A History of Courage and the Continuous Search for Political Expression

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I am going to talk very briefly about the historical evolution of feminisms in South Africa particularly in terms of how feminisms and feminist consciousness have evolved within the liberation struggle and the different ways of reading feminisms in South Africa.

My major starting point is probably where we left off earlier, looking at feminist canons or academic canons, and forms of starting and producing knowledge and whether that is necessarily always in touch with and informed by the evolving reality on the ground. I want to locate my discourse and myself within that discourse.

Firstly, I come from South Africa. I grew up in the turbulent 1980s, so I am pretty much shaped by that reality. I grew up in very rural Eastern Cape and that too is very much a part of the lens through which I view feminisms and feminist evolution. Like Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan writer, essayist and historian, I too am defined by a commitment, or an obsession as he puts it, of remembering what has happened in the world particularly in the global South, in the economic South, in the African continent and above all in one little space that is South Africa. It is through commitment, through constant remembering and committing to memory, to events of past centuries, as if they happened yesterday, that I believe we are able to understand the processes by which we have come into being. It is also through the lenses of history or histories, particularly looking at histories as evolving in the past as well as in the present, that we may find courage to

1 Transcript based on the author’s presentation.
imagine and revisit the political drama and the ideals that propel us forward in the first place.

I have come from afar – in terms of geographical location but I also think in historical terms – from South Africa, to share with you our experience and the ways in which we have historically pushed back, at times in ways that apparently defy reason, the frontiers of patriarchy and untold power and aggression, for no other reason, quite frankly, but to be human, be able to exist as women, as human beings and as citizens. That country, like so many others that have gone through histories and traumas of that nature, is rich with stories of courage, fear, imagination as well as sheer and deep commitment to universal ideals of freedom and most critically to personal freedom and claims to personhood and living with dignity. Many of us including feminists like myself who grew up in the barricades of the 1980s are simply exhausted right now in South Africa from the testosterone-charged political drama that unfolds in front of us. We find it alienating. We ask, as many people in the global movements have asked in their own countries, “Where is my own face in this testosterone-charged political drama, where is our reality?” The current discourse in South Africa, if it can even be called discourse, never mirrors the reality: the rise in food prices right now in my country, the homelessness and those who live with untold scars of yesterday’s struggles against apartheid; the majority, of course, being women as always. Sometimes we do feel despondent, and when that despondency takes over, as it must if we are to be human, we announce to no one in particular that this is not what we thought the struggle is about and somehow, as we repeat this mantra-like statement or line, we feel renewed with energy to move on.

So this is the central theme of my presentation, this part of a quest to uncover the histories of courage, the many sides of struggle, our many victories, our losses, in the past and in the present. In much of our communities, geographical, ideological, communities of practice, collective memory is severely undermined and in some cases dying because those in power distort it, reproduce it in order to shape it and give it a different name so that you cannot recognise yourself in it. I am from an incredibly dynamic, ever changing political environment, where yesterday’s political signposts are suddenly pointing to a different direction. So we have to dig deep within ourselves to find the
space of political and moral sanctuary, and to find a language and a new
discourse perhaps or even an old one for that matter, that will not
only enable us to understand the present but will assist us in our quest
for a better tomorrow.

I will begin by talking about two historical events in order to
make a few points that I wanted to make about this evolution of femi-
nist consciousness in South Africa. When I looked at the literature and
the various emails sent by the team for the colloquium, I chuckled
because it is often taken for granted that in pre-colonial Africa there
existed a homogenous identity, a cultural practice, forms of worship
and belief systems amongst Africans. At the bottom of the hierarchy, it
is believed, were women like myself or like my forebears. On the other
side of the argument of course there are those who have a vested
interest in power and in perpetuating the stereotypes and the myths,
who in defence of Africa and its Africanness, deny any heterogeneity
and internal contradictions amongst Africans themselves. On many
sides of this discourse, including those in the dominant feminist litera-
ture deriving from Anglo-Saxon Europe which I think this seminar is
also partly about exploring, is a deep silence on African women’s multi-
ple and complex locations, in the pre-colonial period as well as in the
periods that came afterwards and in the present. On the other side,
there also are those with vested interest, particularly men and patriar-
chal women, as we call them at home, who in defence of Africa, will
then eschew anything that is so-called Western and talk of Western
feminism as a foreign concept. Many of us of course do not know what
Western feminism is, we do not know what kind of animal that is,
because we believe that even Western societies themselves have never
been homogenous, they continue to be completely complex and het-
erogeneous themselves. So we believe that often these complexities
mirror each other. That is not to deny the fact that people from my
part of the world, from my continent, have had particular experiences,
especially in the colonial countries in the African continent.

