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OVERCOMING THE SISTERHOOD MYTH

Fidela Fouché

Until recently both in South Africa and elsewhere there has been a general assumption that sisterhood, and therefore an effective women's movement, can be built on a supposed sharing of gender. There is now increasingly a recognition that this is to conceive of gender in a way which takes it out of its concrete context where it is intertwined with race and class. In this article I shall examine the gender/race/class relationship as one especially relevant in a country with a multiplicity of cultural, ethnic, race and class groups. I shall also discuss the divisions among women - especially those between white and black women - and the historical reasons for the divisions. In considering both of the above I shall draw upon American feminist writers' insights. Obviously the relationship between white and black women in the United States and South Africa is not identical: in the US black women are in the minority and in South Africa they outnumber white women. They are also more highly politicized both than their American counterparts and than white South African women. However, there are enough parallels to justify reference to American feminist writers as both relevant and instructive. Finally I shall attempt to show that while in South Africa the reconciling and accommodating of a diversity of women's needs and interests is being seriously tackled the process remains problematic.

The National Women's Coalition

The National Women's Coalition, made up of about 70 women's organizations and launched in April 1992, acknowledges that South African women are not a homogeneous group and that there are deep historical divisions among them. Far from assuming a commonality of needs and interests 'as women' the organizers have laid down as the Coalition's first objective the identification of women's different needs so that these may be incorporated into a Women's Charter. Simultaneously an attempt is being made to educate and raise awareness in women in order to empower them to organize and take action. There has been a recognition of the need to conduct the campaign at a local level if maximum participation of women is to be effected. To this end the NWC has set about reaching women in their different geographical areas, taking account of their different languages, racial groups, educational levels and socio-economic needs. In this way the NWC hopes to ensure that the needs of all groups of women are articulated.

The NWC is focussed essentially both on research which, through the participatory workshops, will yield empirical information about women's priorities and make possible effective action, and on a campaign to raise women's awareness. While one of the current more academic debates among women is around the merits of a women's ministry versus women's desks in a future government,¹ the NWC avoids theoretical discussion and concentrates rather on particular concrete issues like violence against women, rape and - currently - on voter education and on strategies for dealing with these. The issues dealt with in the workshops have not been the same in all the regions since priorities as to interests and needs vary from region to region.

The implicit presupposition at NWC leadership level is clearly that women's needs and interests are extremely diverse, that women cannot effectively be united 'as women' or as 'sisters', but that there can be concerted action on particular issues which concern all women, if in different ways. Nevertheless, sisterhood rhetoric continues to be used, especially at a popular level in the workshops. At a NWC workshop in Pietermaritzburg, for example, a participant said that she had learnt that 'women of all groups have the same fears, worries and responsibilities'; another spoke of 'the similarity of women's issues regardless of race'. And the conflicts between groups of women - notably white and black - are far from being submerged. Thus, while the NWC is making it possible to transcend difference as a problem, the stereotypes about sisterhood, which mask rather than transcend differences, and mystify rather than clarify, persist. The need to analyse gender in its relationship to race and class, therefore, remains, as does the need to examine the relationship between white and black women both in its historical dimension and in the ways it is being perpetuated.

The Myth that Women Share the Same Gender

Since gender - as opposed to sex, a biological given - is by definition the *meaning* given to femaleness and maleness, 'being a woman' and 'being a man' will necessarily vary from one social context to another. Elizabeth Spelman expresses the difference between sex and gender as follows: 'Women are what females of the human species become, or are supposed to become, through learning how to think, act, or live in certain ways. What females in one society learn about how to think, act and live can differ enormously from what females in another society learn; in fact ...there can be very significant differences within a given society' (Spelman, 1991:134). And indeed there can be differences within cultural groups which form part of the same society. A black domestic worker interviewed by Jacklyn Cock had obviously absorbed the white middle class concept of what constitutes being a woman when she said: 'A white woman can tell you to move a wardrobe. Because you are black she does not think you are

a woman' (1982). The domestic worker, therefore, held the white middle class stereotype of women as delicate and to be protected while for typical white employers black females were not properly women but merely robust female workers of indeterminate gender.

Far from women of all groups having the same fears, worries and responsibilities, as the Pietermaritzburg workshop participant believed, the contrary is the case: squatter women's fear that their shacks will be demolished and their possessions confiscated by the police is entirely dissimilar from the kinds of fears women in white or Indian suburbs or peaceful and settled townships have; single women of all races and classes have different responsibilities from married women who are supported by their husbands; going on strike and losing pay may be an issue for women workers but it will not arise for middle class women.

