ed.):Rendering Things Visible, pp. 249-250.

<sup>1070</sup> E. Kuzwayo: Call Me Woman, p. 189.

<sup>1071</sup> Interview by C. Clayton with E. Kuzwayo, in C. MacKenzie, C. Clayton (eds.): Between the Lines, p. 63.

<sup>1072</sup> B. Lipman: We make Freedom: Women in South Africa, p.19.

<sup>1073</sup> D. Driver: 'M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng' in M. Trump (ed.):Rendering Things Visible, p. 231.

it reveals a tendency to accept the stereotypes of women presented in the texts written by black males.<sup>1075</sup> Kuzwayo views women as political participants in the struggle, in that she gives motherhood a political dimension. She even tends to use the terms 'women' and 'mother' interchangeably, according to the 'custom of my country that every mother is every child's mother.'<sup>1076</sup> Thereby she asserts motherhood to be

*the spiritual power of immanent being, but an intelligent active and angry political role.*<sup>1077</sup>

The fact, that she hardly mentions the achievements of single or childless women may indicate that she regards motherhood and marriage as women's chief destiny. Considering Kuzwayo's own biography, this seems rather unlikely, although. Due to the failure of her first marriage, she sought her own self-fulfilment in terms of community work instead of marriage and motherhood.<sup>1078</sup> By keeping the emphasis on women as mothers, Kuzwayo is nevertheless perpetuating the marginalisation of a considerable number of black women.

The works of Tlali, Mashinini and Kuzwayo show a continuing commitment to Black Consciousness as both a psychological attitude and a political movement. They portray women through a female consciousness and explore their ambiguous social status and special oppression. This is in accordance with BC's analytical approach to recognise blacks as persons whose self-worth has to be analysed in order to be healed. All writings mentioned above reveal that the traditional images of power and authority at the level of the family cell have been inverted.<sup>1079</sup> Even if not stated openly, they indirectly claim the need to abolish patriarchal social rules which became obsolete. They call for the empowerment of women and for the acknowledgement of their contributions to the struggle. Their works show that 'fighting, being mothers and writing' are not necessarily contradictory terms. By contrast, they prove them to be mutually reinforcing features from which the actual sense and strength to act as a womanist derives. According to Daymond:

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<sup>1074</sup> B. Lipman: *We make Freedom: Women in South Africa*, p. 19.

<sup>1075</sup> S. Christensen: *Women Write Back*, p. 58.

<sup>1076</sup> E. Kuzwayo: *Call Me Woman*, p. 217.

<sup>1077</sup> D. Driver: 'M'a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng' in M. Trump (ed.): *Rendering Things Visible*, p. 238.

<sup>1078</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239. Driver suggests that Kuzwayo consciously chose the term 'woman' rather than mother in order to claim some space beyond the definitions of mother in the discourse of the BCM.

<sup>1079</sup> Alvarez-Pereyre, J.: *Images of Power in the South African Novel. The Novels of Miriam Tlali* (*Matatu*, vol. 2., no. 3,4, 1988, p. 119).

*Kuzwayo demonstrates how the act of writing, of re-creating such moments of anguish, becomes in itself empowering and liberating. The double process evident here of speech becomes in itself empowering and liberating, shows how cultural strength is being created. Writing, with all the composure that it allows, becomes an act of cognitive restructuring, of forging a new basis for self-hood.*<sup>1080</sup>

Writing implies personal salvation and political community work. Kuzwayo does not need to reject motherhood in order to voice her own subjectivity, but insists on speaking from the position of motherhood.<sup>1081</sup> The influence of Black Consciousness proved restrictive in its ideological inscription of womanhood in the writings of Tlali and Kuzwayo. ‘Womanism’ is here represented in a conservative way, emphasising Black women’s role to empower men. It is hence supposed that national liberation does not only have to be prioritised in relation to women’s emancipation. Assuming that both liberations cannot be achieved simultaneously, the questions concerning women’s emancipation were excluded from the liberation struggle for the sake of unity.

Feminist theories were rejected. The actual conditions, black women were living in, however, forced them into even more independent roles. According to Kuzwayo it is not a question of whether but when women go from protest to challenge.

*The divorce rate is becoming very high in the towns for the simple reason that women don’t take anything sitting any more: most of the men hide behind custom when it suits them and they throw it out when they don’t need it. Many of the women, especially here in town...have stopped and said “What is happening? Who am I? Who are we? Where do we come from?” And I think this embodies the “why” women have taken the stand they have taken – they are beginning to realise that they are just as human as their menfolk and just as human as anyone else on earth.*<sup>1082</sup>

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<sup>1080</sup> M. Daymond: ‘Seizing Meaning – Language and Ideology in the Autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Emma Mashinini’ (*Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 9, no.1, April 1993, p. 32).

<sup>1081</sup> D. Driver: ‘M’a-Ngoana O Tsoare Thipa ka Bohaleng’ in M. Trump (ed.): *Rendering Things Visible*, pp. 238-240.

<sup>1082</sup> Kuzwayo in B. Lipman: *We make Freedom: Women in South Africa*, p. 20.

