

“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.

Schreiner's literary output, and particularly *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), has been regarded as canonical in the field of South African literature. By default it has been taught in South African English departments and has appeared ubiquitously in courses on South African literature. By contrast, Ngcobo's work, including *And They Didn't Die*, which charts the difficulties faced by black women under early apartheid, has been given almost no space in the curriculum and relatively little critical attention. Without doubt, this speaks to ways in which texts by white authors have historically been privileged over black authors, in research and curricula on South African literature. The questions that arise are whose perspectives have been given prominence, and why; and who university curricula are meant to educate, and to what end. These questions become more pointed when one considers that, although Ngcobo paid a "moving tribute" to Schreiner later in her life, when she was reading Schreiner's work at university she felt "utterly divided" from it (quoted in Daymond 1999, 253). It is also interesting that the publishers felt it necessary to present the 1999 editions of Ngcobo's novel with an explanatory afterword by a white South African feminist, Margaret Daymond, presumably because they thought the novel needed to be explained and made more accessible to white readers, within the historically white-dominated field of feminism.

In her afterword to *And They Didn't Die*, Margaret Daymond speculates about the impact of writers such as Sol Plaatje on Ngcobo's ideas about land, but also claims that "[t]he novel which might have given Ngcobo the clearest indication of how a people's relationship to the land can be written is Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*" (Daymond 1999, 253). The statement is a somewhat strange one, as *The Story of an African Farm* focuses exclusively on the stories of white protagonists, with the words and deeds of black characters appearing in no more than a handful of sentences, presumably intended to convey local colour. In *White Writing*, J. M. Coetzee describes Schreiner as the great anti-pastoral writer in English, claiming that the farm space in *The Story of an African Farm* is represented as a microcosm of the greed, idleness and anti-intellectualism of settler society. Yet the novel seems to have little to offer black readers on the subject of land. Coetzee notes that in the white pastoral tradition "the black man becomes a shadowy presence flitting across the stage to hold a horse or serve a meal" and "blindness to the colour black is built into the South African pastoral" (1988, 5).

Despite being an antipastoral novel, the same critique may be leveled at *The Story of an African Farm*, with one revision: when they appear fleetingly, the black characters are most often women. The first reference to black people is as "K****rs" and appears on the first page of the novel in a description of the farm: "first the stone-walled sheep kraals and K****r huts" (Schreiner 1998, 1). After this, black women characters are referenced in passing: "A K****r girl, who had been grinding pepper between two stones, knelt on the floor, the lean H*****t stood with a brass candlestick" (1998, 39); "the wooly little K****r girl was washing Tant' Sannie's feet in a small tub" (1998, 60) etc. Though the term "K****r" should be seen within its historical context, as a word used to refer to black Africans in Schreiner's day (when parts of the Eastern Cape were named "Kaffraria"), it should also be acknowledged that it has accumulated an extremely derogatory meaning in South Africa in the twentieth

century and even more into the present, and therefore I concur with Michael Harmel: “I have no doubt that [Schreiner] would heartily have approved of the deletion of that term, with all the ugly associations it has gathered round itself, from modern editions of her works” (1955). Schreiner became a major advocate of rights for women and black people in South Africa, but she was a product of her time. In *The Story of an African Farm*, her first novel, black African characters have no agency or individual characteristics, while the “H*****t” or coloured characters possess a cheeky insolence, with an example of the latter being the woman who impudently and gleefully tells untruths in order to participate in the expulsion of the old German man, Otto, from the farm (1998, 49).

Ngcobo notes that on her early exposure to Schreiner she felt “only disappointment as I kept meeting those nameless, shadowy ‘wooly K****r maids” (quoted in Daymond 1999, 253). The novel she would most likely have encountered at university level in South Africa would have been *The Story of an African Farm*. As evidenced by *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897), where black African women are represented with agency in resisting violent colonialism, and by *Woman and Labour* (1911), where African women in pre-colonial society become the benchmark against which Schreiner measures the degradation of white women under colonial patriarchy, Schreiner’s representation of black women would become more complex later in her life. Yet, in *The Story of an African Farm* black women are mere props, and in Schreiner’s other famous novel, *From Man to Man*, the black woman is represented in an overtly negative light, operating at best as a dark mirror for the white woman.

