

Review

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Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority. Shireen Hassim. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006; and

Representation Et Reality: Portraits of Women's Lives in the Western Cape, 1949-1976. Helen Scanlon. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2007.

Shireen Hassim begins her important study on the political participation of women in the struggle against “one of the vilest regimes in history”, South Africa’s system of apartheid, with a quotation from Chantal Mouffe, “Feminist politics should be understood not as a separate form of politics designed to pursue the interests of women as women, but rather the pursuit of feminist goals and aims within the context of a wider articulation of demands... Feminism ... is the struggle for the equality of women... against the multiple forms in which the category ‘woman’ is constructed in subordination.” This forms the framework with which Hassim addresses the South African women’s movement during the period of heightened struggle of the 1980s, and the transition to democracy in the 1990s. She shows that the women’s movement was not a single organisation, but a heterogeneous movement, a *strong social movement*, able to articulate its interests through its diverse constituencies, mobilise them, and “develop independent strategies to achieve its aims while holding open the possibility of alliance with other progressive movements”.

Hassim’s study is a brilliantly crafted and powerful political analysis, the most detailed and comprehensive published since Cheryl Walker’s 1982 study of the earlier struggles of women in the 1950s and 1960s. It is deservedly the winner of the American Political Science Association’s best book on Women in Politics for 2006. It addresses both the intersection of different feminist approaches within the women’s movement and the movement’s political engagement with the broader struggles for citizenship and freedom from oppression in South Africa. Hassim shows how the South African women’s movement historically moves between a “feminine approach” that addresses the “cultural experiences of

gender and the everyday struggles of poor families and communities to survive” and a “feminist approach”, which essentially challenges conventional gender roles and gendered hierarchies, both within social and political movements and in society. Both were features of women’s organisation and were incorporated within nationalist struggles. Theoretically, her study deepens our understanding of how alliances with nationalist power brokers have often led to an increasingly inclusionary elitist politics, while more transformative approaches allied to social movements sometimes confronted nationalist movements, the effect of which was to marginalise women’s concerns. Hassim’s analysis seeks to understand the gains and the political losses for the women’s movement in the transition to democracy in South Africa, to explore what was possible and whether the political choices it made enabled the women’s movement to “pursue its self-defined goals to remove gender inequalities and transform the conditions of life of the most vulnerable groups of women”.

A *sine qua non* of feminist thinking has been the importance of autonomy for women’s organisation. In her introduction, Hassim draws on Maxine Molyneux’s insightful work to argue that autonomy is less valued in post-colonial societies than in the West, precisely because women’s political activism is embedded within broader struggles for national liberation or social transformation. This context – changing over time – forms a critical factor in determining the opportunities and constraints for advancing women’s political goals of gender equality at different moments. Women’s independent organisation need not necessarily advance women’s interests, while alliances, “associational autonomy”, might be more strategic in promoting equality. A third form of organisation, from above, which Hassim calls “directed collective action”, may or may not promote gender equality. Through finely wrought empirical research in Chapters Two to Four, Hassim develops her theoretical insights. She addresses the issue of “associational autonomy” through a detailed analysis of three anti-apartheid women’s organisations in the Cape, Natal and the Transvaal. She then turns to the ANC Women’s Section in exile as an example of “directed collective action”. The Women’s National Coalition, which emerged in the transition to democracy, constitutes an example of an independent, autonomous organisation.

The transition created a new political opportunity structure in which not only did new opportunities for women to redefine themselves as a political constituency emerge, but a “discursive space” opened for women’s movements to redefine goals and priorities. At the same time, though,

she shows that these possibilities were in turn determined by what she calls 'the universe of political discourse'. In Chapter Five, the relationship between nationalist discourse and women's liberation is put under the microscope – Hassim asks, "were they congruent, and in what ways?" She argues cogently that nationalism was something of a "master narrative" that established "boundaries to women's agency" in terms of collective action. She critically engages with a range of South African feminist discussions and acknowledges the "seething" undercurrents of debate about the "nature of feminist practice" within the women's movement that she interprets as "an indigenous feminism". Her analysis moves towards a recognition that in postcolonial contexts, the boundaries between women's movements, feminism and nationalism can only be understood in the context of the contest between them. She probes the way in which women's interests in South Africa were defined, how race and class intersected in the debates, and how the polarisation of "rights and needs" tend to obfuscate the way gender politics has brought the two together.

