
Laretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* (1990) in post-apartheid South Africa – a critical rereading

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Abstract

Rereading Laretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* nearly thirty years after it was first published in 1990 proved to be a complex, rewarding experience. Setting her story of the lives of rural African women in KwaZulu-Natal during the turbulent times that include the Cato Manor protests of 1959, Ngcobo creates a world of nearly unrelieved deprivation and suffering – in a text that also offers pleasure to the reader. Such pleasure is due to the quality of the writing; Ngcobo took her craft seriously. At the centre of the tale is Jezile, a young woman. She endures much suffering, and yet the novel closes with words of defiance that are hers. Since some of her travails stem from patriarchal beliefs as well as class and race practices, the novel is an example of the intersectionality focused on by contemporary feminist scholarship. Finally, I argue that Ngcobo's stance in this novel on the retention or otherwise of traditional cultural practices is just one manifestation among others, such as interviews, of the knowledge of politics she can contribute to present day readers.

Rereading Laretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* in 2016, having last read it in the early 1990s for the purpose of writing a journal article (Hunter 1994), I again experienced intense pleasure in the novel. Yet the story focuses on the sufferings of the rural women in South Africa under apartheid, women who were among the most materially deprived of the country's inhabitants. The novel's protagonist, Jezile Majola, is one among these rural women and her life is punctuated by cruel, undeserved blows, the worst of these being the removal of two of her children by her husband in the name of offended patriarchy. Released from prison, he is told she has given birth to a third child and he fails to find out from her that the boy is the result of her being raped. Why isn't this, then, a story that repels as it traces Jezile's psychic and physical exhaustion by poverty, the relentless deprivations of the state, and the harshness of indigenous patriarchy? And how is it that this novel retains its freshness, indeed considerable relevance, in a South African publishing field that is crowded with accounts biographical and fictional of life under apartheid?

Ursula Barnett says, "Ngcobo's is the first novel to deal genuinely with the lives of rural women in South Africa" (Barnett 1992, 1). Noting Barnett's use of the word "genuinely", I attribute the novel's pleasures and freshness to its aesthetic, intellectual, and ethical aspects, among them the tale's sense of authenticity. Ngcobo is also skilful at wielding literary devices

such as plot and characterisation and the tale includes lyrical passages that successfully evoke lives lived in intimate response to weather and seasons.

The wind rose tauntingly in whirls as though it was possessed with evil intent. It flung the dust into people's eyes and drove them off course as it fought to topple their loads off their heads. When it did not succeed, it followed them into their houses and pursued them under their thin blankets, as it poured layers of dust, covering every dish, plate and cup. (Ngcobo 1990, 110)

Another source of pleasure lies in my growing realisation, as I reread, that twenty-six years ago this well-read activist and writer composed a fiction that so clearly displayed the connections and interplay between what feminist theorists and critics term the intersectionality of gender, class and race/ethnicity. Intersectionality as a concept and as an analytical tool is particularly useful in a multi-ethnic country like South Africa, since it acknowledges that subjection may be experienced in different forms, which may operate variably, in interplay with each other (See Aboobaker 2016; Chaudry 2016). The intersectionality of race, class and gender was a feature of the oppressive formations of the apartheid state, but contemporary feminist theory and practice is also concerned with the persistence of such formations in the post-apartheid period.¹ Further, in South Africa as in the United States, race has led to the dividing of feminists along ethnic lines. The very word "feminism" has been rejected by some women of colour because of its association with the domination of white middle-class women in the post-WWII women's movement (see Gouws 2017).

On the authenticity of Ngcobo's tale, claimed by Barnett, the writer grew up in the rural region she depicts, near Ixopo in KwaZulu-Natal, and, after living in South Africa for the first thirty years of her life, spent thirty years in exile, from 1963 to 1994. Her early experiences embedded themselves in her memory and imagination and, in an interview in 1993, she said that so painful to her were those lives that she was forced to postpone writing about them (Hunter and MacKenzie 1993, 102). When exile took her to London, for the first time she was free to write a work of some length and she wanted to write a fiction about the life of a rural woman, "But whenever I began to write [she] would die on me. Then I let her die" (Hunter and MacKenzie 1993, 102). She wrote instead *Cross of Gold* (1981), which followed the career of a young *male* protagonist.

