



“Utterly Divided”? The feminist perspectives of Laretta Ngcobo and Olive Schreiner

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Abstract

This article compares the feminist views of Olive Schreiner with those of Laretta Ngcobo, raising questions about race, gender, intersectionality, decolonisation and the curriculum in South Africa.

In the context of contemporary debates about intersectionality and decolonisation, it is productive to consider Laretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* (1990) in relation to the writing of her South African feminist predecessor, Olive Schreiner. Although the literary output of both writers focuses on women and gender, there is a massive discrepancy in the reception of their works, their writing is vastly different on issues of race, and Ngcobo has articulated her ambivalent feelings about Schreiner. In this article, I compare key scenes in the fiction of these two South African women, one in Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* and one in Schreiner's *From Man to Man*. Both scenes involve the rape or sexual coercion of a black domestic worker by a white man, though in Schreiner's text, the scene is focalised through the perspective of a white woman, Rebekah, and in Ngcobo's novel the rape is focalised through the black woman protagonist, Jezile. As I intend to argue, juxtaposing these scenes reveals tensions between white feminism and black feminism, in South African literature and society, that have existed for more than a century. I aim to confront the following questions: What was Ngcobo's attitude to the representation of black women in Schreiner's literary output, and what relevance does Ngcobo's ambivalence towards Schreiner's writings have for debates on intersectionality and decolonisation in post-“rainbow nation” South Africa? Can Ngcobo's work be read as a response or riposte to the first edition of Schreiner's *From Man to Man* (1926), which was published posthumously and edited by Schreiner's estranged husband? To what extent could the new edition of *From Man to Man* (2015) edited by Dorothy Driver change an understanding of race and gender in this novel, and to what extent might it be relevant to discussion of Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die*? What are the main points of similarity and contrast in the work of Schreiner and Ngcobo, two South African feminist writers whose experiences were worlds apart, not only because they lived at different historical times, but also in terms of race? In this article I am not seeking to make Ngcobo's work more accessible through references to Schreiner, but rather I wish to read their work comparatively.

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