

# The Search for Mother Africa: Poetry Revises Women's Struggle for Freedom

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There seems to be a myth surrounding the nature of South African women's participation in the struggle against apartheid. It is one which erroneously assumes that women, who must undertake almost complete responsibility for the welfare and survival of their families, are so limited by being passive, nurturing and motherly that they cannot at the same time be powerful, independent and politically active.

*Breaking the Silence, A Century of South African Women's Verse* (Lockett 1991) forwards the cause of self-definition for the women and mothers of South Africa. The insight it provides into the political commitment and social orientation of women helps dispel the myth of Mother Africa, which, as editor Cecily Lockett describes it,

seldom allows for any role other than those of wife and mother for the black woman, who continues to be a prisoner of gender, defined only in terms of black men. Similarly, the emphasis on courage, determination, and survival as positive qualities inherent in black women tends to glamorize their real suffering and oppression as, in many cases, sole breadwinner of single-parent families (1988, 35).

Perhaps that underestimation of the power of South African women can be dispelled in light of their literary contributions, which are now surfacing with increasing momentum. The role of South African women in society, as seen in Cecily Lockett's anthology, *Breaking the Silence, A Century of South African Women's Verse*, is all encompassing and inherently proactive.

With the slow dismantling of apartheid and rising hopes for reform in South Africa, sexual equality is becoming an issue of national attention as well (Nolawe 1992, 23-25). Not quite surprising, yet still amazing, is the fact that every single black woman poet in the modern period of Lockett's anthology focuses on the theme of mothers or the condition of motherhood in black South Africa—or at least mentions motherhood as a vehicle of resistance.

As the spirit of social change and reform takes hold on the continent of Africa, women are not necessarily defining new roles for themselves. Instead, women's demand for power centers around active participation and a stronger voice in the decision-making processes that shape society. An African mother must, by necessity, be an

activist. Particularly in South Africa, it will be important to confer with women regarding economic restructuring or rural planning because it is women who have adopted the primary role in providing for the family, be it economically or in the traditional role of food production (Budlender 1992). South African women are indeed the mothers of the nation.

In recent years, South African women who are scholars and writers have sought to clarify exactly what it means to be a female activist in South Africa. It seems likely that women's expectations demand not that their power should be measured by the same standards as men's, but that women should gain full control over the spheres of influence, such as agriculture and family, that they have been responsible for traditionally.

Professional women define their expectations in a way that may astound non-African feminists. A comment by human rights lawyer and writer Linda Ama exemplifies their diverse character and unquestioned ability to run the country and simultaneously raise its children:

As an African woman I do not have a problem with carrying a baby on my back, or water on my head, or working at home, or going to work in my law practice, or sitting down to write conference papers. There are contradictions, but they will gell [sic] into amazing strength for African women (Bazilli 1991, 58).

There is an important distinction to be made between the black male author's portrayal of the mythological Mother Africa and the verisimilitude of the South African mother who appears in women's writing. As opposed to the stereotypical, passive, idealized mother men allude to, we see in women's poetry the suffering and struggle involved in gaining control over their own lives and defining their own harsh, unglamorous role in the salvation of the country and its children.

"Song for you (for my mother)," a poem by Christine Qunta, reveals the imperative nature of change from a mother's point of view. Struggling for reform, or, indeed, struggling in general, is intrinsic in the role of the mother. Survival itself, not only justice or equality, is a thriving force in women's actions.

and when you like other women  
few black, many white  
tried to fulfill yourself  
knuckles worked white, hands open  
waiting to receive; there was nothing  
but kicks  
the bitterness; black flesh  
dug into you

black hands tried to kill you  
and those you bore with pain  
...where bound—who knows (Lockett 1991, 337).

Written about a South African mother, this poem does not conjure the image of a peaceful, content mother with the luxury of expanding her horizons to the academic world. Instead, we see a woman fraught with pain and worry over the children she fought to raise, perhaps hoping desperately that they will return to her, yet tragically unable to protect them, as we see in lines 38-40:

two graves are reminders  
of sons who could have been  
you (1991, 337-8)

Qunta herself is a political activist and was involved with the South African Students Organization (SASO) and Black People's Convention (BPC) during the 1970s. Both the BPC and SASO were fundamental in the Black Consciousness Movement.