Her long-term commitment to the task of writing about rural women came to fruition in 1990, when *And They Didn't Die* was published. By then her female protagonist would emerge with a fully lived life; Jezile Majola did not die, and Ngcobo was able to transmute the suffering of the women in the villages of the Sabelweni Valley into an aesthetically pleasing tale, told by an unnamed narrator whose voice is not distorted by anger or anguish. Her patience is unsurprising as Ngcobo viewed her writing as an art form, not only as a conduit

¹ Intersectionality theory and practice may be applied also when examining the categories of sexual orientation and disability as well as in fields such as the law.

for communication. “I think I always had this passion for writing”, she said, adding that she wrote “for [her] own pleasure” as well as “to tell the whole world what kind of life we were forced to live” (Hunter and MacKenzie 1993, 100, 102, 101). The narrative voice expresses sympathy for certain characters, especially for Jezile, but is not sentimental; instead the voice is clear, intelligent, informed, *controlled*. It is also mildly teacher-like (Ngcobo was a schoolteacher). In short, Ngcobo creates a highly reliable narrator. The novel also has a varied cast of characters, some of them deftly delineated, for example, Jezile’s husband Siyalo and his mother, and while the protagonist invites both our compassion and admiration as she responds with resilience to her trials, she is neither a paragon of virtue nor an emblematic “strong” woman. On the train as she travels from her village to the city of Bloemfontein – her husband is imprisoned for stealing milk for their baby and she is forced to take some paid work with a white family – the reader is told that she “wallowed in self-pity” (1990, 189); and her eventual predicament in the Potgieter household will lead to her losing control of her will and her body. She is a flawed human individual, who also is representative of the country’s rural women.

Jezile’s story is, apart from the time in Bloemfontein, rooted in the daily life of the two villages and homes between which she moves, the home of her mother and the home of her future husband Siyalo and his mother MaBiyela. Conditions are crowded in the villages, which are based in a Bantustan, or a “homeland”, areas to which women, children and the elderly were confined. These areas, peripheral to the large cities and the towns, were treated by the state as “reservoirs” of labour, with the able-bodied men being forced by taxes and other monetary costs to look for waged labour in the cities, on mines, on white-owned farms. Ngcobo extends the scope of Jezile’s representativeness, even as she sustains her focus on Jezile’s thoughts and actions, by having her protagonist interact with notable events in South Africa’s apartheid-era history. These historical events include the 1956 protests against the law that required black *women*, like their menfolk, to carry a passbook (a kind of internal passport), the Cato Manor Riots of 1960 in Durban, and the 1985–86 State of Emergency. These historically significant events take place largely as background to Jezile’s story; they are also, in the absence in the text of dates, markers of the passing of time. But they do affect her life and in the most striking example of the meshing of Jezile’s life with an historical event, when she stabs and kills a white soldier who is trying to rape her daughter, the soldier is present in the village of Luve to enforce the 1985–86 national State of Emergency. The personal and the political also mesh earlier in the novel when, missing her Siyalo, who is parted from her due to the country’s racist labour laws as well as wishing to fall pregnant, Jezile uses her pass. It enables her to visit him in Durban, and as a result she is a witness to the violent protest in Cato Manor in 1960. The novel reminds us of the length of time the poor black populace have protested, and are punished for it. A recent repeat, an especially grievous one, took place in 2012, when police killed 34 mineworkers and wounded 78.²

² This tragic event is known as “the Marikana massacre”. A thorough review of the report on the massacre issued by the state-appointed commission of inquiry, the “Farlam Commission”, can be found at <http://www.casac.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Summary-and-Analysis-of-the-Report-of-the-Marikana-Commission-of-Inquiry.pdf>. This document was prepared for the Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution (CASAC) (accessed January 29, 2017).

As early as 1992, when being interviewed for Hunter and MacKenzie (1993), Ngcobo identified the flaw in the transition settlement with the apartheid state: it granted political liberty but failed to grant economic liberty. Her political acuity also led her to speak of “the heaving masses that are moving to the cities in search of non-existent jobs”; she added:

I believe that the South African [National Party] government means a lot of what it says politically, but that it ... is not serious about economic liberation. Political liberation is not worth the paper it is written on if it does not go hand in hand with complete economic liberation for all South Africans. The way things look now it seems a few might benefit by eating alone of the fat of the land, while the masses both in the cities and in the rural areas do not have a look in. (1993, 114)

Here Ngcobo distinguishes between political and economic spheres, but in *And They Didn't Die* she also shows their intersectionality with sexism. Interviewed in 1993 while on one of the visits she made to South Africa after the lifting, in February 1990, of the banning of key liberation organisations such as the PAC (to which Ngcobo and her husband belonged) and the ANC, she drew attention to the co-existence of race and gender oppression: “In South Africa we do not have only the oppression of the blacks by the whites, but we women also have to endure the oppression of our oppressed men”, and she adds that “[t]radition reinforces this, and elevated man above woman” (Hunter and MacKenzie 1993, 102). The “whites” include white women, who are complicit in the oppression of blacks. When questioned whether their shared oppression by patriarchy raised the likelihood of feminism drawing black and white women into solidarity with each other, she bitterly rejects such a possibility:

