

## Rebellious Women: South African women in the struggle for Freedom

Patricia McFadden, November 2015

### Introduction:

I would like to thank the colleagues here at the Steve Biko Center for affording me this invitation to be part of the amazing legacy of courage and foresight that Bantu Biko represents for us all who strive for Freedom, universally. I was already active in the anti-Apartheid resistance when he was brutally murdered, and as with the assassinations of Patrice Lumumba, Eduardo Mondlane, Dulcie September, Thomas Sankara, Samora Machel, Amilcar Cabral, Walter Rodney, among many who dared to reclaim their African dignity, his death served to heighten our determination against the racist colonial regime; it became an additional springboard towards liberation. We will always honour their courage, which is our collective light as Freedom Fighters. Ashe'

Tonight I would like to speak to the signal importance of those Africans who, wearing female bodies and identities, stepped into the path of patro-history and caused a significant shift in the meaning and future of liberation for this region in particular. I have 'edited' the title of my presentation somewhat, as a way of creating a conceptual opportunity to critique the term 'role', while using it to highlight a different perspective on how certain women – radical, rebellious women – were crucial agents of progress in our societies. So without further ado, let me explain the reasons behind my precociousness.

On receiving this invitation and the title of the lecture, I decided that, in typical radical feminist fashion, I would take this opportunity to subvert the title, and use the occasion instead to look back at our recent past, in a different way, so as to re-imagine the notions and practices of liberation and freedom for women in particular and for us all as Africans living in a deeply troubled moment of blatant imperialist hegemony and impunity across the world. In South Africa, the fragments of people's dreams of freedom lie tattered and scattered about us; the destitution at the intersections, the millions in shacks along the highways and

byways of a country that is still one of the wealthiest on the continent and in the world, the ever-increasing military budgets and blatant brutality of the repressive and coercive arms of the State, and the frightening arrogance and elitism of those in the academy and those who drive the ideological infrastructure of neo-colonial class plunder and consumption.

For women generally, our circumstances are increasingly precarious and perilous in a multitude of ways; rampant misogynistic behaviour and practices abound, with impunity and femicide as the most blatant expressions of male rage and social distress. We are in the midst of a concerted BACKLASH – male pushback against women’s forward agency. Women have become the ‘cause’ of male frustration, despair, dysfunction, and socio-cultural failure. Women are increasingly blamed for the disintegration of black masculinity and the crimes that males commit on the bodies and lives of little girls and females of all ages.

This scapegoating and the sexual violence that accompanies it across the breadth of this society are among the most glaring expressions of a profound crisis in social, political, spiritual and cultural terms. It all emanates from the bedrock of capitalist exploitation and human suppression. Our societies have their backs against the wall of seemingly immovable social cul du sacs – and facing us is the unfinished business of liberating ourselves from a persistent racist infrastructure that perpetuates a deeply rooted capitalist white privilege and which feeds an emerging, voracious black ruling class. We strove for freedom through liberation struggles, but the moment of independence inevitably took us to neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism, exploitative systems that are presently at their height as parasitic social formations.

Therefore, in thinking about how and who women became in South Africa and across southern Africa over the past century of struggle, I thought it would be interesting to debunk a few conceptual and ideological ‘holy cows’. Let us begin with a conceptual norm that is casually used to flatten thinking and erase *herstory* from the dominant narratives of political and social resistance in southern Africa.

I have always found the term ‘role’ deeply annoying and at best just boring, because not only is it static, conservative and passive, it also pigeon-holes women

into old and tired statuses that reinforce oppressive and debilitating patriarchal power relationships and practices. Roles are givens; they are expressions particularly of socio-cultural conformity and normativity; a contradiction to the very meaning of liberation. The term is used to limit our imaginations of who women are or can be, by implicitly constructing women as mothers, wives, caregivers, grandmothers, volunteers, sisters...all the statuses that reinforce male privilege and which keep women confined to the domesticity of patriarchal heterosexual households. Roles define females as 'safe women' – women who live their lives with their eyes downcast; women who never raise their voices in rejection of patriarchal conformity; women who are satisfied with being the extension of their fathers, husbands and sons; women who are passionate (and often cruel) gatekeepers of male patriarchal privilege.