Nevertheless, in her more empirical analysis, Hassim's research points to the "politicisation of traditional roles" as "part of a revolutionary nationalism in which woman, mother and nation were part of a continuous discourse". Grassroots organisations articulated the desire for change in gender power relations in the private realm, which pierced the conventional scope of formal politics to bring a transformative agenda into the political arena. What she shows, though, is that when women leaders were pulled out of the women's organisations in their affiliation to the United Democratic Front, this weakened the capacity of the movement to hold together organisationally. By the end of the 1980s, women's issues may have become subsumed and even sidelined in the broader struggle; certainly the movement itself was in decline, but the discourse of gender equality and women's autonomy had surfaced. The internal debates in South Africa had influenced the ANC in exile, and a younger, more radical generation of women brought women's liberation and nationalism into conversation. Hassim's chapter on the ANC in exile offers a unique study of the gender struggles in the movement. In particular she shows how militarism tended to trump any feminist project in the hegemony of the idea of the "armed struggle as the bedrock of the ANC vision of the revolution".

So how then did feminist thinking and the commitment to gender equality become such a distinctive aspect of the South African transition when conditions seemed so antithetical? Hassim carefully traces the changes in the

political opportunity structure from the early and mid-1980s, both in South Africa and internationally. She argues that the transition was the catalyst for the creation of an autonomous organisation in the context of an earlier history of women's organisation, which provided scope for the articulation of a women's agenda outside the ANC. But more critically, she suggests that the nature of the transition allowed for a new democratic discourse to take centre stage. Her chapter on the transition brings fascinating new material to light about the internal conflicts and negotiations within the WNC about its political practice and goals. She details the contest of ensuring women's presence both in the final constitution making process and in the development of an "interest-based women's politics". The WNC did not survive the transition, partly because it "never developed a coherent sense of long-term purpose". But in the end, the political compromise of acknowledging and including women, by accommodating their formal demands for institutional mechanisms and an equality clause, were incremental gains – easy victories that did not translate into real power. Instead, women's gains were used as "political collateral" that tended to undermine real transformative change.

The final chapters of the book deal with the strategic shift from negotiating the terms of women's political integration to those of engaging the state, and the accountability of women politicians to a somewhat diffuse women's movement. The formation of the national gender machinery and institutionalisation of promoting gender equality is also put under the spotlight. Hassim's research traces the complex process of "interest group politics" and constituency building, which led to increased representation with the possibility of "shifts in the allocation of resources to address women's needs". She calls this a "virtuous political circle". Debates for and against quotas and group (i.e. women's) representation are discussed. A focus on numerical representation can evade more important issues of accountability, argues Hassim. This can be compounded by the form of electoral system, as in the proportional system, which she argues (and her evidence shows) promotes greater party centralism, and even male domination. Not because women's numerical representation is enhanced, but because men remain the power brokers. Hassim thus points to the ambivalence and ambiguity of women's involvement in both party and representative politics. Through analysis of policy and legislative changes that would challenge male domination, Hassim shows how intractable change can be. Yet women form the majority of voters. The solution, she strongly suggests, is for an autonomous women's

movement to pressurise effective and accountable women decision-makers. All feminists should heed this advice.

In a different vein, the book by Helen Scanlon, *Representation & Reality: Portraits of Women's Lives in the Western Cape 1948-1976*, takes us into the personal realm and lived experience of politically-active women during the construction of the apartheid state in one region, the Western Cape. The unique nature of the local state, where apartheid tried to create a "Coloured Preference Area" that made African black people "third class" citizens, is germane to understanding the intersection of race, class and gender in this part of the world during the period under review. This is a beautifully-written political history that, through both organisational histories and a personal-narrative approach, explores how the intersection of the intimate and the personal with the everyday issues that shape women's lives, such as rents, wages, housing and food, can catapult women into political activism and organisation. Apartheid's race and class policies meant that for women "being simply domestic" became intensely political.

The book addresses four theses. The first questions the boundaries of what we understand as "the political". Scanlon shows, through a critique of different scholarly attempts to characterise women's political engagement, that we need to explore women's aims and aspirations "within a severely constrained socio-economic context" in new ways. The link between formal politics and personal life grew within (and out of) "distinctively female cultures". In particular, and this is the second thesis, women's engagement occurred within particular competitive and divisive contexts. While the personal became politicised, much of the emphasis was on local issues. It was often, too, "competition for men's attention" that often divided women and prevented them from organising collectively to "fight for a better deal". The third thesis engages with the critical ethical and methodological questions related to writing about the personal and the political. How can researchers mitigate what critics have identified as the thorny issue of "the sovereign position of the academic" in interpreting the lives of others? Scanlon navigates the complex contentions with empathy and deep respect for her subjects.

The fourth thesis Scanlon identifies relates to the question of *whose* lives become the focus of historical analysis and understanding. Because of the androcentric nature of power, women have been significantly marginalised, as Scanlon notes. She explains that this has led to an organisational bias and a focus on the lives of "important" women, where some of the evidence

constructs what she calls “a kind of authorised version of the past”. Less prominent women “brought different and new information to light”. Even so, with the passage of time and the death of politically active women, the experience (particularly of politically active black, working class women) goes unrecorded. History is full of gaps. Her study is an attempt to address “the anonymity that shrouds so many women activists”.