Not only do differences of gender meaning obviously militate against the formation of inter-cultural alliances on the basis of gender but the circumstances of different groups of people dictate the weight given to gender as opposed to, say, race or class. While gender oppression and sexual identity are *the* important issues for white western feminists, they are generally outweighed for black women, in the US, in South Africa and in the third world in general, by racial oppression. Angela Gilliam asks: 'what Southern African [black] woman could identify with a women's struggle that did not address the issue of the oppression of men workers as well?' (1991:221).

The Motherhood Myth

The myth of the commonality of the motherhood experience is really an attempt to concretize the sisterhood myth. Being a woman is often - especially among African women - associated with being a mother and those who aim at uniting women as sisters often appeal to women's common experience as mothers. In the 1950s protest against the issuing of passes to African women the government and the electorate were addressed in the following rather stereotypic terms, obviously in order to strike a common chord in all women: 'We speak from our hearts as mothers, as women. Life cannot be stopped. We must love and marry and find a home. We must bear children in hope and in pain. We must love them as part of ourselves. We must help them to grow, we must endure all the longings and sufferings of motherhood. Because of this we are made strong to come here, to speak for our children, to strive for the future' (Joseph, 1986:12). According to Ruth Mompati, more recently interviewed by Diana Russell, 'Working with women in the federation enabled us to realize that there were no differences between us as mothers. We were all women. We all had the same anxieties, the same worries. We all wanted to bring up our children to be happy and to protect them from the brutalities of life. This gave us more commitment to fight for unity

in our country. It showed us that people of different races could work together well' (Russell, 1989:114).

It is undoubtedly true that women of different races and classes can work together towards a common goal and that this was amply demonstrated during the roughly 12-year span of the existence of the Federation of South African Women, which, established in 1954 as part of the Congress Alliance, aimed to promote the freedom struggle. But, in fact, biological motherhood does not, any more than being female, guarantee solidarity among women. The women of the FSAW were united by their involvement in a shared project and not by common motherhood. Neither 'being a woman' nor 'being a mother' has the same meaning cross-culturally; women of different races and classes usually lack a common aim and have different loyalties and a different concept of motherhood. As Chandra Mohanty says, 'that women mother in a variety of societies is not as significant as the value attached to mothering in those societies' (1991:60). White and black women in South Africa show very different ways of being mothers: the stereotypic white mother is absorbed by her husband, home and family while the situation of black mothers in general does not similarly evoke cosiness but, rather, hardship, separation and militancy.

Given that motherhood in the West implies cosy domesticity white feminists commonly see the emphasis on motherhood as anti-feminist. For example, Julia Wells in her paper says: 'Motherism is clearly not feminism. Women swept up in motherist movements are not fighting for their own personal rights as women but for their rights as mothers' (1991:4). But in her Preface to the second edition of *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, Cheryl Walker qualifies her earlier view that women in the anti-pass campaign in defending their maternal roles were conservatively endorsing the gender relations of the patriarchal family and negating their rights as women. Thereby she invites a re-thinking of the accepted feminist view of motherhood. The association of motherhood with submission and passivity is, she shows, a feature of Western rather than of African society: black women in FSAW in identifying with their role as mothers rather than as wives were concerned with defending and protecting their children rather than with supporting their husbands or the institution of marriage per se (Walker, 1991: xxi). Albertina Sisulu's plea to white women shows an implicit recognition of this difference between white and black mothers in general: 'My approach to my white sisters is, "Our children are dying in the townships, killed by your children. You are mothers. Why do you allow your children to go to train for the army? There is no country that has declared war on South Africa. Do you want your children to come and kill our children?" Because that is what is happening. We want to know from our white sisters why there is not a word from them about this. Our children are being killed mercilessly, but what do they say? How can

they, as mothers, tolerate this? Why don't they support us?' (Russell, 1989:152). While a few white women did strenuously oppose the conscription of their sons, most did not see the safety and wellbeing of their sons as a priority but uncritically and complacently endorsed the dominant patriarchal values.² This is only one of the many instances in which many black women had a sense of betrayal by their 'white sisters'.

Black Women as 'Triply Oppressed'

The view that black women are triply oppressed follows from the conception of gender as universally the same, and it has become one of the clichés of progressive literature on black women (Hassim, 1991). Black women, it has been argued, both in the USA and in South Africa, are oppressed by virtue not only of their gender but also of their race and class, while white women are the victims only of gender oppression. This 'additive approach' simplistically assumes that black women's experience of sexism is qualitatively the same as that of white women, their experience of racism qualitatively the same as that of black men. It argues that in a sexist and racist society black women bear an extra burden when in fact it is a different burden from white women's (Spelman, 1991:123). And it overlooks both the fact of the complex interaction between the categories of race, gender and class and the logical point that if gender is a cultural construct and not a universal essence, it will be socially and culturally variable.

