

# Anthem to the Unity of Women

**Author:** Kally Forrest

**Publisher:** Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd

**Place:** Johannesburg, South Africa

**Year:** 2024

**ISBN:** 978-1-4314-3480-0

Reviewed by

**Maiti Manganye**

Msmanganye@nwp.gov.za

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2024/n32a11>

## Introduction

The book is a biography of Lydia Kompe, entitled *Anthem to the Unity of Women*. The author is Kally Forrest, a former trade unionist whose contribution to the *South African Labour Bulletin* as an editor has been remarkable. Jacana Media published it in 2024 in Johannesburg. Extensive research conducted by several scholars in historical studies across the contemporary landscape uncovered many unsung heroes and heroines of South Africa's liberation struggle. They received little historiographical attention in the mainstream accounts of apartheid South Africa and her transition to democracy. *Anthem to the Unity of Women* seeks to bring forth the struggles of women in patriarchal societies. Lydia Kompe's journey from oppression to liberation is pivotal to these challenges. The periodic episodes of her struggles form an integral part of engagements in this book. It further navigates the complexities of colonial imposition and its impact on individual identities. The intersectionality between rural and urban patterns that account for the plight of South African women has been widely covered in the book.

## Summary

The book is primarily centred around the struggles of South African women. The author navigates Black women's imposed roles, particularly in rural communities. The focus is on

---

how Lydia Komape experienced life in Limpopo, where she grew up. She was confronted with a two-pronged struggle. The first phase was patriarchy, while the other one was more political. These struggles imposed severe limitations on her. Despite these uphill battles, Lydia was unrelenting in her quest for social justice. She tried hard to educate Black women in her community about human rights, gender equality, and political emancipation. There is less contestation of narratives, chiefly because both the author, Kally Forrest and the biographee Lydia Komape share perspectives on the nature of the struggle that South African women face. The biographer comes from a rich political background. She played a significant role in politics. She was a trade unionist, fighting for the rights of workers. Kally is highly recognised and respected in political circles amidst her immense contribution to the *Bulletin on Labour Relations* as an editor. Her ultimate goal has always been the emancipation of black women from the shackles of patriarchy as well as the politics of oppression and deprivation. Kally's fight against the oppression of women found expression in several biographies that she wrote for various organisations and their impact on individuals and broader society in pre-democratic and post-apartheid South Africa. What also comes through in this biography is Lydia's identification with life in the rural areas of Limpopo and its pressing challenges. These include abusive labour practices such as ploughing the fields, harvesting the crops, and fetching wood and water. It is interesting how Lydia navigated the complexities of her journey, fought against all odds, and made it to the top. When South Africa attained political independence in 1994, she was among the first people to serve in President Nelson Mandela's cabinet, a significant milestone in her political career. As she was affectionately called, Mam Lydia became a voice for the voiceless women in South Africa, especially those based in the country's rural areas. Her personal experiences of apartheid and its oppressive laws shaped the narrative of women's struggles for emancipation. The extent to which she experienced the oppression of women in various forms within patriarchal societies under the apartheid regime represented the majority of women across the racial spectrum.

## Analysis

Lydia's biography enables readers to recast their frame of mind to an earlier period in history to understand the essential realities of the country's political landscape. She navigated her political journey with so much determination that it impacted even white women activists. The struggle for women's rights and privileges reached its peak from the 1970s right up to the 1980s. It entailed, among other things, workers' rights and entitlement to land. The

biography brings into sharp focus the different forms of discrimination that Lydia had to endure during the years of her struggle. One would perceive it as double jeopardy in the sense that she got it for being a woman in a patriarchal society and for being a black rural woman in an apartheid country. The writer has captured the essence of the struggles black rural women bear in a South African context well although the biography traversed through other terrains of the liberation struggle wherein black women featured prominently. The narrative is not only confined to the life of women in the rural areas of Limpopo; it stretches over to other forms of the struggle which impacted South African women across the board. The biography demonstrates the effects of rural and urban influences on the struggle and how they determined approaches to different episodes of women's fights for justice.

Data were generated mainly through personal interviews. In the main, interviews are considered credible accounts in generating historical data. The writer relied on interviews chiefly because no primary sources, such as letters and diaries, documented Lydia's lived experiences. The narrative was driven by first-hand accounts, which reflects the strength of this biography. Furthermore, the voice of the biographee is dominant, permeating all chapters of the book. Lydia's accounts resonated with the general experiences of most women in rural Limpopo province. The literary style is quite intriguing. The subtitles of the chapters are thought-provoking. They arouse curiosity and enhance critical engagement. The use of pictures, particularly in chapter 9, compliments the entire literary work and makes it an exciting read. Pictures constitute visual memories in history, shaping readers' perceptions of various histories. They make it easier for the readers to capture the essence of historical narratives. The shared photos reflect a juxtaposition of narratives. The writer presented a contestation of narratives in this biography so well. Lydia's shared personal anecdotes about her early life and its challenges have been presented alongside her navigating the complexities and challenges on the political front.

## Critique

There is unity between the title and the content. It puts the reader into proper perspective regarding what the biography seeks to interrogate. The cover and design make the book attractive to readers. The title: "*Anthem to the Unity of Women*" blends well with the content. However, the downside of this biography is that it relies too much on personal interviews. Lydia is the only person driving the narrative. Her story has been used to gauge the sentiments of South African women amidst the struggles of diverse magnitudes they were confronted with. There is neither contestation of narratives nor competing perspectives in

---

this biography, yet it touches on the struggles and challenges faced by other women. Their perspectives would have been more welcome. Their experiences might vary and shape their perspectives differently. As a critical driver of stories about the oppression of women, Lydia also relied heavily on assumptions about the impact of the apartheid regime and patriarchy on women in rural Limpopo. There is no evidence in the biography suggesting any interaction with these women. There is no record of personal interviews conducted with them. There is no information about debate platforms created for these women to share and debate pertinent issues. Lydia has primarily driven all the stories about their plight.

## **Conclusion**

The overall thoughts and impressions of the biography reflect its general acceptance by a broader reading audience. It speaks to various forms of the struggles black women in rural parts of the country have endured. It is interesting to learn that the lived experiences of women in the rural parts of Limpopo represented the sentiments of most black women throughout the country. This biography has been meticulously written and captured the essence of the topic. It succeeded in its navigation of black South African women's struggle against the oppressive rule of the apartheid government. The attempt to establish an alignment between rural and urban environmental influences is one of the highlights of this biography. It would undoubtedly serve as a constant reminder of where we come from, where we are, and where we are going. It will contribute immensely to the political literature that continues to shed some light on the dynamics of the liberation struggle. It will enable women in South Africa across the racial spectrum to reflect on women's struggles through its prism.

Finally, one would strongly recommend this biography as a must-read for all, as it illustrates a tactical shift from collective legacies to individual legacies.