The struggle for women to raise children in South Africa is not merely a domestic task. The political and social tensions which overwhelm everyday life make motherhood a role tantamount in importance to any full-time (male) political activist's. In South Africa, for example, many women are single parents who work in wealthier people's homes for domestic wages. Eight hundred thousand women work as domestics out of a total 1.5 million women working in paid employment (Malveaux and Simms 1986, 80). They often have sole responsibility for the family, the home and for wage earning.

It is obvious that the woman—already described as single parent, breadwinner and political activist—would have had little time left in her schedule for artistic endeavors. Lockett's anthology demonstrates how politics have come to shape a black woman's family role in South Africa today. Moreover, it shows how the condition of motherhood is viewed with pride and reverence by women themselves. These poems reflect a crucial point: that there is an undeniable need for change in South Africa and this does not entail changing a mother's role, but instead empowering her to fulfill her needs as head of the family.

The gravity of social conditions faced by black women resounds in their poetry. Gladys Thomas's poem "Leave Me Alone" is addressed to the speaker's white female employer: "I tear my hungry baby from my breast / to come and care for yours / Yours grow up fine / But, Oh God, not mine" (ll. 1-4; Lockett 1991, 187). Reminiscent of the time of slavery and wet nurses, we see a mother frustrated by the financial plight which forces her to leave her own child to nurture someone else's.

Many women have been the driving force in political demonstrations, particularly to oppose pass laws, and in strikes for better wages.

The assumption that women have played a passive domestic role in South Africa overshadows the fact that they have been as politically active as men, if not in leadership roles. Women's domestic role actually necessitates and compels political action.

As early as 1912, women became visible in political affairs. Pass laws in the Orange Free State were expanded to include women, and outrage at this development was registered from both sexes. One of the common arguments against women carrying passes was based on their traditional role in society:

Both men and women were quick to argue the unique character of women, as wives and mothers, which made it particularly repugnant to apply passes to them. They stressed that nowhere else were women subject to such regulations. By imposing on women the risk of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, passes directly threatened the well-being of the family. If mothers were taken off to gaol for falling foul of the pass laws, children would be neglected and the family would suffer (Walker 1982, 28).

Regardless of whether their motivation stemmed from a desire to defy racist injustice or precipitated in reaction to the already intolerable pressure of their duties as women, it is clear that women did not adopt a passive role in defiance campaigns. At Blomfontein in mid 1913, women launched a demonstration and presented a petition to the mayor protesting pass laws (Walker 1982, 31). Evidence of women's activity and participation in public affairs continues from this point onward.

The story of women's activism in 1913 is substantiated by Alice Ntsongo in her poem "Women Arise":

1913 call  
vibrated from eardrum to ear  
they arose those warrior women  
and marched in the 'Free State...'  
eyes blazing they moved forward  
their path, and racists quivered.  
...forcing the final cowards  
to burn that violent law (1991, 305)

The large-scale appearance of black women in the political arena during the first decades of this century does not reflect some of the individualistic tenets common to western feminism such as equality or gender-blindness in the eyes of the law. According to scholar Cheryl Walker,

The anti-pass campaign of 1913/14 had nothing to do with the women's rights movement then rocking the western world and to which white South African suffragists looked. It can in fact be ar-

gued that in defying the law as vociferously as they had, African women were looking back to a cultural tradition that had allowed women a great deal more independence and authority than western society considered either 'natural' or 'respectable' at that time (1982, 32).

Examples of resistance activities involving women as well as men may not be accounted for in detail, but photographs alone indicate that women did not stay home during many protests. On the occasion of National Women's Day, 1931, the following slogan appeared from the women's department of the Communist Party of South Africa: "Women organise! Don't let your menfolk keep you back. To win their freedom, they need your help" (Walker 1982, 48).

In 1943, the ANC offered full membership to women and automatic inclusion in the newly formed ANC Women's League (Kimble and Unterhalter 1982, 11). This step did not by any means invite women into the central leadership structure of the organization. That there is an ANC Women's League acknowledges that women have a distinct agenda and seek empowerment in a way which is not as specific as the racial struggle of the ANC, but involves the issue of gender.