The relationship between a white and black woman ... as a rule is completely negative. This negative attitude is something which slowly and silently consumes you, which degrades you, which diminishes and mutilates your own identity. (111)

Ngcobo wrote the novel in the 1980s, at a time when feminists were vigorously debating the ideals and practicability of sisterhood and, on this topic, Ngcobo appears to share the view of theorists such as bell hooks. hooks is an African-American scholar well known for her writing on race, class, gender and culture. Her influential text *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2014), uses the term “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” throughout the book. hooks positions racism within a comprehensive socio-economic system, and she analyses the intersectionality of the components of such a system. Her term “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” would have fitted South Africa’s apartheid state, too, and we may speculate that Ngcobo, who travelled widely to attend and speak at conferences, is basing her rejection of sisterhood on a combination of her personal experience and her knowledge of contemporaneous debates.

Ngcobo’s choice of verbs in the above quoted paragraph, “consumes”, “degrades”, “diminish”, “mutilates”, reveals her anger at how damaging the injury is that white women inflict on black women, and in her fiction she devotes considerable attention to Jezile’s experiencing, precisely, diminishment of her identity when she works as a domestic servant for a white

woman. Entering domestic service at the age of twenty-seven, Jezile is already finding life “hard and bitter” (Ngcobo 1990, 189). With her husband in jail, the crops destroyed by drought, and desperate for work that will enable her to feed her two children, she accepts the “proposition” of a Mr Potgieter, the white foreman of a local roadworks gang whose work is coming to an end, that she accompany him from Natal to his home in Bloemfontein. There she is to help his wife with their six children (188). The ambiguity of “proposition” hints at the sexual exploitation that Jezile will suffer at this man’s hands.

Mr Potgieter will exercise white power over Jezile in typically masculine ways, both protecting her and sexually abusing her; his wife asserts her white power as a female employer of a black woman, as “madam” to her “maid”. Jezile, who has lived all her life thus far in a rural village, is ignorant at first of the behaviour she is supposed to adopt as an urban domestic servant. Jezile destroyed her “pass” in solidarity with the other women in her village, when they were protesting at the requirement that black women carry passes. When Mrs Potgieter insists that Jezile must have a pass, Mr Potgieter comes to Jezile’s rescue, as he does again when his wife tries to force a punishing schedule of domestic labour on Jezile. The Potgieters dislike each other and Mrs Potgieter is resentful of her husband’s favouring of a person she deems her inferior. Mrs Potgieter’s resentment may make her an especially harsh “madam”, but her ways were also typical of how white women treated their domestic servants. She makes no effort to use Jezile’s given Zulu name, instead using a generic name, “Annie”, that denies her individuality and labels her as of the servant class, female, black, inferior. She instructs Jezile to address her as “Nonna” (Afrikaans: “young mistress”), and so to acknowledge repeatedly the other woman’s domination.

The narrator emphasises the *strangeness* for Jezile of so much of her new environment, emphasis that encourages sympathy for Jezile, while phrases that trace the growing psychological and emotional distress for her of working in this white household accumulate. Ngcobo also depicts the two women as erecting psychic and emotional barriers to their understanding of each other, despite their sharing the same space for many hours each day. Such barriers are erected, sustained, and reinforced by behaviour patterns that, due to the stratified nature of the South African social order, based as it is, obsessively so, on racism (overlying classism) have become normative for most women in the relationship of a domestic worker with her employer.

They were fast erecting barriers to map the relationship. By the next day their relationship had formalised into a distant if not hostile exchange. Everywhere Jezile turned she encountered bars that marked the limits of her humanity in that household. (200) The damage is profound.

