

# Review

Desiree Lewis

Post-apartheid herstories: Zubeida Jaffer's *Our Generation* Cape Town: Kwela, 2003 and Pregs Govender's *Love and Courage: A Story of Insubordination* Johannesburg: Jacana, 2007

A strong tradition of women's autobiographical genres in Africa reveals their potential to subvert official, state-driven and masculinist narratives of nation and community: Nigerian works like La Ray Denzer's *Constance Agatha Cummings-John* (1995) and Folarin Coker's *A Lady: A Biography of Lady Oyinkan Abayomi* (1987) or Laeticia Mukurasi's *Post Abolished* (1991), the story of a Tanzanian woman who was sexually harassed in a state-owned company, stress the agencies of African women in relation to neo-colonialism and patriarchy. Intervening into masculinist narratives of nationalism and post-coloniality as well as domains of textual interpretation that often speak for women, they have contributed to a rich though neglected tradition of women's history from below. In *Our Generation* and *Love and Courage*, Zubeida Jaffer and Pregs Govender expand this vibrant continental legacy of women's self-narratives.

Written by women stalwarts of anti-apartheid struggles and post-apartheid activism, *Our Generation* and *Love and Courage* are at once stirring testimonies of women's political roles in South Africa and powerful interventions into masculinist postcolonial history. They also venture further than what could be described as a first wave of South African women's autobiographical writing<sup>1</sup>: in the eighties, the self-narratives of writers such as Sindiwe Magona, Emma Mashinini and Ellen Kuzwayo challenged hegemonic patriarchal views about struggles for human rights. Jaffer and Govender unravel difficult personal experiences around for example, marriage and family life, or deal frankly with depression, illness and spiritual despair; in so doing they unveil silences that a previous school of black women autobiographers were unwilling or unable to address. Writing at a time when it is less difficult for South African women to "betray" gender-blind notions

of family, community, nation or constantly being strong for others, Jaffer and Govender grapple with gendered dynamics in personal and public life in ways that were not possible for writers like Kuwayo or Mashinini.

Both texts push back the boundaries of masculinist intellectual activism and struggle, and show how women's political involvement prompted moves to ensure gender equality in post-apartheid South Africa, and generated a productive disobedience in the face of gendered authoritarianism – at the level of the family as well as at the level of the state and national politics. As such, the books can be read as inspiring herstories bequeathed to daughters. In fact, the impression of a message to daughters is spelt out in Jaffer's frequent references to her daughter, Ruschka. The writer also invokes an audience of metaphoric daughters, women who can learn from the female-authored stories so often marginalised in male-stream canons. At the end of chapter thirteen, reflecting on the plight of a Dutch woman who witnessed her mother's trauma at the end of World War 2, Jaffer writes about the post-apartheid legacy she is determined to help forge: "I take the image of that woman into my heart, carrying her with me as a constant reminder that this is not the kind of future any of us should wish for our daughters" (2003: 90).

Pregs Govender's autobiography is both an inspiring and a cautionary narrative about the courage needed to retain ethical and political vision in the face of struggles for individual and social freedom and against all injustice and authoritarianism. Govender describes her early life in terms of its class and political complexity, and her carefully structured text provides enthralling descriptions of the author's childhood in Durban, of her family and community, and of her eventual involvement in student politics. As a spirited child growing up in one of Apartheid's specially designated "Indian areas", she is influenced by her father's radicalism and grapples from a young age with various social injustices. Her political awareness grows when she begins to attend university and becomes a student activist, and her militancy becomes even bolder once she starts teaching and later works as a trade unionist.

Govender also deals intricately with personal experiences – as a wife who battles to extricate herself from constricting scripts of femininity, as a single parent struggling to raise children on a meagre income, and as a spiritual being searching for an enduring sense of serenity. This textured account of different facets of her life is connected to her better-known public activity – as a leading member of the Women's National Coalition formed in 1992, as head of the Women's Charter campaign which would make recommendations

for gender transformation under democracy, and later as an ANC MP in the first parliament after 1994.