The passbook issue precipitated the Sharpeville shootings in 1960. Lilian Ngoyi, a member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC, was detained for five months and subsequently banned for her involvement in the uprising (Quanta 1987, 113). As men and women gathered outside police stations nationwide without their passbooks, challenging the police to try and arrest them all, gunshots were fired and 69 people lost their lives. The Sharpeville incident presaged a massive crackdown on liberation movements nationwide.

The repercussions of this crackdown are revealed in Winnie Morolo's poem "Courage, African Woman." Morolo's speaker is capable not only of raising her children alone, but of raising them to free the nation:

I, African woman, responsible for her family  
Used to bitterness in life  
I, woman alone  
Nkgoleleng banake, Nkgoleleng baAfrica  
Courage I must not lose

Hopeful I am  
That these children of mine  
Will grow to be  
Brave heroes  
To lead their oppressed nation  
Nkgoleleng banake, Nkgoleleng baAfrica (1991, 232).

It is important to note that the speaker identifies herself as a single mother, or perhaps not necessarily unmarried but left alone due to circumstances of oppression. She acknowledges bitterness and that she is alone, but her hope and spirit seem to be her salvation. Furthermore, it is not necessary to explain why she is alone. The reader may assume it is because of one of the many forces of apartheid: imprisonment, death at the hands of internal security, mine work or migrant labor.

The next major phase of defiance involved the Black Consciousness Movement. Beginning in the late 1960s under the leadership of Steve Biko, Black Consciousness was the political current steering the tide of the Soweto Uprising in 1976. The issue that incited blacks in 1976 was not passes, but the inferior quality of Bantu education. Sibongile Mthembu, a young woman who was detained for her part in the uprising, shares her views on women's struggles in South Africa:

At the time it is more important for me to fight for political rights as a black person...thereafter I might fight for my rights as a woman. But sometimes I think the two wars should go together...we have no option but to face the political struggle (Lipman 1984, 98).

Male and female students participated in the Soweto protests, and both young men and young women were shot. In the same light, women played a supporting role in the Black Community Projects, especially the clinics and creches, set up by the Black Consciousness Movement (Arnold 1978).

Another poem by Gladys Thomas, entitled "SowetoJune1976," is a gender-neutral retelling of the historic uprising. That women were involved is not pointed to overtly, but it is definite that the gender-neutral voice includes women, especially since one of the activities included in the first stanza is whoring, an exclusively female enterprise. A similar poem written by a man such as Serote would almost always use masculine pronouns and generalized concepts such as "sons of Africa." Thomas's persona can easily be assumed to be female:

We started our day like any other day,  
in Soweto  
Starving, working, dying, slaving,  
whoring, thieving, drinking  
existing the way you want us to,  
in Soweto (1991, 188).

Ntsongo's acceptance of Black Consciousness philosophy is implicit in lines five through seven. She is addressing her words to a white audience and blaming the social decay in the townships on apartheid's destruction of African identity: "existing like you want us to." Steve Biko, leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, also blames

apartheid for creating a negative identity that enslaved the pride and aspirations of blacks (1978, 27-32).

One poem written in 1979 by Boitumelo Makhema (and undoubtedly influenced by Black Consciousness) reveals two common themes of mother-centered poems. There is a sense of realism about the suffering of mothers, but also the extolled virtues of hope and invincible faith seen in male writers' images of mothers. The repercussions of the black mother's abandonment of her child to find work (also described by Gladys Thomas) are referred to unabashed, like in Makhema's poem "A Mother's Cry 1":

Here I stand  
With no child in sight  
Did I conceive to throw away?

My children have gone to the towns  
To seek bread  
They never returned  
They went to the mines  
To dig gold  
They died in Shaft 14

.....

They went to ISCOR  
Their hands were guillotined  
My children  
Children of blood, blood of my children (1991, 233).

Perhaps the great tragedy of mothers in South Africa is that the lives of the children for whom they sacrifice everything are so expendable. The poem is constructed of three triplets and three couplets. The triplets (ll. 1-9) convey: 1) the children's course of action; 2) their motivation and reason for that action; 3) the end result. In each case, the result is death or disappearance. Hence, by the time we get to the couplets (ll.10-16), there is no need for reasons (as are offered in the second line of each triplet) because any action results in death. All attempts to live are futile, even the mother's attempt to create life ends in destruction because those lives are taken away without reason, she has "conceive[d] to throw away."