Chandra Mohanty in her 'Introduction' to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* emphasises that our being 'women' is constituted as much by race, class, nation and sexuality as by gender and that ideologies of womanhood have as much to do with class and race as with sex. 'Thus, during the period of American slavery, constructions of white womanhood as chaste, domesticated, and morally pure had everything to do with corresponding constructions of black slave women as promiscuous, available plantation workers. It is the intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation... that position us as women' (Mohanty, 1991:13).

The very complex interrelationship between gender, race and class is evident at various levels. In any given society not only does the gender meaning given to members of different races and classes differ but it and the race and class meanings mutually reinforce each other. Deborah King (1988:42-72) speaks of black women as being in triple jeopardy. However, racism, sexism and classism are, she emphasises, interactive rather than additive. There are not, she says, only several simultaneous oppressions but the relationships between them are multiplicative as well. King gives the following example: while under slavery white women were sexually oppressed by white males, slave women by virtue of the compounding effects of racism and classism were the sexual slaves of white men.

This means that black women's experience of gender oppression was more degrading by virtue of its qualitative difference. Although slavery is not in any literal sense any longer practised in South Africa the sexual experience of white and black women respectively at the hands of racist white men is, probably, not unlike the earlier American experience.

The exploitation of white women takes a very different form from that of black women in South Africa and elsewhere: as already noted, white middle class women have traditionally been associated with weakness and delicacy and supposedly need the protection and support of middle class white men, while black women, predominantly of the working class, on the other hand, have been seen as robust and strong workers who need the protection of neither white nor black men. Spelman quotes the black American feminist, Angela Davis's remark that 'the alleged benefits of the ideology of femininity did not accrue to the black female slave who was expected to toil in the fields for as long and as hard as the black male slave was' (Spelman, 1988:122). South African farmers similarly have made no concessions to their female rural workers' 'femininity'.

Race, class and gender act in concert both to constitute people's identities, and their aspirations: thus, upwardly mobile white working class women and some black middle class women aspire, ironically, after values like glamour and dependency - values which typify white middle class femininity and which stifle white feminist (usually middle class) women.

Women in General as Oppressed

It is said, sweepingly, that all women are oppressed as women, with the implication that women can find a common bond in their oppression. But, again, the fact is overlooked that the ways in which women of different classes experience oppression are very different. Although by Marxist standards unemployed and dependent women, however luxuriously they may be supported, are more oppressed than women dignified by financial independence, by the standards of most black women white women are far from oppressed. Indeed, white middle class women may more accurately be seen as discriminated against rather than oppressed (hooks, 1984:15).

White South African women have enjoyed both race and class privileges denied to black women, and their experience of oppression, or unfair discrimination, like their experience of being women and mothers, has differed significantly from that of black women. In South Africa as in the USA being confined in the home has been seen by some white women as oppressive while for most black women it is viewed as a luxury that they have been denied (King, 1988:72). While white middle class women have experienced the family as patriarchal and oppressive this has seldom been the experience of those black South African

women whose family life has been disrupted by migrant labour and influx control. Middle class white women are seen as being oppressed by white men in that they are demeaningly considered as being in need of protection and support, while black working class women are seen as oppressed because they are unprotected, unsupported and exploited workers. To speak of both white and black women as suffering the same gender oppression is, therefore, to gloss over important differences. As Desiree Hansson remarks (1992:37): 'The fact that black males have been extremely disadvantaged in our society has made it more difficult for black and white women to recognise their specific oppression as women. The severity of racial oppression experienced by black people under apartheid has impeded black women's recognition of their gender oppression. Similarly, due to the extreme racial oppression suffered by black men, the gender oppression of racially privileged white women has not seemed self-evident'. While a minority of white women are explicitly conscious of gender oppression, most black women experience racial oppression far more consciously than they do gender oppression. That the invocation of women's common experience of being victims of oppression by men cannot, in South Africa any more than in the United States, be an effective political rallying cry is only now being realized.

We also know only too well that women who are oppressed can also be oppressors. Rather than seeing men as the universal oppressor we should recognise that women may oppress men on the basis of race or class (King, 1988:72), and that some women are partners with men in oppression (Johnson-Odim, 1991:320-21). Black women are oppressed not only by men but also by white women and by the black middle class women who employ them as domestic workers. As Jacklyn Cock shows from her interviews with black domestic workers, many both envy and despise their employers; they envy them their easy, seemingly opulent lives, despise them for their callous indifference to their employees.

bel hooks believes that 'The feminist emphasis on "common oppression" in the U.S. was less a strategy for politicization than an appropriation by conservative and liberal women of a radical political vocabulary that masked the movement so that it addressed and promoted their class interests' (1984:8). hooks's observation is of obvious relevance also in South Africa.