I think that it is important to just perhaps touch therefore on
something that appears to be a major shock to many people in South
Africa: the fact that as early as in 1894, African women refused to carry
passes, passports, documents of identity; as early as in 1894, before the
state of South Africa was formed. And when the Union of South Africa
was formed in 1910, and black people were excluded and formed the
South African Native National Congress – which is the precursor to the present day African National Congress (ANC) – they too left the women out, the men left the women out, the black men left the women out. I think it is important to say, in order to see the complexity of identity and the ways in which African women have pushed for political space, that in 1913, merely a year after the ANC was formed, women took to the streets in Bloemfontein, even before Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement, and took to the streets in ways that were much more militant, in ways that had never been seen before.

Historians reading this particular event have tended of course to look at what appears to be rather than what actually did happen. Interestingly, Julia Wells, who is seen as an authority on South African women’s history, writes that the women who were in Bloemfontein, who resisted the pass laws, bore little resemblance to the majority of Black women in South Africa. They were urbanized, devotedly Christian and well educated. This is the literature that I have read, this is what I have been told and I look at it and wonder, “Where the hell did she get this from?” Because of course the actual reality is very different. For the women who were in Bloemfontein, the trigger point of the protest was a shiny new public bathhouse that was built for white women. Black women were doing laundry and the only way they could do laundry for white people was to use the bathhouses that were considered sanitized and hygienic enough. But in order for them to do that, they had to purchase passes. The images of that particular march are very important not only because it was the first march of its kind in South Africa, but because it talks of the intersectional, intersectoral, interracial, intergenerational and, most importantly for us in South Africa, multiethnic composition of that march itself.

I as said, when the ANC was founded in 1912, women were left behind. They were not allowed to join but women were in fact voting in ANC long before they were members. Their influence was in fact not through their husbands or through pillow politics, they were simply going to the conferences and influencing and lobbying the political spaces as they wanted to.

This notion of breaking away from the movement that you are part of has always been part of the South African women’s movement consciousness. In 1954, the Federation of South African Women was formed and it was the first multiracial, non-racial platform ever
formed, even before the trade unions in South Africa. Women who were from different groups, from different ethnic groups, from different sectors in terms of industry of the unions came together and formed the Federation of South African Women. You had communists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims and one of the lasting legacies of this union is the green and black church-like jacket that the African National Congress Women’s League continues to wear.

And again, when these women marched in 1956, still refusing, long after the men had accepted the passes, 20,000 of them gathered in Pretoria. The urban legend says that the then Prime Minister jumped out of the window running away from the women. The beauty, of course, of the African oral tradition and story-making is that you can juice it and spice it up as you want, but it is often very close to the truth because the truth is that he did fly out of Pretoria on that day. He did not exactly jump out of the window but he did take a plane out of the city.

As we look at 1956, we again have to look beyond the appearances. For me, one of the most powerful images, one that is reported less and that very few people comment on, is the one of Lilian Ngoyi with her daughter talking to her as she was about to ascend the steps to the empire, if you like. Their foreheads are almost touching and you do not need the words to understand what the mother says to the daughter. But you understand that this is a moment that is pregnant with what is unexpected and perhaps what we do not know could have happened.