In *From Man to Man*, Rebekah’s philandering husband, Frank, who is associated with all the worst masculine energies, eventually reaches the end of his wife’s tolerance when he has a sexual relationship with their domestic worker. Unnamed in the first published version of the novel, which was edited and compiled posthumously by Schreiner’s husband, the black woman is referred to simply as “the girl” or “the servant girl”. After Rebekah sees her husband visiting the woman’s room one moonlit night, she writes him a letter asking for either separation or divorce. She then decides to enter the servant woman’s quarters to speak with her in person, with the resulting confrontation creating dramatic tension:

Before the window on the side of her single bed the servant girl was sitting. She was half dressed:

her short black wool, with difficulty parted, was combed out to stand in two solid masses on each side of her head; her small dark face, with its puckered forehead even a little blacker than the rest, was raised as Rebekah opened the door. She had on a red-striped flannel petticoat and a pair of crimson corsets, from a mass of frilled white lace, showed her puny black arms and bare shoulders; on the bed beside her lay a white nightdress heavy with bows: on the other side lay the serge dress she was just going to put on. The girl placed a closed fist on each of her hips, and raising her chin in the air looked at Rebekah through her half-closed twinkling eyes.

“Wat wil jij hé” she said, throwing her chin higher.

Rebekah stood silent; all she had determined to say passed from her. The girl threw back her head yet farther and burst into a laugh, intended to be defiant but with an undertone of fear; all her white teeth showing between her thick dark lips, as she sat with her fists on her hips.

Then, as Rebekah looked at her, Rebekah knew that it was with that girl even as it was with her that day. (Schreiner 1926, 301, my emphasis)

Like Rebekah, the black woman is pregnant, and like Rebekah, she has been impregnated by Rebekah’s husband. But the phrase “it was with the girl even as it was with her that day” also signals a more complex mirroring. The “red-striped flannel petticoat” and “crimson corsets” are clearly not the undergarments of a respectable woman, and one of the questions that emerges is what the black woman had been given in exchange for being sexually coerced by Rebekah’s husband. In considering the representation of this woman as trading favours with the “master” for sex, that is, as a prostitute, it is also important to remember that *From Man to Man* is essentially the story of two white women, two sisters whose fates are clearly meant to be read as mirrors of each other: Rebekah is married, while her sister Bertie becomes a prostitute. Schreiner was a socialist and a friend of Eleanor Marx, so she would have been aware of the views on gender and marriage expressed in *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels, which presents bourgeois marriage as no more than prostitution:

Our bourgeois, not content with having wives and daughters of their proletarians at their disposal, not to speak of common prostitutes, take the greatest pleasure in seducing each other’s wives. Bourgeois marriage is, in reality, a system of wives in common and thus, at the most, what the Communists might possibly be reproached with is that they desire to introduce, in substitution for a hypocritically concealed, an openly legalised community of women. (Marx and Engels 1888, 25)

The mirroring between Rebekah and Bertie, and the fact that Rebekah does not consummate her relationship with the married neighbour Mr Drummond, despite her attraction to him, and despite the fact that Mrs Drummond has been having an affair with Rebekah’s husband, could be read as Schreiner’s alignment with the Marxist critique of marriage. She wanted to expose the ways in which marriage was comparable to prostitution, and did not want to write a novel in which her heroine was simply “swopped” between men. Nonetheless, *From Man to Man* focuses on white women, with the black woman in the scene above being given little subjectivity. We have to read the scene very carefully to glean anything about her that the text might be trying to convey.

As Dorothy Driver has noted, in early drafts the woman’s name was “Clartje” (Driver in Schreiner 2015, xxiv), and as explained in a footnote added by Schreiner’s husband, the phrase “Wat wil jij hé” translates literally as “What do you want?”, but “the pronoun ‘jij’ is

in Cape Dutch, the only language of the Coloured people of the West, and is the most extreme insult when applied to a superior” (in Schreiner 1926, 301). From this we can deduce that Schreiner, for whom racial categorisations were important, intended for the woman to be read as “coloured”, rather than as a black “African”. Through her speech and body language, the black or coloured servant woman emerges here as a defiant, insubordinate subject, who may be compared to the insolent “H*****t” woman in *The Story of an African Farm*. Having infiltrated the intimacy of the white home and usurped Rebekah’s place in her husband’s life, she has realised that she is in a position to inspire shock and fear in Rebekah.

Can we turn this uncomfortable scene around and read it from another angle, where the “single bed” could be read as drawing attention to the curtailment, if not historical erasure, of black and coloured women’s sexual and family life in the migrant labour system of domestic employment? Moreover, could not the woman’s “laugh with an undertone of fear” suggest her precarious and dependent position, which prompts the question of how much choice she has had in the relationship with Rebekah’s husband? Unfortunately, the text forecloses on exploring these issues further, with Frank soon finding that the woman has vanished, and that her room has been literally whitewashed, purged of her presence:

he walked to the door of the servant’s room and looked in. ... the room held nothing but a bare iron bedstead standing in the centre, and there was a strong smell of fresh whitewash. (Schreiner 1926, 307)

