

Personal reminiscences on life as a member of the Black Sash

Rosemary Smith, *Swimming with Cobras*

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Swimming with Cobras is a memoir by former Black Sash member, Rosemary Smith, who was born and raised in the United Kingdom. Smith moved to South Africa in 1966 and through this memoir she delivers a refreshing, personal perspective on South Africa's socio political context from the mid 1960s through to the dawn of democracy in 1994. While the title of the book is a curious one, the first chapter explains its significance, detailing how Smith once swam in a river in the Eastern Cape while unbeknown to her there was a cobra swimming nearby. It was only after she had been alerted to the snake's presence that fear set in. The distress brought on by this experience is used as a metaphor for the fear felt by political activists during apartheid. Aside from setting up this metaphor, Smith also introduces the prevailing tone of the work, namely the diverse activities the Black

Sash engaged in; these included, for example, attending funerals, which served as an act of solidarity as well as an opportunity to monitor the event for the potential recruitment of new members and for exposure of the organisation. One of the challenges that emerged through these events was language. While none of the Black Sash women could speak Xhosa or Zulu, and thus they could not communicate with a wider black audience, this did not prevent them from getting noticed during this politically turbulent time.

The second chapter moves into a more personal sphere focusing on Smith's early life and career as a medical social worker in the UK. Smith's humanitarianism is reflected as she describes her encounters with people experiencing socio economic hardships. This attribute becomes apparent later in the book when Smith's political activism was further developed in South Africa. The author's political identity was also affected by her brief move to the USA, which is discussed in chapters 3 and 4. In these chapters, a comparison is made between the USA and South Africa, where Smith concludes that the USA had a more "glitzy" approach to politics while in comparison, South African politics was morally scarring and isolating. This seclusion was exacerbated by a number of factors including the country's geo political location and the restricted access to information and news.

From chapter 5 onwards, Smith's change of identity from passive humanitarian to political activist becomes the main focus. The author explains when and why she joined the Black Sash in the 1960s, while also contextualising the Senate Bill, which triggered the Black Sash into action in 1955. Alongside explaining this background, Smith also discusses the multiple identities women had to create, being wives and mothers, as well as in her specific case, being a white political activist during apartheid.

By the sixth chapter, Smith focuses on the functioning of the Black Sash, specifically its advice offices. These offices were a vital part of the organisation and were led by its volunteers in order to demonstrate Black Sash members' commitment to the organisation and its cause. These advice offices gave the organisation insight into what was happening at grassroots level, but they also contributed to the labelling of the Black Sash as an anti apartheid organisation that was functioning to assist and educate the oppressed. Contributors to the organisation varied from local residents to academics. This theme is discussed in detail in chapters 7 and 8 and provides a valuable, fresh perspective on the Black Sash. Smith concludes that regardless of race, women were the most affected by apartheid due to their domestic responsibilities, work commitments and also because of the onerous consequences of apartheid legislation such as the Group Areas Act.

Towards the end of chapter 8, Smith highlights the threat of detention, especially towards fellow activists. The threat of solitary confinement was constantly looming over comrades involved in anti apartheid organisations. It was common for such activists to have their bags packed in case they were suddenly detained. These experiences resonate with that of Ruth First's book, *117 Days*,⁴ in which First provides chilling insight into what it was like to be jailed in solitary confinement as a South African anti apartheid activist. The theme of detention continues in chapter 9, and the role of spies is also discussed, showing how they

4. R. First, *117 Days* (Penguin Classics, London, 1965).

intimidated organisations. With thousands of people being detained in the late 1980s, the need for anti apartheid organisations to work together became more apparent. As a result, Black Sash members were encouraged to “leave the ivory tower” and to join other women’s organisations like the influential Federation for South African Women (FEDSAW). This increased the scope of networks and contacts for the Black Sash and encouraged them to become involved in the wider anti apartheid movement.

An unlikely character locale emerges towards the end of the book: Grahamstown was a clear influence on Smith’s political experiences, and the reader is introduced to the roles of poverty, violence, solidarity and political activism in this town in shaping Smith’s identity. Grahamstown’s socio political history was publicised through tours the Black Sash organised. Certain events and individuals and the effects of legislation were highlighted during these tours. Pass laws in particular were a point of concern and Black Sash members would raise funds to free people who were unfairly persecuted because they had violated these laws.

In chapter 11, the Black Sash is analysed from an international perspective by exploring its interactions with other political activists in exile. By 1990 the Black Sash attended the Women’s Committee of the Dutch anti apartheid movement. This illustrates how widespread the movement was and how the Black Sash was exposed to international contact and influence. Smith then shifts focus from the international to the domestic. Chapter 12 focuses on the democratic process in South Africa making reference to Mandela’s release and the overall direction of the Black Sash amidst the changing context. Despite this positive change, Smith discusses underlying frustrations which were reflected in violent demonstrations. This is discussed specifically with reference to townships and the lack of basic necessities such as clean water. As such, by the mid 1990s, the Black Sash became more involved in empowering the public through education and it ran workshops in rural areas to teach people about the voting process. The book ends with the transformation of the Black Sash from an anti apartheid organisation into a non governmental organisation (NGO). This new NGO status was because of the changing socio political context; there was an awareness that the Black Sash of the 1950s could no longer function in the same manner in the transformative 1990s. Advice offices shifted their focus to a wider platform, not only dealing with welfare matters, but also queries relating to insurance and finances.

This is a captivating memoir. Smith has a strong personal connection to all the stories discussed throughout the book. She paints a vivid comparative picture, highlighting the contrast of life in the UK in the 1960s with her experiences in South Africa. Throughout the work, Smith successfully situates the Black Sash within the wider context of national political organisations, such as the African National Congress and the Progressive Party, as well as women’s roles in society, which she portrays as active, though limited. Smith also draws attention to other welfare organisations that she and the Black Sash were involved with, including GADRA, FEMSA and Christian Aid. The dominant themes in the book are those of violence, solidarity and family as they related to women under apartheid. The role of family units in particular is explored from Smith’s own close knit family vis à vis the socio economic impact on other families in rural areas who were broken up as a result of the political circumstances of the era. At times it is difficult to follow Smith’s recollections because they tend to be sporadic, but nonetheless, it is these memories that illustrate the unpredictability and fear which were part and parcel of

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life under apartheid for political activists. Although the work is a memoir written from a personal point of view, Smith has also consulted historical records ranging from those of the Black Sash to the volumes published by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). These insights make this book a well balanced and valuable read.

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