[Jezile] had lost her name, her past, her friends and relatives, her language [only Sotho and Afrikaans are spoken in Bloemfontein; Jezile is Zulu-speaking], her initiative, and she felt she was just a shell of her real self. But more than anything she felt lonely. (201)

[I]t was human contact and recognition she longed for. (201)

Potgieter's rape of Jezile, a perverted form of "contact and recognition", is also a brutal manifestation of the interplay between racism, classism, and sexism. As a result of the assault Jezile's feelings of hopelessness and helplessness persist and grow; she lives in a state of inner conflict, and feels disempowered. Filled with shame (despite having been the one assaulted, a phenomenon found in other cultures) and knowing that her fellow villagers may suspect that she followed Potgieter in order to continue an already existing relationship, she does not return home. Then, as she realises that her having remained in the Potgieter home may be misinterpreted, "[s]lowly she began to feel part of the complicity. The cause rather than the victim of the couple's unhappiness" (206). Her resolve to resist Potgieter's persistent gifts and his sexual attentions weakens. Once pregnant, she dreads even more how her misfortune will be perceived in her village, that she will not be believed. Her intense anxiety leads to her dissociating from reality: "[T]he baby had no place among the Majolas [her husband's family] nor among the Mapangas [her family of origin]. Therefore it could not exist" (208).

When Jezile does return home, she is, as she anticipated, reviled, above all for having given birth to a "white" child, which is seen in her mother's village as a "communal catastrophe" (214). Her mother-in-law takes her into her home, but both women are excommunicated from their church, which "was a lifeline for everyone", so that "this judgement was like a death sentence" (216). To relieve her mother-in-law's suffering, she takes the two older children and Lungu, the baby boy, and returns to Luvu and her own mother. There, some years later, the unkindest cut of all befalls her: two Majola men come to claim her two older children – Siyalo, now released from prison, has returned home and custom dictates that a child belongs to its father, not its mother.

Failing to come to his wife to hear her version of how she came to be pregnant, Siyalo betrays Jezile, who had to his knowledge previously been faithful to him. In her absence, her people, the Mapangas and his people, the Majolas, "had judged her, condemned her and disowned her" (226). The Majola emissaries do not even acknowledge her presence: "custom was their guiding code – unyielding primeval adjudicators, administering primordial laws" (226). The language here is the most impassioned in the text; the author is fierce in her denunciation of this form of injustice, the assertion of patriarchal privilege taking a form so crude it precedes human-ness ("primeval", "primordial") (226). Further, the Mapanga women may rally around to comfort her because "[t]hey were there to see her through", yet they, too, "accepted the harsh execution of custom without question" (227). Men "execute", women "accept", and the alternative meaning of "execution" roils just beneath the surface (227).

For the next two years, both parents work hard and devote themselves to their children's upbringing and schooling, Siyalo in Ixopo, Jezile in rural Sabelweni. Then the protests against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction break out in schools in 1976. Lungu is shot in the back by police and paralysed from the waist down. Ndonga, one of their daughters, having been politicised at her boarding school, goes "underground" to evade the

security police. While in hiding, Ndondo secretly visits her mother, precipitating the final calamity to befall Jezile. She stabs and kills a white soldier when she discovers him raping her daughter. She hastens to go to Siyalo to tell him what has happened and exhorts him to act more boldly. Pressed hard by the agents of apartheid, they, the oppressed, must do more to protect their people, especially their girls and women. Her final words to Siyalo are: “We have to defend ourselves”. Jezile is perhaps proposing that they resort to violent methods, for Siyalo’s response is to “swing around to face her, carnage in his mind” (245).

If Siyalo had not unjustly abandoned Jezile and broken up their family, it is unlikely that she would have had to act as their daughter’s sole protector. In her non-fiction, too, Ngcobo has condemned the unfairness with which males may claim their privileges. In her essay “The Prodigal Daughter”, published in a collection that she edited, *Prodigal Daughters: Stories of South African Women in Exile* (2012), she relates some of her own experiences of exile. She and her children, “caught up” with her husband, A.B. Ngcobo, in Zambia, after following him from place to place for some months. Her husband was a leading member of the banned PAC (Pan Africanist Congress), and so a refugee from the South African government (2012, 120). In Zambia, Ngcobo and the other exiled women “began to think” how they could help those women with children they had left behind and who had husbands in prison (121). They decide to collect money for them. Their first setback emanates from the very organisation they are serving,

When we began to organise ourselves, we discovered that our own organisation was not prepared to accept us as full members of the PAC because we were women. ... [yet] inside South Africa ... [w]e had never been treated as “women”. (121)

The women adopt a different method.