Historical Differences between Black and White Women

According to dominant Western ideology, especially in the 19th century, it was the role of women 'to complete, sweeten, and embellish the existence of others' and where men were seen as 'naturally' aggressive, competitive and protective women were seen as 'naturally' passive, nurturant, and in need of protection (Stacey and Price, 1981:38). White South African women still largely conform

to this role. In traditional African pre-capitalist societies women enjoy higher status and more autonomy than in Western societies (Guy, 1990), but Western, Christian notions of motherhood with its docility and subservience to male authority had by the mid-20th century 'been grafted onto the stump of indigenous formations' (Walker, 1990:8). To what extent black women had absorbed the Western ideology of gender and to what they had retained traditional African concepts is unclear. Generally speaking, however, in spite of Westernising influences, African concepts of femininity have been different and the different political and economic circumstances of white and black women have reinforced those differences.

The policy of migrant labour, influx control, the Group Areas Act, and apartheid legislation in general, meant that the situation of most black women was not only one of far greater hardship than that of the least privileged of white women, but also qualitatively different. Many black women have had, of necessity, to develop such qualities of endurance, strength and self-reliance as have been demanded of few white women. In the process of protesting against repressive legislation they were politicized and radicalised. Walker quotes a woman who was involved in the protests against the beerhalls in Natal during 1958/9: 'They [white officials] forced us to take off our headdooks [to be photographed]. It was against our custom but we had to do it... the light got to our brains. We woke up and saw the light. And women have been demonstrating ever since' (1991:234). As Walker shows, the women of FSAW frequently violated the gender stereotypes adhered to by black men and the Westernised men of the ANC and APO showed some ambivalence towards the women activists: while they strongly supported the women's anti-pass campaigns both during 1913/14 and during the 1950s, they were disconcerted by the degree of independence and initiative shown by the women. Walker says: 'While the anti-pass campaign of 1913/14 had nothing to do with the women's rights movement then rocking the western world and to which the white suffragists looked, in defying the law as vociferously as they had, African women were looking back to a cultural tradition that had allowed women a great deal more independence and authority than western society considered either "natural" or "respectable" at the time' (1991:32). Walker shows also that in the 1956 anti-pass campaign tensions had arisen between FSAW and the ANC. The ANC regarded itself as ultimately responsible for the campaign but was divided on the best tactics to adopt. It recognised the political potential of women's rejection of passes and called for a joint campaign of men and women. FSAW, however, saw a lack of a clear lead from the men and assumed a large measure of independence (Walker, 1991:189-90). What was perceived as the 'monumental achievement' of the women in their march on the Union Buildings in Pretoria on 9 August 1956 conflicted with the deeply-held

views on the junior position women should occupy in society at large and in the national liberation movement in particular. And Walker quotes the following extract from FSAW's report on the 1958 anti-pass campaign in Johannesburg: 'The Federation awaits direction from the ANC as to the course which the anti-pass campaign will follow and requests that this direction may be given in the near future... The women await with impatience the active entry of the men in the anti-pass campaign' (1991:222).

Lilian Ngoyi, president of the ANCWL and prominent in FSAW, in late-1959 evidently concerned at the women's perception of the indecisiveness of the ANC, in a struggle which was after all part of the struggle of the African people, said: 'The impression seems to be gaining ground that the women are courageous and militant whilst the men are frightened and timid, this idea is harmful to the internal disputes and harmony [which] should now exist' (Walker, 1991:229-30). It is true that the white women of the Black Sash also defied the gender stereotypes. Walker writes: 'The sight of white, middle class women well-dressed, well-spoken, well-behaved - demonstrating against the government outraged many of its supporters. Frequently the women were exposed to verbal abuse and threats of violence. Not only were they defying the government, they were also defying a set of unwritten rules about what was seemly and proper conduct for women' (1991:174). But the Black Sash has been a small and unrepresentative organization of white women.

