



## Review

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*The Closest of strangers: South African women's life writing.* Judith Lütge Coullie ed. Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2001.

Reviewing a book like this – a compilation of life-stories of different South African women over a historical period spanning more than a century – is a challenge. Where does one start? And how can one do justice to over fifty entries?

This review does not attempt such a feat. Instead, I provide an overview of the book and the insights it gave me, hoping to entice the reader into buying and reading their own copy. *The Closest of Strangers* is an anthology of women's life writings, each of which has its own validity. "Life writings" are here defined as "the representational practices that depict the lived experiences of the subject" (6). These stories are histories of women who lived in South Africa, but who saw their country through different lenses, according to their race, class, language, political affiliation, religion, and so on. This book is probably unique in its attempts to corral an entire range of South African women, regardless of race, class and creed. It brings together a range of stories, both previously published and unpublished, by diverse women, some known, others unknown.

The diversity and the numerical significance of writings by black women is a strategic choice meant to remedy the historical imbalance that formerly gave dominance to white women's stories (10). The narratives are taken from a wide variety of forms, including oral and written texts, non-narrative praise poems and narrative memoirs, as well as extracts from autobiographies, letters and diary entries. A detailed introduction sets out the rationale for and the journey involved in putting this book together.

The title of the book is an effort to reflect diversity. What would draw together an over-privileged white woman and an under-privileged black woman with their vastly different standards of living? In her introduction, Lyndall Gordon notes that the title may seem naïve, given that until recently there existed clearly demarcated boundaries around which race, class and language were negotiated. Nonetheless, she contends that despite the chasms created by both official and unofficial state policies, these seemingly disparate

categories of women were mutually interdependent: the white woman was dependent on her black domestic worker for labour and childcare, and the black domestic worker depended on the white household for survival. Gordon also observes that for many of these women, colonialism intersected detrimentally with sexism:

The codification of customary law by colonial authorities ... was generally disadvantageous to African women..... in white communities, men who learned and perpetuated a sense of their inalienable right to dehumanise black South Africans often felt that they had a similar right over women. Thus the oppression of women, although unequally imposed, was never confined to any one particular race group and the brutalities of the gross infringements of human rights that apartheid bred ... continue to sour gender relationships in this country (10).

The following excerpt demonstrates the kind of gap Gordon speaks of. The late Marike de Klerk, the wife of the last apartheid era President, wrote:

[I]ike most of my school friends, I simply accepted that black girls went barefoot, wore worn-out clothes and later worked as servants in white homes....

I calmly accepted that black women sat on the floor instead of on chairs and benches in white homes; that black people die illiterate; that coloured people differed from me (343).

Sindiwe Magona, the writer who herself once worked as a domestic worker, shares the view from the other side of the divide:

It seems strange now, of course, but the idea of say, white people suffering bereavement never crossed my mind. Even their tragedies were so far removed from my world that I had never stopped to think of white people doing anything they didn't choose to do (2).

This book touches on questions of representivity and nationality, if loosely. Some of the women whose stories are featured were born and lived in South Africa, but were forced to leave, either for reasons of political survival, or because they were expelled by the apartheid government: these include Maggie Resha, Hilda Bernstein, Ruth First and Bessie Head. Others, like Nicky Arden, Lyndall Gordon and Prue Smith, emigrated. Some, like Emily Hobhouse and Pauline Smith, were born elsewhere, but spent a significant portion of their lives in South Africa and were profoundly influenced by their experiences here.

At the beginning of each extract, the editor has made an effort to provide an introduction to the writer, but in some cases, little information is available.



This is particularly true of the praise poetry and short writings by some of the black women. These writings were drawn from adult literacy classes, and not much biographical information was provided. The editor also explains that in the case of the stories by Mildred Mjekula, Maureen Sithole, Ma Dlomo Lugogo and Dollie, which were taken from a collection on black women workers, the information was restricted to the little the women themselves provided. Given their relative lack of prominence, it was difficult to track down further information about them (284).

The stories, which span the years 1895 to 2000, are categorised into historical periods, each with a brief summary of the socio-political and economic events that occurred in South Africa at the time. The extracts explore the role that women played in shaping this history, as well as their experiences of racism and events such as forced removals threading through their life stories.