## Conclusion

Much research has been conducted on the political parties of the National Liberation Movement. Less has been written on the Black Consciousness Movement and almost no attention has been given to women's roles and status within both. The reasons for that are obvious: Historicizing a liberation movement entails the critical evaluation of people's politicisation, manifested in the structures of their organisations and reflected in the agendas of their movements. The interpretation of the latter requires the provision of theoretical concepts which can be employed to systematically relate ideological outlooks to the socio-economic context in which they emerged and the transcendent society towards which they aspire. Political leaders have to be identified through their speeches and writings as well as their physical appearance in the political arena.

Black women, however, were generally present as representatives only. Their invisibility in historical writings does not imply that they had no political stance in the movement. Being viewed and viewing themselves as social actors, as embodiments of Black Solidarity and customary integrity, motivated as well as hindered ambitions to take individual stances in black politics. Their inaudibility also did not entail that they had no voice in politics. Yet, they predominantly spoke on behalf of those they had to care for and whom they aspired to become part of the transition toward a democratic society. Women were the custodians of a house of resistance. As such they entered the public sphere of waged labour and anti-apartheid politics. They did not principally aspire to liberate themselves from the social sphere of traditional domesticity, but *reacted* to the way in which politics eroded their social solidity. The social disabilities they suffered motivated as well as hindered their political activity. Apartheid marginalized them as legal minors, reproductive working units or single parts of a 'labour reservoir' and isolated them geographically. Black politics called upon them, not to insulate themselves further, but to become involved as loyal supporters of a black national movement that drew inspiration from a past in which women's lack of political authority was compensated for by social features that had long been eroded and hence lost their legitimisation. Their entry into the public sphere, however, motivated the realisation of the unique nature of their multiple oppression. Trade unions and women's organisations provided forums to discuss and publicise the causes of their oppression. It is however significant that black women themselves predominantly addressed the contradictions of



industrialisation and retribalisation as causes of their 'triple oppression.' Social disabilities resulting from deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes on part of the black male society, where either ignored or viewed as consequences of black people's deprivation.

Ironically, the most assertive demands for gender equality were made in the 1950s in context with the multiracial motherist movement. It is here where historians usually seek to identify the emergence of women's political consciousness, if not a nascent feminism. The latter attempt proves hardly successful, if conducted in Western terms of women's emancipation. Motherist politics of resistance called upon the community to respect women and often resulted in the formation of new organisations. Yet, in their motherist protests black women clearly distinguished themselves from Western feminist movements, as they affirmed obligations traditionally assigned to them as women and aggressively utilised entrenched stereotypes to tackle social injustice. Black women were not fighting for their personal rights as women but for their rights as mothers.

The increasing state repression forced black women to develop new identities of authority and power. However ambiguous they were, these identities differed from the passivity and silence related to conventional western, middle class conceptions of sisterhood, motherhood and wifehood. It is however debatable to which extent this status was acknowledged in the sphere of political activism. BC called upon women to realise the political potential of their motherhood. Yet, womanhood was hardly ever associated with potential action. BC writings extensively utilised gendered stereotyping, implying the idea that women had to identify themselves with their men's oppression in the first place. Supporting men's emancipation from racially inferior complexes rendered women politically active. They were thus supposed to be politicised by their men.

Since the national liberation movement started operating on a mass basis in the 1940s, there were no official restrictions that impeded women's participation in national politics. It was rather the failure of parties to adequately address their social disabilities resulting from legal minority, geographical isolation and social marginalisation, that prevented women from participating on an equal level with men. Yet, all activists interviewed by Ernest Messina agreed upon the fact that they were acknowledged as equals once they had proved their determination to pursue their political commitment on a long-term basis.

The motherist movement of the 1950s is frequently portrayed as *the* era of women's politicisation. Until 1976 it provided the only means to detect claims for women's emancipation, to conceptualise their movement in theoretical terms (namely motherism), to identify them as political leaders and to distinguish their political activity as an individual force in the wider national movement. The legacy of the 1950s has been a burden in some ways. The rise and fall of the national women's movement went along with the rise and fall of motherism as a political force. It emerged with the 1950s mass campaigns and declined, when the latter was brought to a closure. Few actions since could measure up. Women's movements of the 1970s did not become as prominent. They remained localised and gained a much smaller base of support. The era of Black Consciousness witnessed significant changes in women's images, behaviours, attitudes, social conventions, outward appearance and beauty standards. These, however, were not indications of an emerging women's movement. BC sought to emancipate women as blacks, not as women. The movement called blacks to validate their own subjectivity and to examine their psychological oppression as objects in a white-defined society, as 'the Other.' Women's 'black' subjectivity was acknowledged as a political force, but not their femininity. The silence and invisibility of women in the agendas of the BCM indicates that female activists themselves did not intend to challenge the masculinist patterns of a movement which claimed to liberate all blacks but failed to address the bulk of women living isolated in the homelands or as domestic workers in white areas. In order to actively participate in the male dominated BCM, and to discard themselves from repressive social views, which they felt rendered them 'non-people', they aspired to attain the status of 'honorary men', but rejected any association with First World women's emancipation movements. Women in the upper ranks of the BCM adhered to the principle that 'women's issues' were private matters and should not be transmitted into the public sphere. The Black Women's Federation, although constituted of the most influential female representatives of the national liberation movement, deliberately lacked a clearly defined political or feminist orientation. Whereas the FSAW intended to convey black women's social disadvantages onto the agendas of the national struggle, the BWF appeared to reinforce these disadvantages as it sought to join women in their capacity as 'significant associates.' Yet, black women's self-maintained subordination under the political strategy of Black Solidarity did not result from a decreasing awareness of gender oppression. Articles such as 'Women's Liberation: A Black South African Women's View', published by Zanele Dhlamini in *Sechaba* in 1972, indicate that the conceptualisation of black women's triple