Historically, little sense of sisterhood or commonality has been forged in this country. The suffragists of the early part of the century did not seek the enfranchisement either of black men or women and indeed did not pursue the franchise for white women with any great militancy. Walker says: 'Compared to the suffrage campaign being waged by Emily Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union in England, the South African campaign was a timid and decorous affair' (Walker, 1991:21). When, finally, in 1930 white South African women gained the vote this success seems to have been due less to the efforts of the women themselves than to Hertzog's desire to slash the proportion of black voters in relation to white voters in the Cape. Walker further comments: 'Although the demand for the enfranchisement of women was an explicitly feminist one, the suffrage movement was a racist movement that ignored three quarters of the women in the country... It was an attitude that would characterise the bulk of white women's organizations throughout the twentieth century' (1991:24). The anti-pass campaigns received very little support from non-African women. When through the Nursing Act of 1957 segregation was introduced into all aspects of the nursing profession white women did not protest.

The mass of white women have shown ignorance of and indifference to the situation of black women. Helen Joseph, says of the women at a 1954 FSAW

conference who spoke from the floor: 'I wish that the hall could have been filled with housewives from white suburbs to hear them [the women speaking from the floor, describing their pitiful homes and their inability to meet any increase of rent]. But it wasn't, nor was the Federation ever able to attract more than a handful of white women from the Black Sash or the Liberal Party to attend its conference. Our identification with the ANC and the liberation movement saw to that' (1986:6). Hilda Bernstein confirms that the white women of South Africa, have not, except in small numbers, associated themselves either with the national liberation struggle or with the powerful women's movements. She cites as the exceptions the Black Sash, women in academic research and FSAW's small white membership (Bernstein, 1985:12).

Black women involved in the liberation movement seem to have shown a greater readiness to make overtures to white women than vice versa. Joseph quotes a spokesperson of the ANCWL commenting on Black Sash protest against the removal of Coloured voters from the common roll: 'The white women did not invite us to join their protest... but we must go to the Union Buildings ourselves to protest against the laws which oppress us and we shall invite the white women to join us'; and further, 'There was little response from the white women other than those who were affiliated members of the Federation. However, we had obeyed our mandate, we had invited them, and a few did come' (Joseph, 1986:10). Certainly, Dora Tamana, National Secretary of FSAW during the 1950s, seems to have abandoned the attempt to involve white women in resistance by the time her banning order had expired in 1981. This is evident from her call addressed exclusively to oppressed and dispossessed women:

You who have no work, speak,
You who have no homes, speak,
You who have no schools, speak,
You who have run like chickens from the vulture, speak,
Let us share our problems so that we can solve them together
(Joseph, 1986:204).

The Relevance of the Category of Neo-colonialism to South Africa

Dabi Nkululeko, in her vehement attack on 'colonial' women who presume to research indigenous women, raises an important point, namely, that the overcoming of apartheid will not necessarily bring with it the exclusion of 'colonialism', class exploitation and sex oppression (1987:97). Indeed the beginning of the conquest of apartheid will mean beginning to be able to confront the less crude and blatant forms of exploitation and oppression. It will also mean the active liberation or 'de-colonising' of themselves by oppressed and exploited people.

In South Africa it is often claimed that we have the coexistence of first and third worlds and that South Africa is currently struggling to emerge from apartheid which is a form of colonialism. On the one hand, we have the predominantly white owners of capital, dispensing first world technology, adhering to 'Western' values, supposedly upholding Western standards; and, on the other, the larger numbers of predominantly African black, poor, disenfranchised, landless people. Admittedly there are classes of people in South Africa who do not strictly fit into either category. But the first world/third world model remains applicable to South Africa and the discussions of colonialism or 'neocolonialism' by such writers as Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty are highly relevant.

In what is, strictly, a post-colonial era, the term 'colonialism' is used in an extended, metaphorical sense. Mohanty shows that the term 'colonization' has come to denote phenomena ranging from exploitative economic exchange to 'the production of a particular type of cultural discourse about what is called the "third world"'. This discourse treats of third world women in an essentialist way, sees them as homogeneous rather than as heterogeneous, views them abstractly, rather than as 'real material subjects of their collective history' (Mohanty, 1991:53). Her broad definition of 'colonialism' as implying 'the relation of structural domination and suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question' (Mohanty, 1991:52), generally concurs with Spivak's account of 'neo-colonialism' (Spivak, 1991:220). According to Spivak, 'neo-colonialism' in one of its manifestations takes the form of a 'benevolent multi-culturalism', which 'understands' foreign cultures in a superficial way, but overlooks the heterogeneity of third world people (1991:226). Some white American feminist writings discussed by Mohanty are guilty of this colonial attitude in that they represent a composite, singular 'third world woman' (Mohanty, 1991:53), the 'essential' third world woman, instead of taking account of third world women's diversity - their differences of class, ethnicity, their different interests, needs and goals. South African white middle class 'liberal' women, like first world women elsewhere in the world, tend to see black women as a homogeneously underprivileged mass - childlike, backward, oppressed, exploited, passive - to whom they benevolently extend their largesse and expertise. An article by Robert Lacville entitled 'A coil in the baby machine' (*The Guardian Weekly*, Jan 15-21, 1993) satirises first world feminist assumptions about third world men and women. 'Cathy' who promotes family planning, 'is a caring White Liberal, into Women's Rights and Choice and Equal Opportunity, and various other post-colonial ideologies which our culture likes to thrust down African throats'; she is full of indignation at what seems like a chauvinist conspiracy against Ibrahim's wife's practising birth control. But her stereotype of the African male as insisting on unrestricted paternity is shattered when it turns out that it is his wife herself