It is important to remember that *From Man to Man*, which Schreiner began in the 1880s and worked on in fits and starts throughout her life, was never finished by the author in her lifetime, and that both the first edition, edited by her husband, and the most recent edition, edited by Dorothy Driver, were assembled from manuscripts alongside what the various editors claim to have gleaned about Schreiner’s intentions through considering her notes, conversations, and letters. Thanks to the scholarship of Driver, we have an edition assembled from a contemporary feminist perspective, and we know that Schreiner at some point wanted to give a name to the black woman who appears in the scene analysed above, though this name does not appear in the edition assembled by her husband. Driver’s stated aim is to provide a “generous” and “hospitable” reading of Schreiner, and her choice to use the name of the black woman character in the new edition of the novel speaks to this. But the fact remains that whereas Schreiner apparently plotted out the various fates of her white women protagonists to the end, the life story of “Clartje”, the black servant woman, remains untold even in Driver’s edition, and the reader is left with unanswered questions. To what extent did Schreiner consider that “Clartje” was coerced into a sexual relationship with Frank? Did Rebekah dismiss her from her position, or did she leave of her own accord? Where has she gone? Her child, Sartje, suddenly appears in chapter twelve as Rebekah’s adopted ward, who is “treated in all ways as her own child, except that it was taught to call her mistress”. Is this meant to be a critique of Rebekah or an indication of her generosity? Does the maternal or nurturing instinct that Schreiner prized in women not exist to the same extent in the servant woman, or did Schreiner consider the pressures on black servant women such that they outweighed their ability to be mothers?

With these problems of reading Schreiner's text in mind, I now turn to the ways in which Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* rewrites, from the perspective of the black woman, Jezile, some of the issues that one finds in *From Man to Man*, and presents a radical black feminist anti-colonial critique.

Ngcobo wrote her novel in exile, due to her and her husband A. B. Ngcobo's political activities, his prosecution during the 1956 Treason Trial and his subsequent role as a founder and leader, both at home and in exile, of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). She was forced to flee South Africa to Swaziland and Zambia, before settling for twenty-five years in the United Kingdom, where she wrote *And They Didn't Die*, which was first published by Virago Press in London in 1990. A South African edition (Skotaville) appeared in the same year, and another edition followed in 1999.

As its title suggests, Ngcobo's novel tells of survival in the face of desperate odds. Despite her immense fortitude and resourcefulness, the protagonist, Jezile, remains trapped within the exploitative and crushing environment of the 1950s rural "native reserve", where the men are away – most of them, like Jezile's husband, working in the mines. As Barbara Boswell suggests, however, the novel is remarkable for its representation not only of black women's forbearance, but also for its representation of their agency and capacity for revolutionary resistance. The very first pages, for instance, show the resistance of Jezile and her friends to a white landowner who seeks to humiliate and intimidate them.

At a key moment later in the novel, Jezile is forced to seek employment in town as a domestic worker, which takes her far from home to Bloemfontein where she is hired by Mr and Mrs Potgieter. Like the majority of servant women in Schreiner's novels, Jezile is deprived of her name by Mrs Potgieter, who randomly calls her "Annie". The behaviour of her employers brings into stark focus the arbitrary power of employers over their domestic servants under apartheid (and sadly this arbitrary power continues into the present day). Mrs Potgieter is unkind to Jezile, while Mr Potgieter seemingly treats Jezile with respect by communicating with her in Afrikaans rather than in Fanakalo. He also agrees to a higher salary than his wife offers, restrains his wife from subjecting Jezile to a punishing work timetable, and brings Jezile small gifts that transform the meagerness of her "outhouse": a lamp, a table at which she can write letters to her family, and a small pocket radio. His ulterior motive, however, becomes apparent when he enters her room one night, claiming to love her, and, deaf to her protests, rapes her. Ngcobo focuses here on the physical and psychological effects of the violation on Jezile, and on her realisation that she cannot tell anyone about what has happened. Whereas in Schreiner's *From Man to Man* it is only white women, particularly Rebekah's sister, Baby Bertie, who have reputations to be damaged by gossip, in Ngcobo's novel Jezile knows that if she returns to her village her life will never be the same: "Rape is a burden to its own victim. It was as though she had wished it on herself. She could predict all the lurid gossip. They would even suggest that she followed him to Bloemfontein because she had an affair with him" (Ngcobo 1999, 205–6).