However, while I am critical of the expression 'women's role' in the liberation of any society, I must acknowledge the fact that many women did participate in the liberation struggle against colonialism even if it was in their traditional roles as females (as mothers, wives, daughters, etc), and for most of these women, this was and continues to be the normal identity of a woman in the patriarchal societies that they have learnt to accept and support.

What is often overlooked and under-theorized, whether we are considering anti-colonial resistance in a general sense, or looking specifically at the engagement of particular groups or classes in the Movements towards independence, is that only a very small minority of African people actively participated in organised resistance against settler colonialism, for example in South Africa, or Zimbabwe, relative to the population size. After independence, not a single African country undertook a systematic critique and re-education of the people concerning racism and patriarchal oppression. Racism was treated as a taboo (to be moaned about in private conversations and criminalised in the law) and patriarchy was designated the responsibility of gendered nationalists – through gender mainstreaming. This has had important implications for the political consciousness of people in general and for women particularly, with patriarchal systems having remained essentially unchanged up to and after the moment of independence.

By contrast, the majority of whites were deeply and actively involved in sustaining colonialism and resisting African liberation right up to the moment when the political compromises were made, allowing them to continue owning and controlling the economic resources and infrastructures of our societies, and enjoying the white privilege that underpins their racial and social arrogance to the present time.

These realities have to be carefully considered when we re-visit the notions of nationhood and post-coloniality. Most whites have not become post colonial and they continue to resist any shifts towards a future that requires that they give up their historic privilege. Most Africans remain trapped in colonial and African feudal systems and practices, living outside the modern state infrastructures that are nurturing the emerging black ruling class. This also poses a huge challenge in terms of the redefinition of an inclusive and all encompassing national identity and practice of citizenship.

The majority of women who joined liberation movements from South Africa to Algeria and across the width of this continent – in Guinea Bissau and Mozambique – did so in their conventional roles as patriarchally constructed females and in the main, most of the literature about women's involvement in the resistance to colonial domination highlights and glorifies these conventional identities, these roles, as natural and unproblematic. In fact, all women who were known to have actively resisted colonialism within the parameters of the liberation movements are still conflated into these deeply gendered and patriarchally defined identities, thus erasing the ideological and political differentiation that actually characterised women's resistances everywhere on the continent.

The liberation narrative about women in South Africa is no different, and whilst women were very diverse in social, class, racial and political character within the South African struggle for liberation, the erasure of such political differences becomes even more dramatic and obvious once one scrutinises the nationalist narratives more closely. A homogenous notion of who women became within the historiography of anti-colonialism has been carefully re-invented and is systematically reproduced during national days designated to reinforce this mild

political identity, and the positioning of particular individual women as wives, trade unionists, educators, and political activists serves to mute the radical agencies and revolutionary prowess of other women whose courage provided the wedge in cracking open the door to an alternative life for women in general. This hegemonic discourse and the narrative that maps it, represents a quintessential expression of hetero-patriarchal nationalism and gendered social engineering. Radical women within the herstory of anti-colonialism are consistently erased and made invisible within the narrative of women's engagements with colonial and feudal patriarchy across the continent.

Even when women narrate their experiences and journeys to this place we call South Africa today, they do so with a keen awareness that they can only speak of particular events; self-censorship has become the new expression of loyalty to the party line, and any divergence from the official discourse elicits a swift and vicious punishment of economic and social exclusion from the neo-colonial largess that is controlled by the males who defined and own the liberation story.

Conceptually, therefore, it is crucial that we think politically about the terms, notions and language that we use when we anticipate a discursive event, because how we pose an issue or a question determines to a greater extent the content and orientation of our debates and conversations. We must become radical, rebellious women, so that we can create the new consciousness and craft the alternative ideas and lifestyles, in the traditions of those women who joined liberation struggles to free themselves from colonial and patriarchal repression so that they could be the amazing humans that they were conceived to be.