While all this information points to the assertion that women were involved in politics not as feminists of any kind but as black people, supporting evidence (such as estimates that women should not be jailed because there would be no one to look after the children) indicates that the experience of women under apartheid oppression was already being shaped by the double blade of racial and gender oppression. To substantiate the "indefatigable hope" of Black women, one needs simply to refer back to Makhema who says of her missing chil-

dren, "But I knew they had hope / Only the flesh would be harmed but never the spirit" (1991, 223).

Since Nelson Mandela left prison and resumed his status as an international figure, the most powerful political movement has been the ANC. Although women like Winnie Mandela and Albertina Sisulu carried on the work of their imprisoned husbands for over 20 years, they are not continuing to work in an executive capacity. This does not seem to be problematic, as women's level in the hierarchy of political movements is not prioritized on the agenda of reform (Mayibuye 1991).

Winnie Mandela's experience, which reveals commitment and courage equal to her husband's, forced her to endure similar punishments and physical assaults. The apartheid government was not sexist in doling out harassment or torture of women:

She was detained under the Terrorism Act in May 1969 and held sleepless for five days and nights while being interrogated by the security police. During the interrogation she suffered from dizziness, swollen hands and feet, she had difficulty in breathing and she began to tremble. By the time she was acquitted she had spent 491 days in Solitary Confinement (Lipman 1984, 233).

Winnie Mandela recounts her struggle in light of personal suffering but also, more poignantly, as she was affected as a mother. Referring to her 1977 banishment to a small farm town in the Orange Free State, Mandela frequently describes her helplessness as she watches her daughter Zindzi undergo the experience with her. Her regret for Zindzi's suffering is far more painful than any torture or indignity she endured personally. She says:

It was the hardest thing for me to take as a mother, that your commitment affects those who are very dear to you. That shattering experience inflicted a wound that will never heal. Of course I was bitter, more than I've ever been (W. Mandela 1984, 25).

Zindzi, now a mother herself and a poet, records the experience with equal pain. In her poem "Mother," she laments every black mother's inability to be present for her children because of the struggle:

I felt so depressed  
O terribly  
and all I could do was cry  
but  
where were you mama (1989, 33).

The poem relays a series of emotions in a similar manner: "I felt so lonely...and all I could do was go / I felt so thirsty...and all I could do was swallow." Should the changes in South Africa simply allow mothers to provide for and nurture their children without the pressure of



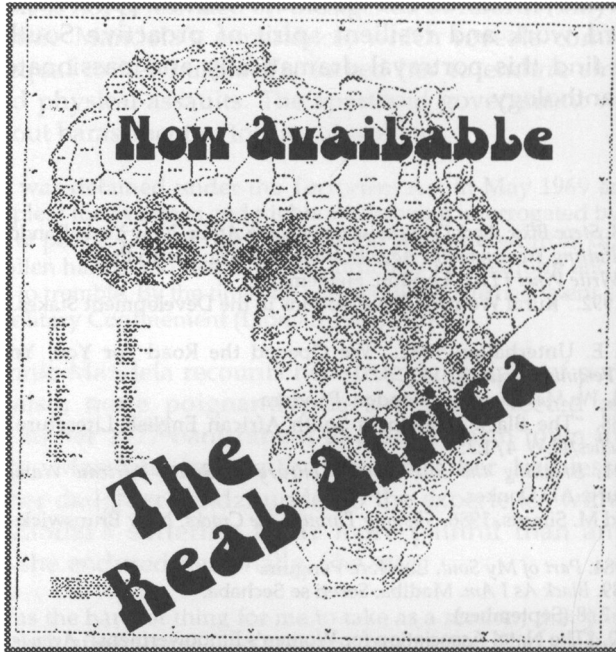
political struggle, it seems that many proactive women will have reached a major goal.

Perhaps the title of Gladys Thomas' poem "Leave Me Alone" is really reflective of black women's need to pursue their domestic and professional tasks without the limitations set on them by apartheid or by controlling men. As this argument indicates, women have accomplished much without previous recognition or support from the controlling power structure, white and male-centered as it is. The portrayal of the true Mother Africa as she describes herself pays tribute to the courage, hard work and resilient spirit of proactive South African women. We find this portrayal dramatically and passionately stated in Lockett's anthology.

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