Especially noteworthy in Govender's account of South African politics is her portrayal of the build-up to the dismantling of apartheid. Govender gravitated increasingly towards the feminist organisation and mobilising which drove the institutionalizing of gender transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. Her experience of feminist activism under Apartheid and in Parliament allows her to provide a nuanced inside view of the way gender activism shifted away from civil society to become the responsibility of the state, and the autobiography will be of considerable interest to analysts of gender struggles in South Africa.

Many readers are also likely to find her insights into corruption, nepotism and intolerance within anti-apartheid activism eye-opening and sobering. Particularly revealing is the writer's evidence that present-day patterns of state authoritarianism originate in trends within the anti-apartheid movement. When Govender worked as a trade unionist in the late 1980s and tried to pursue struggles for justice, union leaders threatened and condemned her, and eventually ordered to drop her call for action. Exposing little-known evidence of trade union activism in the 1980s, Govender writes: "Things went from bad to worse... The organisers and the administration staff were warned not to speak to me.... Ostracism was a powerful weapon" (2007: 103). Experiences of such persecution start even earlier – when she is involved in student politics and realises that "leaders were excellent in their ability to strategise and plan, but their desire to control everything and everyone was a huge weakness" (2007: 58).

The writer makes it clear that both the anti-apartheid struggle and the postcolonial state have provided scope for some to abuse power; paradoxically, then, they often reflected the brutal codes of the system that they sought to supplant. In the face of these codes, women's independence is construed as disloyalty, disobedience, a betrayal of what is "proper" in a woman; wayward women are humiliated and divested of a sense of belonging within communities: ostracism as she reminds the reader, is a very powerful weapon.

In dealing with the post-apartheid period, Govender describes how earlier experiences of being disciplined and isolated intensified as the stakes for power through access to the state apparatus increased among the new elite. She shows that the state is as much classed as gendered, and that this character permeates post-apartheid nation-building; as is the case in other

African countries, state apparatuses become important means for individuals to consolidate capital and power. The autobiography explores the writer's courageous condemnation of events including: the arms deal and the way that the government prioritised military expenditure, often involving personal gain for politicians, even when 70 per cent of South Africans live in poverty; the introduction of the neo-liberal economic policies which steadily supplanted the more socialistic economic programmes introduced immediately after independence; and the failure of the state to provide adequate response to HIV/AIDS, especially as this affected poor women. Although Govender's courageous responses to these issues are well-known, her testimony of the details of her responses, and of the action taken against her for "insubordination" are captivating and shocking.

Particularly important in the book's treatment of these issues is the writer's complex analysis of power, gender and patriarchy. Refusing the simplistic idea that patriarchy is a system in which "men oppress women", she explores the way in which social behaviour and political action come to be pervasively gendered, with masculine and repressive behaviour and codes often being assumed by women and men determined to protect their privileges and power. Deeply entrenched cultures of aggression are revealed especially starkly in an episode she recounts in a chapter titled "Elimination", when she describes her discovery that her commissar in the ANC underground had sought formal permission to have her eliminated because she was "insubordinate".

Govender's prose is evocative and often almost lyrical. The narrative voice is that of a woman who has passionately immersed herself in myriad challenges at an emotional, spiritual and political level, and a deep serenity and compassion – despite the frequently alarming content – makes this work highly inspiring and optimistic. Its title, *Love and Courage: A Story of Insubordination*, is therefore extremely apt, and encapsulates a state of freedom seen to be vitally linked to resisting injustice and authoritarianism. The book provides a deeply spiritual configuring of what individual and social freedom could and should be in a real "democracy". This optimistic vision is not the facile reconciliatory message that has been central to commercialised post-apartheid nation-building, a process that Govender relentlessly demystifies. Repeatedly uncovering some ugly facts behind "the struggle", and "the new democracy", Govender gives fresh content to the idea of speaking truth to power.

Like Govender's, Zubedia Jaffer's narrative deals with her involvement in South Africa's present with reference to the past, and explores distinct

periods between the 1960s and the present day. These could be described as a period when anti-apartheid struggles shaped strong bonds of loyalty and solidarity – in class, religious, ethnic and gendered terms – among those who were driven by the struggle against racist injustice; the euphoric period of the build-up to the first democratic election and a time immediately thereafter; and a postcolonial phase of reflectively taking stock of how far democratic struggles still have to go.

