

6 Women in uprising and transitional processes: an introductory note

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During uprisings, revolutions and times of conflict, women always walk a very thin tightrope between empowerment and disempowerment; they are forced into positions of responsibility that only the day before were unthinkable and they take up leading roles to guarantee social survival and the future, but this does not guarantee that once the ‘revolution’ is over, their new power will be acknowledged.

Times of upheaval can be times of hope, but also of death, destruction, and mourning, in which rights are suspended and old rules are broken. These times are in all senses ‘exceptional’ times. When they eventually come to an end and some sort of new ‘order’ is established, women’s participation in bringing about that newness tends to be overlooked, to be seen as ‘exceptional’ as the times that produced it, as extra-ordinary, anomalous. From there, the step to the restoration of old roles for women and to disempowerment is very short, and so women need to start re-negotiating again, to denounce the complicity between the post-conflict present and the status quo and re-organize a vindication of rights and status.

I want to focus briefly on the meaning of this tightrope, this crucial empowerment/disempowerment dialectics in historical moments of political transition for women, during and after uprisings and wars, by referring to one historical experience that I have followed closely, and that has come back to me in the

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form of questions for today's work. The great event is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of the late 1990s².

Years ago I worked on the testimonies of the South African women who stood before the Human Rights Violation Committee during the TRC's special hearings that were held in Johannesburg on the 28th and 29th of July 1997³. Hundreds of victims testified, above all women, and what was striking about these women's testimonials was that they were able to disclose what had happened to family or community members but were reluctant to talk about what had happened to them. Special hearings were thus organized to encourage women to discuss their life experiences as women under apartheid. They were called upon "to speak as actors, as active participants and direct survivors of the violation of human rights [...] as themselves, those that directly suffered" (Mtintso, 1997). A representative of the Federation of Transvaal Women highlighted how women in South Africa "deserve to be counted among those who have played a role. Not as wives, not as mothers, but as women, but as citizens of this country and as leaders" (Makoyane, 1997). The emphasis was clearly on recovering the women's perspectives and their roles, not only as victims but also as social actors. The hearings allowed for the various degrees to which women's identity was cancelled to come to light: from intimidation and forms of psychological pressure to annihilation through violence and torture.

Sheila Masote, daughter of the late Zeph Mothopeng, President of the Pan African Congress from 1986 to 1990, strayed from the expectations of the Committee, which had been appointed to hear about 'gross' violations of human rights, when she took the stage and vindicated her own negated self:

2. As explained in Oboe (2007), "[t]he South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was called into existence in July 1995, after intensive negotiations between the African National Congress (ANC) and the National Party (NP). The mandate of the TRC was enormous: it was required to establish as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights which were committed during the period from 1 March 1960 to 10 May 1994; it was asked to suggest ways of repairing past wrongs and, under certain conditions, it was allowed to grant amnesty to apartheid perpetrators. In order to achieve these ambitious tasks, three committees were put into place: the Committee on Human Rights Violations (HRVC), which held public hearings where people could testify about past abuses; the Amnesty Committee, which considered applications for amnesty; and the Committee on Reparation and Rehabilitation, which recommended policies to the government regarding reparations for the victims of apartheid" (p. 72).

3. TRC Women's Hearings: <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/#wh>

“On the programme it says I’m here to speak about – on behalf of the family. No, that is not what I am here about. [... Y]es, I’m part of the family, but I refuse to be family and have no identity as Sheila. The problem that I have always suffered and I have always said to myself is that I don’t seem to be having an identity like belonging to me. I’m always either Zef’s daughter, Mathopeng’s daughter or Mike Masote’s wife. Or no, Masote’s mother and Zef Masote’s mother. But no, I feel I am me. And this is why I am here” (Masote, 1997).

