

Autobiographical Writing by South African Women

Judith Lütge Coullie (ed), *The Closest of Strangers: South African Women's Life Writing*

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Professor Coullie of the Department of English at the University of KwaZulu-Natal must be congratulated on the choices she has made in compiling *The Closest of Strangers: South African Women's Life Writing*. This anthology of extracts in which each woman “seeks to depict the lived experiences of her own life or the life of another” (p 6) includes oral and written texts, praise poems, memoirs, extracts from books, diaries and letters. These autobiographical excerpts written by South African women in the period from 1895 to 2000 are placed in historical context by making extensive use of *The Reader's Digest Illustrated History of South Africa – the Real Story* (1995), Saunders and Southey's *A Dictionary of South African History* (1998) and *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (1990), by Cheryl Walker.

In her introduction Coullie discusses the reasons for her choice of title for this book: she wanted to reflect the racial, cultural and class differences of South African women. She claims that in the early part of the twentieth century, the differences between English and Afrikaans-speaking white women were defined in terms of race, while Africans were viewed as “another species of human being” (p 4). Coullie was motivated “by a desire to give a diverse range of women – the unemployed, illiterate and disempowered, as well as the educated and privileged – the chance to be heard” (p 11) and in this she has succeeded admirably. Her other aim – that her readers, inspired by the excerpts, would go on to read the full texts – will doubtlessly also be realised.

The historical division of the book is a logical one, concentrating on certain key events to mirror women's reactions in times of crisis. In the section dated 1895 to 1910, “The Birth of South Africa”, Kathleen McMagh describes her visit to a boarding-house in Durban and the typically high-handed, Victorian attitude towards “others”. Indian women, she writes, were invariably called “Mary” and the men “Sammy”, while Zulu domestic workers were dubbed “house boys”, irrespective of their age. There also is a short extract from the well-known account (originally published in 1936 in Afrikaans) by Sarah Raal

of her experiences during the Anglo-Boer War. *The Lady who Fought* (2000), will give readers who know more about the concentration camp experiences of Afrikaner women, additional insight into the devastation and hardship suffered by ordinary families. This is followed by Emily Hobhouse's letter to an aunt, which recounts the post-war suffering as farmers tried to rebuild their country. The section closes with an abstract from the autobiography of famous actress, Leontine Sagan. In her *Lights and Shadows* (1996) she describes the Johannesburg of 1905 that was "not restricted to different races and nations; only the English kept more or less to themselves". The democracy of the mining camp disappeared, social values shifted and class distinctions developed. All this was reflected in the choice of where to live: "The rich lived in Parktown, the middle class in Doornfontein and the poor in Fordsburg. The Rand Club, the fortress of the upper ten percent, stood arrogantly in the centre of town" (p 42). The grief of an adolescent love affair is reflected upon, and once again Coullie's choice will inspire readers to hunt down the full text!

In the next segment, 1910 to 1929, entitled "Unions and Divisions", the abstracts are again chosen with care and Pauline Smith, Phyllis Ntantala, Nontsizi Mgqwetho and Prue Smith offer a variety of points of view of the time. Women remained marginal in political developments during both this and the next period (1930 to the early 1940s); these were decades when "domesticity was a cornerstone in both settler and indigenous gender systems" (p 76). In her *Coolie Doctor: An Autobiography of Dr Goonam* (1991), Kesaveloo Naidoo, whose parents moved in the same circles as Gandhi and other prominent Indian families, describes how she qualified as a medical doctor in Edinburgh, changed her name to Goonam, and settled down to practise in Durban. She later became politicised and took a leading role in the 1946 passive resistance campaign launched by Indians in reaction to discriminatory legislation, being imprisoned no fewer than seventeen times.

An interesting new angle that Coullie brings to this anthology is the extensive use of oral documentation. Katie Makanya has related her life-story as interpreter, dispenser and nurse to Doctor James McCord over a period of 35 years, to his daughter, Margaret. This makes for an intriguing mixture of biography and oral testimony. There also is a plaintive song by Ntombi Dhlamini, reproduced by Jeff Opland in his *Words that Circle Words: A Choice of South African Oral Poetry* (1992). This "image of two people whose worldly possessions can be contained in a pillowcase ..." (p 93), reflects the grinding poverty of the African proletariat.

Caroline Kerfoot, in *We Came to Town* (1985), compiled life-writings of an adult literacy class and some of these have been included in Coullie's anthology. One of these documents includes Patricia Nxumalo's reaction to the forced removals of the late 1960s (p 224); others are Jane Hoko's reaction to apartheid (p 296) and Selestina Ngubane's unhappy love affair (p 297). As part of a project on oral tradition, *izibongi*, "the praises of ordinary people", were recorded and published by Liz Gunner and Mafika Gwala in *Muscho: Zulu Popular Praises* (1994). Some of these are also added by Coullie, who has supplied useful notes with these examples. There are extracts from Noleen Turner's unpublished doctoral thesis, *Oral Strategies for Conflict Expression and Articulation of Criticism in Zulu Discourse* (pp 347-349) as well, that illustrate the reaction of "ordinary" Zulu women to their circumstances.