Scanlon weaves personal narratives into the broader context of political developments in the Western Cape, including the different ideological options available through the formation of contending and quite sectarian political organisations. Her study of organisation becomes intertwined with personal biographies in the first five chapters of her book. Through deeply personal stories of women’s lives, Scanlon introduces the gendered effects of apartheid’s constructions – influx control and the Coloured Labour Preference policy saw families attempting to preserve and reconstruct themselves in the face of police harassment and imprisonment. The intensely personal characterisation of lived relations in this period of apartheid engineering provides a new set of graphic, discursive understandings of how people constructed their lives and how they engaged in national politics. African women lived “as guerillas wandering from one squatting site to another as they dodged the police”. This at least provided the necessary conditions for engagement in a broader politics. The specificity of women’s responsibilities shaped women’s political agency in particular ways, says Scanlon, and tended “to justify untraditional public militancy”. So we begin to see and understand how someone like activist Dorothy Zihlangu was motivated to become involved in politics through her experience of discrimination in the Salt River market.

Scanlon shows how local politics brought a range of somewhat odd alliances into play. White liberal women like Eulalie Stott, privileged, disconnected from party politics but concerned with people’s rights, liberties and welfare, were drawn into politics through their moral abhorrence of the new system. The National Council of Women and the Black Sash rub shoulders with the Federation of South African Women and other more transient organizations. Yet “strategies for survival”, the title of the fifth chapter of the book, led women into a range of voluntary formations that reflected “the social reorganisation” of women, but also by them. So Scanlon shows how class position, race, age and ideology over-determined the role, activities and position of different kinds of organisations.

In the final chapters of the book, Scanlon presents the portraits of two

women from each race group whose experiences and ideologies differ, one from the other. The first chapter deals with two white women; Ray Alexander, a committed communist, and Eulalie Stott, a committed liberal, both of whom engaged in opposition to new apartheid policies in different ways and influenced the direction of radical and liberal opposition. Alexander, a Latvian Jewish immigrant, immediately joined the Communist Party on her arrival in South Africa as a fifteen-year-old and began “organising the unorganised”. Her socialist identity predominated. She was to have a profound impact not only on the trade union movement, but also by engaging with women’s organisations promoting women’s rights and the vote. Her ideological role in the Federation of South African Women in promoting a feminist position (before such a position had a name in South Africa) contrasted with the tensions between her personal, familial relationships and political commitments. Eulalie Stott evinced strong reactions – opinionated, “a champion nerve-getter”, but Scanlon paints a complex picture of a dedicated, generous and moral woman, whose membership of the Black Sash radicalised her but in a “maternalist” direction – while her participation in the politics of the Cape Town City Council simultaneously drove her in a conservative direction.

The stories of Dora Tamana and Mildred Ramakaba Lesiea capture the changing contexts within which political consciousness emerged among middle-class and working-class African women activists. The pragmatism and self-help of the first contrasted with the more difficult and desperate conditions of the second, despite the fact that both women were equally affected by the discrimination against Africans in the predominantly “coloured” Western Cape. Scanlon’s accounts of Elizabeth van der Heyden and Elizabeth Abrahams’ stories capture the very different material, political and intellectual context of so-called “coloured” women’s lives. Van der Heyden was a schoolteacher whose political education began in the radical Unity Movement, but moved into an organisation called the National Liberation Front, based on a cell structure of revolutionary study groups and thinking. Revolutionary thinking alone defined both Van der Heyden’s intellectual and non-racial identity, and was the cause of a ten-year jail sentence for fomenting “violence and subversion”. Trade union politics linked to women’s responsibility for bread-and-butter issues were the stuff of Abrahams’ activism, which led to her banning.

Scanlon concludes that biography and personal narratives “illuminate the variety of experiences of women”. Above all, they provide an understanding of individual motivations for women’s politicisation and mobilisation, “stripping

away the anonymity of the many” to show how changing consciousness is often more important than inherited characteristics. The influence of family, an environment of debate, of early migration, of privilege and education as well as ideological commitment were all important in shaping women’s impetus to political activism. But the costs were enormous – “We really didn’t have our own lives,” remarked activist Rebecca Lan.

Both of these books provide very different ways of interpreting the gendered history of different periods of South Africa’s apartheid past and its transition to democracy. The “personal is political” theme remains pertinent, and both books in their own way show how we cannot afford *not* to engage with the unfinished business of the struggle for freedom and non-racialism in South Africa. Both books are required reading for a new interpretation of South Africa’s past and for a new way of thinking about how we, as feminist intellectuals, might engage our political energies.