who wishes to add to the eight children she already has and who foils Ibrahim's attempts to persuade her to accept sterilization.

Angela Gilliam calls the tendency to absolutise the first world perspective on the third world an intellectual neo-colonialism which she links with a latent racism. She cites white feminists' tendency to focus on the 'savage customs' of supposedly backward African and Arab cultures and quotes Nawal el Sadaawi's comment that Western women often go to the Sudan and 'see' only clitorodectomy, but never notice the role of multinational corporations and their exploited labour (Gilliam, 1991:218).

White feminists who deplore the oppressiveness of indigenous patriarchies often seem oblivious of the fact that they are sometimes beneficiaries of exploited third world women's labour.

Gayatri Spivak emphasises another, related, danger of essentialism, which the *Guardian Weekly* story also illustrates: laying claim to a possible grasp of essences, of things as they really are, implies that the knowing subject is sovereign in the sense of unaffected by her social, cultural, and historical situation; impartial, untainted by 'ideology', she supposedly has immediate access to her object of investigation and, as privileged and articulate, she is supposed capable of 'speaking for' the 'subaltern', the inarticulate, oppressed person, 'representing' that person's reality in an unmediated way - as 'Cathy' presumes to 'speak for' Ibrahim's wife, without consulting her. Since, however, reality cannot be represented from a position that transcends all historical and cultural perspectives, ill-informed attempts to 'speak for' will seem arrogant and will militate against unity instead of promoting it. Women's conferences involving white and black South African women have provided ample evidence of resentment against white researchers who seem to claim unjustifiably to 'represent' or 'speak for' their oppressed sisters. But far from believing that intellectual women - of whatever colour - should, therefore, abandon all attempts to articulate the situation of subaltern black women Spivak concludes that since the subaltern is not equipped to speak for herself it is indeed the task of intellectual women to represent her; an important prerequisite is that the intellectual 'unlearn her privilege' (1987).

'Unlearning privilege' to the point of earning the right to speak and to be heard can be achieved - arduously - by undertaking the relevant language and other programmes of study and at the same time a "historical critique" of her own position as an investigator (Spivak, 1990:62-3).

While third world women cannot be said to 'colonise' first world women in that they do not yet speak from a position of power, it is clear that the tendency to essentialise is not a first world prerogative. Black South African women have seen white women as uniformly condescending, exploitative and objectifying of

black women; pampered as to their life-styles; oppressed and economically dependent on their husbands (Nkululeko, 1987:88-106; Funani, 1992: 63-68).

'White solipsism'

Among privileged white people, in South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, there is a tendency to what Adrienne Rich calls snow-blindness or 'white solipsism', the tendency to 'think, imagine and speak as if whiteness described the world' (1980:299). Rich further describes white solipsism not as 'the consciously held *belief* that one race is superior to all others, but a tunnel-vision that simply does not see non-white experience or existence as precious or significant, unless in spasmodic, impotent guilt-reflexes, which have little or no long-term, continuing momentum or political usefulness...'. White South Africans, like white Americans, are vulnerable to this tunnel vision which is well illustrated by a statement like the following: 'Men and women are taught to see men as independent, capable and powerful; men and women are taught to see women as dependent, limited in abilities, and passive' (Spelman, 1991:119). This white solipsism or tunnel vision, which absolutises a particular view or set of views is obviously essentialist, generalising where the perspectivism of a particular view should be recognised. Spelman comments that in the quoted statement both black men and women are ignored since in fact no-one is taught to see black men as independent, capable and powerful or black women as dependent, limited in abilities and passive. On the contrary black American men are seen as powerless and black women have stereotypically been seen as matriarchs or whores. In South Africa, as we have noted, black women have not been seen as in need of protection. And when it is claimed that women have been put on a pedestal, black women are overlooked: no-one has ever put them on a pedestal. But often the existence of black men is acknowledged and that of black women overlooked. In the phrase 'blacks and women' 'blacks' means 'black males' and 'women' means 'white women' (hooks, 1982:144). We have a striking local example of a momentary lapse into white solipsism in a recent issue of *Cosmopolitan* (Jan 1993:16) which contains an interview with a white member of the Women's National Coalition. The interviewee is sensitive to, and well-informed about, issues relating to black women, but she slips - startlingly - into saying: '... affirmative action for women will lag far behind affirmative action for African people'. 'Women' presumably refers to 'white women' since black women have been absorbed into 'African people'.