This evening, then, I want to speak to the significances of women's radical imaginations and dreams as they took the life-threatening risks of standing up to the domination of white supremacy, across class, age and gendered identities. I want to speak, albeit briefly, to the power that such resistance brought to the ideas and practices of liberation, and how women's agencies made the difference in terms of women's futures, beyond the neo-colonial moment. This impact is seldom referred to, less theorised, and often treated as though women

participated in resistance because they were given licence by the males who owned and controlled the infrastructures of the movements against colonialism.

Let me begin by picking a profound thread that runs through the last album of Chiwoniso Maraire, a beautiful, exceptionally talented Zimbabwean woman musician who left us quite recently. She gave expression to her dreams through the mbira. Her last album was entitled 'Rebel Woman' and it was serendipitous in so many ways that she ended her musical career by returning to the most profound political and personal experiences that transformed many African women in the region of Southern Africa over the past century; women who resisted to free themselves first and foremost.

Chiwoniso captures this metamorphosis (from bounded patriarchal subjects to unstoppable free individuals) in the words of her song; a song that encompasses the core of our past and a compromised present, and which requires that we never stop dreaming of an alternative future. She reminds the rebel woman that

*'There will be no compensation, it was of your own free will that you stood on the frontline....but remember that you fought for your people'.* . And I would add, for your-self first and foremost.

### **Rebel women - our feminist foremothers**

As a woman who assiduously rejects any patriarchal role, I therefore prefer the term 'rebel' – and in terms of discussing who women became in the resistance to colonialism, I would rather speak of '*rebellious women*'; – women who made the difference in terms of the larger process that brought us to this moment of independence. These are women who understood that liberation is a long and difficult journey away from racist and indigenous systems of patriarchy and colonialism, and they have continued to shape and impact on this and other African societies in fundamental and foundational ways through their enduring struggles for FREEDOM and a new Humanism.

These rebel women are inspired by the courageous struggles of women who came before them - Loretta Ncgobo, Lillian Ngoyi, Ana Ndzinga, Dorothy Nyembe, Winnie Madikizela, Dulcie September, Mirriam Thladi, Ellen Khuzwayo, Yvonne

Vera, Elizabeth Musodzi and many more amazing women in this country and across our continent, who refused to be *'ordinary'* because of being female, and who stood up and shouted out the freedoms they desired and lived, through their activism, their texts, their resilience in prison and in exile. Their names must be retrieved as the new rallying cry around which the youth of South Africa mobilise and push open the doors to a different future.

The rebel women I know are also inspired by their male comrades who dared to step outside their hegemonic masculine identities and considered women as humans with the same entitlements and rights to integrity and dignity. Men like Frantz Fanon, Thomas Sankara, and Amilcar Cabral and Steve Biko who bravely embraced women as comrades in the anti-colonial struggle even as they had barely moved beyond this idea themselves, when they were all brutally murdered. I am of the opinion that it was this revolutionary growth that went beyond the narrow confines of conventional nationalist ideology as a large platform of anti-colonialism; which made these comrades particularly dangerous to imperialism and the forces of neo-colonialism that were being bred in the belly of the beast. As Steve put it:

*'Women must be at the forefront of nation building to bring the South African citizenry together and, therefore, develop a whole new ethos of human co-existence.'*

For Fanon, critiquing the veil and the imposition of sexual violence on women by French, Arab and indigenous African men was an expression of the deep rupture that racism and patriarchy inflicted on our humanity, and he passionately called for *'a new humanism'* amongst us as Africans, to signal the end of feudal and colonial patriarchy. His scathing critique of black self loathing and its attendant longing for whiteness as the ultimate fulfilment of maleness remains a foundational theses for black men who aspire to free themselves from patriarchal power. For Cabral, women brought the critical agency and intimate understanding of patriarchal colonial exclusion to the demands for freedom and national dignity. No struggle could possibly achieve national liberation without recognising that women's freedom is intrinsic to national freedom.