Interestingly, as people read and give various narratives of both the 1913 and the 1956 marches, the silences are much more eloquent than what is said. The continued invisibilisation of African women’s experiences or women’s experiences in general is something that we still live with. Nelson Mandela writes, in his own biography, that the Satyagraha movement helped him or helped his generation when they went to jail after the passive resistance because they took the stigma out of jail. And we’re all like “Really? But sorry men, how about the sixty women who had been in jail, forty of whom had been without boots or shoes to court in the middle of the winter in Bloemfontein?” I do not think he intends not to acknowledge women, I think this is about what is said generally and has been repeated without thinking about whose voices are we silencing and whose history are we heroising.
The other part important to me in 1956 again is about images. It is an image of four young boys on the shoulders of black domestic workers. One of the interesting images is that of two boys astride the shoulders of these black domestic workers, and holding hands and playing with the other. There are various ways of reading this. You can say that they are so used to black women’s bodies for an easy ride that they take it for granted. That is probably one aspect of it but it would be a very crude one. Perhaps you can also argue that these boys have become so comfortable that they can go into the space of a march that was banned by the government – it is said that all buses and trains were stopped – that perhaps the women themselves had a much more complex relationship with the parents of these boys than we would care to ever even understand.

Coming as I do myself from a family of domestic workers, with a grandmother who worked as a domestic worker for forty years, I find that the black/white relationship between women who live in the same domestic sphere is very complex. I think at some point one becomes the boss and the other becomes the support crash and I don’t think it is necessarily always the same and linear relationship. I know that when my grandmother’s boss, the madam of the house, was beaten up black and blue by her drunken husband during a drunken brawl, I know that it was my grandmother who applied the poultice and it was her who comforted her, not so much as the boss at that particular point in time but as one woman to another. So I think that even in that contradictory space that is deeply unequal, there may be some symbiotic sort of embryonic seeds of solidarity. But perhaps I am reading too much from it.

Looking now at those images of 1956, looking at Ruth First for example at the frontline, looking at how deliberate it was to have black and white women and Indians and coloureds together there to the point that it almost feels imposed and unnatural, at a time in South Africa when we are caught again in essentialist and sometimes ethnically chauvinistic politics, we are caught by these images so that we can understand that non racialism is not something you arrive at but something you actually bore towards.

So when you look at these images now, you see this complex history of otherness, of those who are inside and those who are outside and their ever shifting sense that is very much part of our history in
South Africa. South African women in general have defied compartmentalisation. There is no reason why Ruth First for example had any presence in the potato boycott. She was a Jewish middle class journalist who came from a very rich family. Everything else that we know tells us she should not have been there. There is no way that we can explain why an Indian woman would sell half of her dowry in order to make it to Pretoria to a protest march about a pass she was not asked to carry in the first place. I can imagine how the white supremacist mentality would say “This is not about you, this is about the dark ones”. I think a part of it is about building a very solid ground of refusal even as we acknowledge difference and differentiations and inequalities amongst ourselves.

In many ways the 1956 march remains a very rich field to be harvested if we are interested in understanding how the history influences the present. And yet much of feminist reading and interpretation has been blind to its richness, we have been looking instead at questions such as whether they called themselves feminists, why they came out and said “We the mothers”, as if to call yourself a mother in the face of a regime that calls you a girl when you are sixty is not revolutionary enough in and of itself. So, as we get caught in motherism versus feminism, what we do lose, even us as feminists, is the actual voicing and forms of self-expression that the women who were part of that movement in the 50s were using to define themselves. I think that harvest is a bitter sweet one, I think that if we allow ourselves to be imprisoned by academic canons, the feminist movements globally are actually not going to grow, because we are forever looking for that which we know. If it did not work in 1970, do you think it is going to work in 2008? And I think in many ways we are denying ourselves the potential for a very rich language and a very rich way of self-expression. So yes I agree that we do have to talk about women’s insurgencies, but I would like to talk particularly in the context of African feminisms about feminist insurgencies because I think in my country right now, despite the fact that we have the most non sexist, non racial Constitution applauded by the whole world, that even legalises homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderness, and any other form of identity that you might have, the truth of the matter is that I come from a country that commits hate crimes against lesbians right now as we speak.
We need to therefore understand where the hatred comes from, we need to name it for what it is and say it does not belong in a constitutional democracy, that this hatred is particularly taken in small white towns against black lesbians, black bisexual men and women, and black transgender people. There is an overlaying of race, gender, class and sexuality and right now with the bible thumping right wing that is emerging in South Africa, which is a very new phenomenon, every time they want to leap on any bandwagon, sexuality becomes the issue. So we are seeing in South Africa, in ways that we have never seen before, women’s bodies being battlefields in ways that are very shocking. When you talk about crime breaking in your house, it is no longer sufficient to take the television, they have got to rape the wife and the children too. That is the world that I come from.