White guilt

Adrienne Rich also warns - instructively for white South African women -

against white guilt feelings which can be a part of white solipsism, if they lead only to a preoccupation with our own feelings to the extent of preventing us from connecting with the experience of others. Guilt feelings, she says, paralyse, and paralysis can become a convenient means of remaining passive and instrumental (Rich, 1980:307). Gayatri Spivak tells of a young white 'politically-correct' male in her undergraduate class who says: 'I am only a bourgeois white male, I can't speak [concerning third world people]'. Spivak's response is: 'Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced? Then you begin to investigate what it is that silences you, rather than take this very deterministic position - since my skin colour is this, my sex is this, I cannot speak' (1990:62-3). Ann Russo similarly challenges white feminists to arouse themselves from guilt-induced inertia: 'We, white feminists must learn to listen to the anger of women of color and be similarly outraged by racism, rather than guilty, and to recognise that we are not powerless in outrage, particularly as white women... our guilt and feelings of hopeless responsibility lead many of us to passivity and/or defensiveness, both of which maintain our position of power'. She concurs with Rich and with Spivak when she judges that to say 'I won't criticize' is salving one's conscience and allowing oneself not to do any homework (Russo, 1991:308). It is precisely by opening ourselves to the experiences, histories and cultures of others and thereby gaining understanding of those others and simultaneously of ourselves that both guilt and distance can be overcome.

Black Anger

A source of black women's anger in South Africa which has gained expression at conferences and workshops has been against white academics use of technical jargon which has made them incomprehensible to the uninitiated. While such anger is obviously sometimes justified, this is not invariably the case. Spivak, in the context in which she speaks of the possibility of 'unlearning one's privileged discourse so that one can be heard by people who are not within the academy, adds that this 'is very different from clamouring for anti-intellectualism' in the sense of 'a complete monosyllabification of one's vocabulary...' (1990:57). And bel hooks likewise criticizes a tendency to anti-intellectualism. She recognises that this tendency is psychologically very understandable: since most women have been deprived of access to the means of acquiring a critical and analytical understanding, they feel insecure about intellectual work and fear a grappling with new ideas and information; this may lead them a tendency to 'put down' intellectual work.

By dismissing theory and privileging organization work, some women of color are able to see themselves as more politically

engaged where it really counts. Yet by buying into this dichotomy between theory and practice we place ourselves always on the side of the experiential, and in so doing support the notion (too often fostered by white women) that their role is to do the 'brain' work, developing ideas, theories, etc. while our role is either to do the 'dirty' work or contribute the experience to validate and document their analysis... We must actively struggle to rid the feminist movement of its anti-intellectual bias. We must continue to criticize meaningless intellectual work and promote the kind of study and scholarship that is itself a feminist praxis (hooks, 1984:113-4).

Besides anger at the use of esoteric jargon black women have expressed resentment against white women's assuming an understanding of black women's problems, needs and aspirations. This resentment is sometimes justified - as I suggested under the heading, *Neo-colonialism*. But it is not always so. In South Africa there has been sweeping condemnation of white academics' research of third world women, by, for example, Dabi Nkululeko (1987) and by Lumka Funani (1992). Hassim and Walker have challenged the claim that only black women should research the women of their race, which, 'if taken to its logical conclusion... invalidates the entire research process' (Hassim and Walker, 1992).

The Way Forward?

The National Women's Coalition (NWC) is a transitional organization which was created with a limited lifespan and limited aims. Initially formed for a year its existence was extended until the end of 1993, or for as long as it takes to achieve its aim of identifying the issues affecting women so that those issues can be brought forward and taken account of in the constitution-making process. The NWC will, if successful, also have brought an awareness and acceptance of the diversity of women's interests and will, thereby, have introduced an element of realism into women's politics in South Africa. The question is: can the NWC achieve all of this in so short a space of time?