oppression was not unknown in South Africa. The fact of gender inequality was known but considered to be non-antagonistic. In terms of black women's liberation, the BCM appeared to be a paradox: On the one hand, it claimed to be the first national movement that truly responded to the dynamics taking place within the black society. Yet, in order to unify blacks in the struggle against white power structures, BC writers tended to romanticise community life and gender relations, ignoring the actual dynamics of gender relations amongst blacks. They sought to reinforce traditional hierarchical structures, which had already become obsolete, and hence no longer protected but oppressed women. Considering the way in which womanism tends to naturalise stereotypical gender definitions and urges women in their conventional supportive roles as 'significant others', the BCM of the early 1970s was essentially womanist. For it equated 'womanhood' with 'motherhood' and advocated to direct both towards the fulfilment of black men's social, cultural, economic and political aspirations.

The ignorance of BC towards gender inequalities eventually proved to be a potentially divisive tactic, since it incited an even greater attentiveness toward sexual control mechanisms in the transition from apartheid to democracy. As the number of black female academics increases, so does the demand for the institutionalisation of black gender studies in various fields of academic research. The fact that most writings on the national liberation movement now incorporate 'women' as a special category in their index, attests to the significance this former 'non-theme' has obtained. Since scholars tend to view the 1950s as the 'Golden Age' of black women's protest movements, there remains a serious lack of in-depth studies on women's political activities in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of the writings conducted on BC post 1990 at least acknowledge the invisibility of women in the masculinist discourse of the movement. The way in which women's movements re-emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, revealed that women in the 1970s had not ignored, but rather subordinated the need to address inconsistencies in terms of gender relations. Nevertheless, women's incorporation in academic studies does not mean that they are finally giving a voice.

There are striking similarities between womanism and Black Consciousness considering the history of their development and their ideological outlook. Firstly, both emerged ex-negativo: liberating themselves against 'benevolent' influences of white politics which they experienced as patronising and misleading. Both aspire to work towards the elevation of group and individual racial self-esteem. Initially employed as a vehicle of dialectic opposition

against the psychological forces imperialism had created, 'blackness' came to mean a special way of life, characterised by both black urban culture and customary tradition. Black Consciousness saw the necessity to deconstruct the self in terms of the present in order to recapture the idyllic past and create the transcendent society of the future. Opposing the feminist norm whereby women were defined in terms of their subordination, womanism restrained from associating blackness and womanhood with the negative, calling themselves empowered. Although the 'ism' gives it the appearance of an ideology, it lacks both theoretical grounding and political outlook. This is also due to the fact that it, unlike Black Consciousness, faces no political enemy against which to identify itself. Instead, there are the invisible forces of neo-colonialist oppression. Womanism does not challenge BC in its masculine outlook, nor does it critically analyse women's subordination in this philosophy. It rather seems to incorporate women into the philosophy of 're-emasculating the black man.' What remains is an all inclusive, entirely positivistic, even euphemistic way of thought. It thereby does not make the same mistake as BC did, by seeing the society as monolithic. However, its inclusiveness does not provide any grounds or space for joining interest groups, elaborating organisational structures, providing agenda, theory or leadership with which to identify. Not wanting to totally dismiss the importance and function of womanism, one has to take into regard its role as a sacred, creative space which provides a means for self-expression. Although apolitical in its outlook, it gains a political dimension by refraining from pursuing the path feminist policies indicate. In terms of its inclusiveness and the many dimensions of the society in which it acts, a black women's movement in South Africa could hardly exist in another way. Yet, there remains the question for whom it provides a space for recreation and self-expression. Like BC it claims itself being particularly concerned with the voices from the margins. But until now, these voices have been predominantly articulated by black academics. It therefore displays the same contractions as BC, being a philosophy created in an academic environment yet concerned with those living isolated at the bottom of the social scale. The chapter on the psychological forces of women's oppression was not merely intended to explain their apolitical attitude in the discussion of their involvement in the struggle. It proved that no ideology or philosophy, elaborated in the political or academic environment, adequately addressed the psychological forces of women's oppression. The 'ism' of womanism implies that it is an ideology which provides potential for social reconstruction. Until now, however, it restrained from being exactly that.

Any appropriate evaluation of the interrelation between BCM and womanism would have actually required an in-depth coverage of women's protests from 1976 up to 1994. Yet, the low state of research in this regard renders such an analysis to the endeavour of another thesis.

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