Of course these men had their gendered flaws and these are now being discussed and interrogated among radical feminists on and beyond the continent.

Contextualising radical ideas and stances is crucial to appreciating the dynamic energies of courageous individuals, without rejecting their contributions outright or limiting their significance to the normative meanings of nationalism and anti-colonial resistance. Personally, I am inspired by men like Cabral, Sankara, Biko and Fanon, because of their intellectual and activist courage, their revolutionary beauty as thinkers beyond the norm, humans who shine a light towards a different humanism among radical thinkers, while opening the possibilities for newer discourses around Liberation and Freedom.

Standing up, publicly, through a conscious embrace of the armed struggle and or support of the multiple forms of resistance against colonial domination, rebel women created an indelible shift in the social, political and cultural landscapes of their respective societies. They became rebel women when they fled unwanted marriages, usually to old, repressive feudal males; when they fled from the drudgery of domesticity as a female inevitability; when they fled the impending sexual impunity of white settler farmers and their sons; and when they fled the multitude of patriarchal circumstances that would invariably doom them to lives of servitude in the homes and sites of power controlled by male relatives. It is these flights towards freedom that serve as the stepping stones upon which we, the women who occupy the political spaces of the independence moment, have bent our intellectual and activist knees upon, and lifted ourselves forward towards an alternative future as contemporary African feminists.

By exposing the rape and sexual abuse they experienced in the liberation camps, rebel women established the demand for a feminist right to bodily and sexual integrity for all women. By insisting that they could be as courageous and bold, rebel women were able to break into the male bastions of the military wings of the various liberation movements. By insisting that they had the right to be in the public as protected citizens, rebel women created the new foundations for women's right to mobility and protection by the State from patriarchal impunity.



I was and am one of these women. I was drawn to the idea of resistance against colonialism because I too was born during the era of white colonial imposition. Like all the black people in my society, I could not enter the local library; I could not eat in a nice restaurant; I was taught in a school that had been designated as appropriate for someone who looks like me; and my entitlements to a life of respect and dignity were compromised or denied through systems of patriarchal and racist colonial discrimination. I was a black girl and later a black woman; my fate had been pre-determined by these hegemonic forces. I was expected to become an obedient wife; to breed for a husband, to labour in the domestic arena without any remuneration, and to be satisfied with being an extension of a male for the rest of my life. The racial and gendered systems of the society collude in socialising and scrutinising black females throughout their lives, to ensure the survival of the systems of male hegemony and privilege.

And so, I became a Rebel Women –my wings to becoming a feminist who loves her radical identity and political praxis. And, like the many women across this region who entered the public (through liberation movements and trade unions) and became political in new and dynamic ways, I too became part of a community of African women who have insisted upon defining our own identities and life trajectories. We took up arms because we understood that fascist colonialism and feudal patriarchies could not be dislodged otherwise. The inalienability of Freedom cannot accommodate compromise of any kind.

### **Choosing feminist her story to his story**

Therefore, coming out of this backward glance through a critique of Nationalism and patro-history, we are able to distinguish certain key shifts in women's consciousness and aspirations as humans and as citizens in independent African societies. I use the notion of independence to delineate a moment that we arrived at through nationalist struggles, as a people whose histories and realities were devastated by western impunitious plunder and denigration for half a millennium. It is a moment that is fuelled by the visions and dreams of millions of Africans who imagined themselves in new and different ways. It is a time when the working people's expectations of a better life can be heard and seen in the

resentments and resistances against petty bourgeois economic and social excesses, and in the battles that the working people are waging against the ensconced repressive regimes on the continent, with the approval of the imperialist west.

In my critique and rejection of nationalism as the new hegemony in African politics – gendered or raced – I position myself securely in the company of Africans who dare to step outside the mainstream; Africans who serve as ‘giraffes’ in their communities – able to see as far as the horizons of the society and beyond; fearlessly anticipating the future and living it before it arrives in the commonsense present. Aluta Continua

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