Jaffer's style is very different from Govender's; documentary and naturalistic, it graphically communicates events about her personal and political life. She often deals with events a-chronologically, shuttling backwards and forwards in ways that capture her own tortuous struggles with pasts in relations to presents. Here her detention and torture are extremely important, and function as a reminder of past spectres that she has dedicated herself to challenge. The purpose of the impressionistic style and a-chronological structure becomes especially clear when Jaffer describes her illness, which developed several years after the ANC government came into power, towards the end of the book. This physical and emotional trauma is shown to stem from the political persecution she endured under Apartheid and a long period of simply never having had the scope to deal with the trauma of her detention and torture.

Thematically, the autobiography focuses on women's un-heard or misunderstood strengths, on what Ellen Kuzwayo in her autobiography has called "Patterns Behind the Struggle". Despite the visibility of male heroes in South Africa's struggle (such as Govan Mbeki, Ashley Kriel, Trevor Manuel, or Albie Sachs), the autobiography conveys the centrality of women activists and thinkers in struggles for democratic rights and discourses, especially at a time when the UDF was waging a final attack on the weakening Apartheid state. The narrator herself is of course a key example of female determination and resilience, and "the personal as political" is given a charged meaning in accounts of, for example Jaffer as a young woman leaving Cape Town to study journalism at Rhodes, a historically white university, or as a pregnant woman standing up to her torturers and maintaining her commitment to radical journalism. Without lapsing into individualism, Jaffer conveys evidence that she has excelled in a world monopolized by dominant racial and gendered groups, and her experiences as a journalist especially illustrate her success in a sphere that has traditionally been highly masculinist.

As is the case with Govender, courage in the public sphere is linked to courage in dealing with personal relationships and emotional experiences:

Jaffer describes expressions of independence in relation to her father, her husband, the imams who sought to monitor her submissiveness as a child and a woman seeking a divorce. She provides a clear picture of a woman who refuses to compromise her independence, and like the fiction writer Rayda Jacobs, shows that Islamic doctrine has often been reconstructed to prop up patriarchal interests.

As is the case in many South African autobiographies, Jaffer's individual experience is connected to the collective, and she deals with her own triumphs in relation to other women, including her female relatives. The autobiography provides an important account of the author's family and an ethos that is significant to historians of this period. In particular, however, it celebrates the tenacity and spirit of the writer's mother and grandmother, women who refused to conform to dominant ideas about wifely subservience and invisibility, and who defied apartheid, racism and patriarchy. The subtext of the story of male-led struggle is therefore a record of how black women have always struggled for justice and rights; accounts and photographs of women such as Zora Mehlomakhulu, detained as a young woman in the 1970s and Mildred Ramakaba-Lesiea, one of the main organisers of women activists in the Western Cape, locate the author's personal experience in a proud and independent history of struggle.

In ways similar to Govender's autobiography, the book seems to seek to expel pain and suffering through truth. When Jaffer describes her submission to the TRC, she explains her reason for testifying as "I felt that I don't want to go into the future, in the years to come, and pass all this pain on to my daughter and future generations" (2003: 134). Like Govender, then, Jaffer is alert to the existential and psychic implications of political oppression, to the way that injustice and persecution are not only political and social processes, but also afflictions that corrode the human spirit. Both autobiographers explore "freedom" in ways that transcend traditional, masculine and rational definitions, and tap into a realm of feeling and perception often associated with the gendered or raced "Other".

Several years ago, Amina Mama<sup>2</sup> called on African feminists to challenge gendered authoritarianism at all levels of African psychology. Expanding public debate on issues such as activism, democracy and human rights, and also resounding with the courage, passion and eloquence that the autobiographers have demonstrated throughout their lives, *Our Generation* and *Love and Courage* take Mama's call up in powerful ways.

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## Endnotes

1. Black South African women, such as Noni Jabavu, did write autobiographies before the eighties, although the eighties – marking the airing of gender debates in anti-apartheid struggle – saw the consolidated production of work by black women autobiographers.
2. See Amina Mama, “Shedding the Masks and Tearing the Veils: Cultural Studies for a Post-Colonial Africa” in Imam, A., Mama, A. and Sow, F. eds. *Engendering African Social Sciences*. Dakar: CODESRIA. 1997.