Presently South Africa like any other country in the region is affected by migratory patterns. There is no way that we can be insulated from the crisis that is happening in Zimbabwe, it is only normal that people would move from Zimbabwe to South Africa, after all they did build the wealth of South Africa. The shame of the country of course is that, suddenly, that which we wanted to push under the cover for all those years, that is the hatred of Africans, especially dark skinned Africans coming from other countries, has exploded in May in xenophobic acts and everybody from the president to others claim it is not xenophobia. Ok fine, what is it? So we have come up with all these terms like “negrophobia” to accept this deep-seated fear of imagination, of Africans living and coexisting with one another. In the letter that we received, we were told, “If you come from countries where you do not need to obtain a visa, please bring the letter of invitation because Western European governments are intolerant”. I laughed because my own government is just as intolerant, so I could have sent that letter to you, except that perhaps being Swiss you would have made it through the passport controls. But I think that as migrants move in and out of our societies, we simply have to accept the fact that the boundaries were artificial in the first place and will continue to be so. But beneath that story of xenophobia, what remains untold are horrifying numbers of girl children, who are left alone, who have been caught up in the net of transactional sex in order for them to survive and not to leave South Africa, to go back to their countries of origin. We have no idea how many they are, we are
even afraid to ask, in case the picture is actually much more horrifying than we think.

What is interesting though is that even in migrancy, women still refuse to be put in neat boxes. So we study migrancy and human trafficking, people who are fleeing from economic distress, from war, and then we meet quite a substantial number of Africans who are just in South Africa because they just want to have an experience of traveling. And that defies any kind of logic and when you say, “Wouldn’t you just rather be in your country?”, they reply, “No, I will just go to the next country”. So we have to be humbled by the fact that unless we do have a conversation with people and ask them what shapes them, what informs them, we are simply going to have policies that are way off the mark.

I have told you a lot about the problems in South Africa, there is no need for me to tell you what is good in South Africa. You know that, you know about our political representation, about our Constitution, so I would much rather talk about these grey and dark areas. Not to deny the successes that have been made in the past fourteen years, but what preoccupies us right now is the fact that even the political movement from which I come is a threat to the feminist movement. So the question that I would like to pose is how to reclaim the spaces that we have created in the first place, so that the agenda and the freedom are not completely hijacked. It is a contested space, it always was, but how do we reclaim it? How do we ensure the longevity of the Commission on Gender Equality that I chair and that is a Chapter Nine institution enshrined in the Constitution? How do we ensure that whoever comes into power is not going to have a majority giving him – the him could even be a woman there as most of them have become so patriarchal in their outlook – the possibility to use the simple tactic of numbers and scrap these institutions that he thinks are problematic? So I think that it goes back to where we started, that we have to go back to history, that we have to go back to that very uncomfortable thing which is called mobilization. And if we have to do it again, I think we have to do it smarter, we have to do it in ways that give people an acknowledgement of the power that they have, that feminist epistemologies are more powerful when they are in fact informed and when knowledge is derived, produced and consumed by those to whom it is directed to liberate.