With the dissolution of the NWC the truly formidable task will remain of ensuring that women's issues are acknowledged by the various political parties and that they maintain visibility. It has been emphasised, for example, by Gill Noero of Multi-Party Talks that women can gain a role in the negotiating forum only by lobbying their political parties and acting through them; but Noero also stresses the need for united action by women, the development of alliances, and an attempt to gain public visibility for women, by mass action, if necessary. Cathi Albertyn believes that political parties might well think they can safely drop the gender issue once the election is won and that only a strong and diverse voice

outside of the parties will be able to give us equality in a new South Africa.³ Whatever the difference on whether women can profitably work through their political parties, there is concurrence on the need for building a strong women's movement.

There is still a tendency, given the lack of solidarity hitherto achieved among women, that women delegates to negotiations will identify with their party rather than feel themselves accountable in the first place to other women. This is strikingly illustrated in Thenjiwe Mthintso's anecdote in *Speak* (July, 1993). On the ANC-SACP Alliance's insistence that there should not be a complete absence of women at the multi-party talks, a compromise was reached and each delegation to the talks was made to include at least one woman. When the new round of talks started women demonstrated outside the World Trade Centre because they felt that one woman in each team was not enough to represent women at the talks to decide on the future of South Africa. 'While the women were demonstrating, the delegations started to arrive. Among them were the women who had now been included in each of the 26 delegations. As some of these "ladies" walked past the demonstration, they turned up their noses at the protesting women, as if they saw them as the riff-raff of society... and [as if they] had no idea that the only reason they were there at all was because of the campaigns of the women waving placards outside the World Trade Centre. They swept past like typical madams'. Later in the talks a Conservative Party delegate attacked the Alliance branding them as terrorists. Then 'apparently for reasons of affirmative action' a CP woman delegate was allowed to speak and she immediately continued the attack on ANC-SACP 'terrorists'. The story ends as follows: 'A National Party delegate wrote a note to the SACP. It said: "You see! The SACP wanted women in negotiations. Now you have your victory". What does "sisterhood" really mean in South Africa today? Who do the women now in the talks really represent? Many are loyal to their parties, not to women. And many of those parties are not gender-sensitive at all. So can we really say that women are represented in the talks?' (*Speak*, July 1993).

This anecdote underlines the importance of building a women's movement. But the formation of a women's movement will - inevitably perhaps, given our history - continue to be hamstrung by a lack of solidarity among women. Rivalry among women and the tendency to the kinds of attitude Rich called 'white solipsism' and 'white guilt' on the part of white women and the anger which has been felt by black women will not magically disappear. It will be necessary to forge an *informed* feminism in South Africa which will be more likely to transcend conflicts and differences. Annemarie Van Niekerk says that 'South African feminism needs... to develop a historical-contextual approach with the emphasis on the different kinds of gender oppression in the country'. She adds,

'This is necessary to ensure that it is not dismissed as a middle-class affair centered on the privileges of money and education; or as a capitalist instrument aimed at dividing the working-class ... (1991). A feminism that emphasises the different kinds of gender oppression is obviously one that will have made the sisterhood concept outdated - unless we adopt the redefinition of sisterhood offered by Rahmat Omar of COSATU at the recent conference on Women and Political Action at UNISA as 'the acknowledgement of women who hold other views'.

Such a feminism will need to take its inspiration at least in part from the resistance to oppression offered in the past especially by black women. Julia Wells in her paper, to which I referred above, in discussing motherism, expressed the stance of Western feminism when she said: 'Motherism is clearly not feminism. Women swept up in motherist movements are not fighting for their own personal rights as women but for their rights as mothers' (1991). For us, however, the question is: do feminists by definition fight 'for their own personal rights as women' or does this define a specific kind of feminism, namely, liberal feminism? Motherist movements which defy oppression of all kinds, including patriarchal oppression, are more likely to inspire a feminism which will be effective in South Africa than would be the liberal feminism espoused by most first world feminists, which seeks equality with the patriarchy rather than social justice.

NOTES

1. This was one of the debates at the UNISA Centre for Women's Studies conference on Women and Political Action in June 1993. Representatives from the Centre for Human Rights Studies (University of Pretoria), the Democratic Party, the ANCWL, the National Party, and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (Witwatersrand University) participated in the panel discussion on the desirability of a Ministry for Women's Affairs.
2. Admittedly, one may speculate that there would have been more white maternal resistance to a black patriarchy. It is worth noting, however, that black women's behaviour often flouted black patriarchal expectations and that black women often showed a stronger and more consistent defiance of political oppression than did black men (Walker, 1991:32).
3. Gill Noero of Multi-Party Talks and Cathi Albertyn of the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (Witwatersrand University) were speakers at the conference on Women and Political Action at UNISA on 5 June 1993.

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