When we finally realised that our relationship had changed, we quietly backed off and formed ourselves into a typical women’s group. We began writing letters to other women’s groups all over the world putting the case of the women we had left behind and tried to collect funds for their needs. (121–22)

Ngcobo’s vocabulary, carefully neutral when recounting the first outrage (“our relationship had changed”), remains superficially so when telling of the second outrage, but her contempt is manifest:

Our fund-raising efforts did not yield much, but it was substantial under the circumstances and encouraging for a start. However,... one Saturday morning ... our team got summoned to the PAC office in Lusaka. There was [Potlako] Leballo [a new claimant to the leadership of the PAC] and his new executive members. They told us that they wanted us to submit all the documents of the PAC women’s organisation to him right there and then. He wanted bank accounts in particular. Those men took all the books, went and withdrew all the money from the bank. They said they needed the money for their “forces”. (122)

In conclusion, Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* rewards rereading, first, because it is finely crafted by an artist. Jezile, her portrait sensitively and compassionately drawn, a woman without malice, is likeable and brave. Not presented as a hero despite the tragedy at the novel's conclusion, she remains representative, "real". Even minor characters are given some definition, while lyrical passages convey the rhythms and dailiness of lives dominated by weather and the seasons, and they contribute to the impression of the authenticity of the representation of this rural setting and its inhabitants.

The novel also rewards rereading because it registers important socio-economic problems which, for the most part, await resolution. The extreme differences between the lives of the wealthy and the impoverished persist, although the number of those who eat "the fat of the land" has been augmented by a new black elite. The text raises awareness of how much has been gained by political liberation – freedom of association and of movement, for instance – and, on the other hand, where the vision of the Rainbow Nation has been exposed as a mirage. There is, too, the deep satisfaction of contact with an intelligence that perceives the intersectionality of gender abuse and class and race oppression, *and*, due to talent and commitment, animates their interplay through characterisation and plot.

There is pleasure, too, in Ngcobo's nuanced presentation of gender politics. Siyalo abandons a faithful wife, shaming her but gaining two daughters; Jezile is left bereft of husband and two of her children, and she has no recourse. Ngcobo condemns such customs carried out in the name of patriarchy; they are crude, cruel, and retrograde, but, as already quoted, she said, "we women also have to endure the oppression of our *oppressed men*" (Hunter and MacKenzie 1993, 102, italics added), and Chapter 9 of the novel is devoted to Siyalo. He is missing Jezile, who is in prison, but alienation and despair derive from his loss of hope in the face of poverty, a drought, and the depleted state of the land to which black farmers have been confined. "Somehow he seemed in conflict with the whole of his world. It stood inimical to everything that was life-giving. It had spat him out" (Ngcobo 1990, 111).

Further, even though Ngcobo, in condemning Siyalo's callousness draws attention to his actions being endorsed by "tradition", she by no means proposes jettisoning all traditional customs. Some Zulu customs are in fact celebrated in the text. The Easter festival, for instance, when all the villages of the Sabelweni District participated, and people "concentrated their minds on the religious things and political problems took second place"; the entire village was then "enlivened with joy and expectancy" (221). Zulu mores are also lauded when, the survival of Jezile's children being threatened by food shortages, traditional practices of mutual help and reciprocity save their lives. The narrator says: "This way of life had systems built into it that made survival possible without the stigma of begging attached to it. Life was a shared experience" (222). The narrator says more: "Women whose concern has had to do with customs and traditions have the task to salvage what they can of our way of life", but, crucially, she completes this sentence by adding that while salvaging their heritage they should also "[dissent] strongly from those customs that they feel we have outgrown or ought to outgrow" (222).

Ngcobo's urging, via the fictional narrator, that women should dissent "strongly" when customs continue to deprive them of their dignity and their material and emotional wellbeing is valid still – especially for rural women. Traditional customs continue to retard progress for rural women, in particular with regard to the ownership and use of land, says social scientist Sharon Groenmeyer (2011):

[T]he shift from the political struggle for democracy, which dismantled the apartheid system, to the development of a more egalitarian society means that progress on gender equality made during the transition does not automatically translate into substantive gains for women. This is particularly evident in the areas of economic policy and land reform, where male privilege is more overtly threatened by the inclusion of women. (250)

Ngcobo's novel *And They Didn't Die*, written with both aesthetic skill and passionate political purpose, is a prime exemplar of a text that, whether or not the African writer was familiar with the term and its concept, reveals the intersectionality of economic injustice with that of racism and sexism. Poverty forces Siyalo to steal milk for his child, but he is poor because he is black; he is imprisoned for this minor theft because he is black. His imprisonment means Jezile must take a job in domestic service with white employers, where she is raped. Examples abound of the overlapping and interplay of subjugating forces. In October 2015, country-wide student protests under the #FeesMustFall banner, were accompanied by arson and rubber bullets. Poverty, joblessness, violence directed at women and children, and robbery, all are rife. In 1992 Ngcobo warned that "[p]olitical liberation is not worth the paper it is written on if it does not go hand in hand with complete economic liberation for all South Africans". Her warning has not been heeded.

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