A brief glance at two of the first stories from 1895–1910 sets the scene for prominent concerns over the next century. They reveal not only strong nationalistic sentiments, but also remind us of the pecking order between different races. Sarah Raal, who was born in the 1880s in the Orange Free State, was an active participant in the Anglo-Boer War (now known as the South African War). After escaping from a British internment camp, she joined a Boer commando. Her actions reveal the patriotic and Afrikaner nationalist sentiments that fuelled her involvement in this struggle for self-determination.

Emily Hobhouse's excerpt also draws the reader back to the realities of an era gone by. Hobhouse was a British woman who became a campaigner for the rights of Britain's most exploited workers. When the Anglo-Boer War broke out, she became Honorary Secretary of the women's branch of the conciliation committee. In 1900, she organised a women's protest meeting against the war, and travelled around South Africa recording the testimonies of Afrikaners whose farms had been destroyed. While her heroic efforts have long been recognised by South Africans of all races, it nevertheless comes as a shock to read her cursory reference to her servant in what today would be acknowledged as flagrantly racist terms: "My escort, Mr Enslin ... I and Jacob, the Kaffir boy, started from Bloemfontein today at 10 am" (31).

While the reader is warned in the introduction that these writings are located with socio-cultural contexts that are clearly defined by the era, it is nevertheless an eye-opener to be reminded that there was a time when such parlance was taken for granted; to the extent that an Indian woman doctor in the 1930s describes herself in the title of her autobiography as "Coolie Doctor".



Hers is one of the more humorous stories, an example of one of those that reflect the day-to-day life of a South African woman, as it is dictated by her racial grouping as African, Indian, White or Coloured. Kesaveloo Naidoo (later Goonan) was born in 1906 in Durban to a Mauritian mother and a Southern Indian father. Fiercely independent, she embarked on a medical career – an unprecedented path for a South African Indian woman at that time. Her stories vividly capture life in the Indian community in 1930s Durban, and she gently mocks the conventions of her peers:

The orthodox women at the clinics would not utter their husband's names and I teased them to tell me the names, but they never caught on that I was playing games with them. "My child's father has a bad cough; I want some medicine for him."

"What's his name?"

The woman's reply would be a whispered mention of the first letter of the name (82).

One of the strengths of this collection is that it intersperses the known with the unknown. It does so not only in terms of those included; it also gives unprecedented insight into the lives of well-known figures such as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Mamphela Ramphele, Antjie Krog, Gillian Slovo and Bessie Head, among others. Their stories give readers a glimpse into their lives as wives, friends and political activists in their own right. One of the things that Ramphele's story has inspired me to do (and I speak as a non-South African) is to watch *Cry Freedom* again, this time with a more critical eye. Ramphele's excerpt speaks of her anguish at being unable to mourn Steve Biko, a man she loved and whose child she bore. She also describes how she was thwarted when she tried to halt the making of *Cry Freedom*, owing to the misrepresentation of Biko himself, particularly in relation to her role in his life (267).

This paradox of simultaneous visibility and invisibility strikes the reader particularly when reading Madikizela-Mandela, Slovo and Ramphele's stories. Huge assumptions are often made about what it means to be the partner or child of an icon, especially a political activist. Cognisance is rarely taken of the significant personal sacrifices that these women have made for the greater cause. These stories suggest what it might really mean to be a wife, partner, mother or child of the struggle, because in many ways these women were married to the struggle, and not the men in their lives. The political cause and the person became enmeshed, and for most of these women, the everyday notions of love, good old-fashioned romance, fidelity and domestic life went out the



window. This paradox permeates many of the stories in this collection, and it is worth acknowledging the courage it must have taken for these women to put their personal stories out into the world for scrutiny. The turmoils and tribulations experienced by Bessie Head, Emma Mashinini and Charlene Smith are just a few of those that come to mind.

This book is definitely a worthwhile read. It must be recognised for its attempts to begin to remedy the paucity of available writing by black South African women. The editor is to be commended for her efforts to obtain stories that are rarely heard, or not circulated, because of their oral nature. As a graduate student, I found it useful and helpful to my own work, and as a non-South African citizen, I found it a wonderfully alternative and refreshing take on the history of this country, rather than the usual male-dominated discourses and overviews. I would recommend that anyone with an interest in women's history and stories buy it, and read it, especially if they are keen to learn more about this continent.



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