In "Foundations of Apartheid", the section covering the 1940 to 1949 period, socialist Pauline Podbrey writes of her reactions to the racism of Durban in the early 1940s, when, as a young girl, she dated her future husband, an Indian man. They eventually settled in Cape Town where interracial couples were met with somewhat more tolerance. Norma Kidson, from a wealthy Jewish family in Durban, tells of becoming a member of the Congress of Democrats (an anti-apartheid, communist-based organisation) and how she married fellow communist David Kidson. In the extract from her autobiography *Where Sixpence Lives* (1987), she tells about her unhappy – although privileged – childhood as a white South African. Bertha Solomon was also of Jewish extraction, and as an advocate of the Supreme Court and an activist for women's rights, she campaigned for women's suffrage. She served on the Provincial Council and was a United Party member of parliament for twenty years. In stark contrast is the contribution of Mpho 'M'atsepo Nthunya, who worked as a domestic servant. She had very little schooling, suffered extreme poverty, and after her husband's death, managed to support her family on her meagre salary. Her virtual illiteracy provides a new angle to this collection of life-writings.

In the section "Apartheid Escalates", covering the period 1950 to 1959, Coullie includes a number of interesting excerpts. Sindiwe Magona's contribution is a summary of Xhosa history and details of the Xhosa puberty ritual written for her grandchildren. She also adds her personal experience of Bantu Education and her confirmation as a Christian in the mid-1950s. Maggie Resha led the ANC Women's League delegation to the World Congress of Women in Moscow in 1963 and thereafter, with the ANC banned, she lived in exile in Algiers and then London, before

returning to South Africa in 1976. In the excerpt from her autobiography, her role as one of the organisers of the Women's March in 1956 is discussed. Also included is the account of the early, blossoming romance between Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and her ex-husband, the inspirational leader, Nelson Mandela. In her previously-banned publication *Part of my Soul* (1986), Winnie told Anne Benjamin and Mary Benson: "I knew when I married him that I married the struggle. The liberation of my people" (p 157).

Coullie continues her chronology with the period from 1960 to 1969, which she labels "Winds of Repression". Here women perhaps better known to a wider public relate their experiences. They include Lyndall Gordon, Frances Baard, Helen Joseph, Gillian Slovo, Ruth First, Hilda Bernstein, Helen Suzman and Patrixia Nxumalo.

"The People Rise Up" (1970 to 1979), covers the turbulent period of the Soweto riots. A very personal voice is heard when Bessie Head's letters, which were posthumously published, tell of her nervous breakdown. This personal note is continued in Linda Fortune's experience of the destruction of her home in District Six, as well as that of Caesarina Kona Makhoere who was imprisoned in Pretoria. The section also includes an excerpt from the diary of Maria Tholo (a pseudonym) in which the turmoil in Guguletu during a Christmas season is related. This provides the backdrop to Mamphela Ramphele's account of her love affair with Steve Biko and the birth of their son after Biko's much-publicised death in police custody.

"Turmoil", 1980 to 1989, is traced through a number of abstracts by women trade unionists. Central among these is Emma Mashinini. In her autobiography, published in 1989, she gives an account of her life as founder and first general secretary of the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (CCAWUSA) from 1975 to 1986. This trade union played a key role in the formation of COSATU. In 1995, after many years of service in a number of capacities, Emma was appointed as a commissioner for the Restitution of Land Rights. Coullie has also included an emotional piece by Ann Paton – second wife of Alan Paton – in this section. The excerpt on their personal relationship and marriage ends on a somewhat telling note. Ann wrote in her book *Some Sort of a Job: My Life with Alan Paton* (1992): "This is the place where one writes that we lived happily ever after, but it was not quite as simple as that" (p 321).

The final section of the book, “The New South Africa”, 1990 to 2000, includes passages from AnnMarie Wolpe’s autobiography in which she “recounts the difficulties of returning to South Africa after decades of life in exile” (p 325). There is also a somewhat jarring excerpt by Nicky Arden, which does not fit happily into this section of the book. It describes how she took a two year training course in traditional African medicine and then tried to incorporate this into her Western value system. The ex-wife of F.W. de Klerk, Marike (who was murdered in 2001), related her life-story to the Afrikaans author Maretha Maartens, and Coullie has included the passage in which Marike describes, for the benefit of their grandchildren, the visit to Sweden when De Klerk and Mandela shared the Nobel Prize for Peace. Antjie Krog’s contribution as an Afrikaans woman is an account of her experiences as a journalist covering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings on behalf of the SABC. The penultimate word belongs to another journalist, Charlene Smith – her shocking account of being raped while alone in her home one night. It brings another perspective to the book: one of the prevalence of crime and violence and the need to fight the holocaust of HIV/AIDS. Smith’s voice is added to that of Maria Ndlovu, the final contributor, with an excerpt from her book *Living Openly: HIV Positive South Africans tell their Stories* (2000).

This is an important publication in which women’s voices, once neglected, are heard loud and clear. Judith Coullie has made a significant and well-balanced contribution to our knowledge of a century of South African history.

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