Ngcobo's story then fills in some of the gaps in Schreiner's text, foregrounding white women's role in oppression: "If [Mrs Potgieter] had not treated her so harshly Jezile would have been less well disposed towards Mr. Potgieter" (207). Whereas in *From Man to Man* it is not apparent whether "Clartje" has left of her own accord or has been pressured to leave the farm by Rebekah, in Ngcobo's novel it is clearly the white woman who sends Jezile away. As was the case with the servant woman in *From Man to Man*, Jezile discovers she is pregnant, but in a departure from Schreiner's novel, she keeps her child, whom she names Lungu (meaning "white"), and on whom she "squandered all her love" turning away a white soldier who tries to take him "to live in town like all the white children did" (1999, 228–29). The novel thus resists the narrative of *From Man to Man*, where the best imagined future for the "mixed race" child is to be assimilated into white culture. Moreover, Ngcobo's novel tells of Jezile's life after the rape, and of her protectiveness towards her children, with the novel ending on a Fanonian note of liberatory violence, by the African woman protagonist, in defence of her daughter.

Eschewing the victim status attributed to the black woman who is subjected to the "white peril", Ngcobo's novel tells of Jezile's life after the rape, inscribing the African woman within a framework of revolutionary and retributive violence described by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1969), from a distinctly black feminist perspective that is lacking in Fanon's text. In the final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon details "mental disorders which arise from the war of national liberation which the Algerian people are carrying on" (1969, 200). The first of these case studies is an account of impotence and depression in an Algerian man after the rape of his wife while she was detained by French soldiers. What is disturbing about the case study is not only the husband's pathological obsession that his wife and daughter have become "rotten" and his anger towards his wife for telling him about her ordeal, but also the turn of phrase in Fanon's text: "she confessed her dishonor to him" (1969, 205). In her husband's eyes, and in Fanon's view, the woman is somehow responsible for what has happened to her, despite the fact that she was tortured because of her husband's political activities. Fanon notes that once the man spoke about the incident, and took a decision to take his wife back, he re-entered "political discussions", his symptoms decreased, and he rejoined the anti-colonial struggle. *And They Didn't Die* presents a parallel scenario, but from the perspective of an African woman who has been raped by a coloniser, but is prepared to perform violence in order to defend her family. When the marriage between Jezile and her husband Siyalo breaks down following her violation by Mr Potgieter, it is the African woman, Jezile, who is finally afforded an opportunity for retributive or self-protective violence directed at "the towering symbol" of apartheid power. At the end of the novel, when her daughter is about to be raped by a white soldier, Jezile arrives in time to stab the attacker to death, an act that, while not freeing her entirely from oppression, nonetheless transforms her into a powerful subject and reconciles her with her husband: "Siyalo held her hands in his and whispered inaudibly ... 'Jezile life of my life'" (245). Here it is Jezile's agency, indeed, her act of defensive violence, rather than the colonised man's, that is liberating and restorative.

It is interesting to note that both *From Man to Man* and *And They Didn't Die* are marked in various ways as tributes to the respective writers' mothers, with Schreiner naming the protagonist of her novel after her mother, and Ngcobo dedicating the novel to her mother:

To my mother, Rose Gwina (nee Cele) who by example taught me to cope and to straddle contradictions, and who, above all, believes in me.

Moreover, it is also important to note that Schreiner opposed the Natives Land Act of 1913, and that Ngcobo expresses in her writing a deep awareness of the ways in which this Act played out in the lives of rural African women. In *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, Schreiner wrote of what she called "the White Peril", namely black women's vulnerability to rape by white men, on account of colonial power dynamics. Ngcobo is concerned with a similar theme in *And They Didn't Die*, where the rape of Jezile by Mr Potgieter is counterpoised by the concluding incident at the end of the novel, when Jezile is able to avert the rape of her daughter by a white man. But while for Schreiner the black or coloured woman's sexuality is either invisible, or out of place and even dangerous, in an extremely subversive and risky gesture, Ngcobo brings into focus Jezile's sexuality and sensuality by creating identification in the reader with her physical and emotional yearnings when she reaches Bloemfontein, "the town", by train: "Her body throbbed and ached inwardly, awash with longing ... She turned her thoughts voraciously on herself, squeezing her body greedily as she wondered why she had not allowed herself the privilege of these deliciously painful and unfaithful thoughts" (193). Here the writing of sexuality takes on a political dimension, as Ngcobo rescripts black women's sexuality that had been erased or demonised in earlier, white feminist representations. Perhaps this is the reason why Ngcobo felt that writing *And They Didn't Die* was part of her own personal liberation struggle. As she claimed in a discussion with Boswell:

I think my own liberation came through this book. Again, I don't know the moment, but slowly, not only in fact by the time I get to Jezile and Jezile has to go into town, you know the different little steps she takes towards her freedom? There is a point where I think there is a freedom that she grabs for herself. I think that's a snapping point perhaps not just for my character, but perhaps for me. Because by the time I came to the end of this book, I emerged a different woman. (quoted in Boswell 2015)

Note

Parts of this article are adapted from insights in Lucy Valerie Graham, *State of Peril: Race and Rape in South African Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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