We gather from her stand that the TRC, alongside post-apartheid South Africa, was hardly able to offer women a proper forum, and that what it expected of them did not really coincide with what women wished or needed – new identities, new roles, new rights, which not even one of the most enlightened constitutions in the world could guarantee, unless culture changed. As stated in Oboe (2007),

“[d]espite the framing of equality and sympathy, which was at the core of the TRC, forms of social, cultural and gender inequality did get into the proceedings, which were uneasily located between past horrors and present dreams of reconciliation and justice. The women’s voices came out as quite ex-centric in relation to both” (p. 63).

The questions that this reference to the TRC women’s hearings triggers for me are the following: is it possible to spell out the ways in which a gendered culture may be formed, or has formed in Syria?

What is the process that will lead the majority of Syrian women to be ‘themselves’ rather than someone’s daughter/wife/mother? I am asking this because taking away women’s rights, identities, and presences is still a widespread occurrence in our unbalanced world, and we need to be watchful.

A relevant example is the predicament of women candidates during the Palestinian municipal elections of 2016, announced on the 23rd of June 2016, and repeatedly suspended (Ma’an News Agency, 2016). These were to be the first elections in all of the Palestinian territories since Hamas’ takeover of the Gaza Strip in

2007. In the fraught process leading up to the vote, the exclusion of female candidates' names from campaign materials ahead of municipal elections in the West Bank and Gaza sparked a new focus on women's civil rights in Palestinian society. In some areas, women could only register and appear as candidates in the election lists as the sister/wife/daughter of some brother/husband/father, and their face could not be shown, no picture exhibited. However, the fact did not go unnoticed. News that election materials from villages near Hebron and Jenin excluded women's names (MEMO, 2016) caused an outcry on social media, birthing the Arabic hashtag "Our names should not be covered"⁴. Women took to Twitter and Facebook using the hashtag to say they were proud to put their names to their achievements, as well as those of their mothers, sisters, and daughters (McKernan, 2016). Apparently, many men did the same. The incident resonated with Palestinians, and the Central Election Commission said that the papers in question were illegal, since women are entitled to full political participation under Palestinian law.

I do not wish to conflate Syria and Palestine, but stress that patriarchy takes many forms, some more vicious than others – it may take away the subaltern woman's name and the subaltern woman's face exactly when some speaking position is apparently achieved or allowed.

One last reflection: thinking about the role of women in the Syrian uprising has made me go back to the meanings and the shapes of women's culture in relation to religion and nation.

Do you remember the scene in *The Battle of Algiers* (DZ/I 1966, dir. Gillo Pontecorvo) which is taken up as an echo in *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (UK 1996, dir. Isaac Julien)? A veiled woman in Algiers, during the late '50s, in the years that saw the confrontation between Algerians and the occupying French colonial power, smuggles a gun through a French checkpoint, and she then hands it over to a member of the French Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) who kills a colonial official at a coffee table in the centre

4. <https://goo.gl/JQ4y3B>

of town. *The Battle of Algiers* reflects Fanon's arguments about the veil and violence as a justified means of anti-colonial struggle in quite a complementary way, while Julien's film takes a more critical stance towards both issues.

In the case of the veil, Pontecorvo is following Fanon's example, stressing its significance related to cultural independence from the French occupier. Accordingly, in another scene of the film, while the female FLN members prepare for the guerilla bomb attack they will carry out in the French quarter, they look uncomfortable taking off their veil and transforming their appearance into a Western one. It does not seem to be a pleasant or emancipatory act for them, as the French/Western discourse would argue. Maintaining their cultural heritage is represented as a virtue, and the veil as not oppressive, because they are shown as equal to and respected by the male FLN members.

In the film *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* the appropriation of the veil as a tool to hide and transport weapons and explosives is shown by means of a quotation from *The Battle of Algiers*. In both films, thereby, a critique against the Eurocentric perspective on the Muslim woman as obedient and passive is deconstructed. To Stuart Hall, who serves as a commentator in Julien's film, the women serving the FLN 'could turn the veil against its meaning'. Still, Julien uses the mentioned scene of transformation from veiled to unveiled from *The Battle of Algiers* in order to criticize Fanon's and the film's concept of the veil.

So my third and last question would be: What is the role of religion (and the veil) in this process of emergence of women out of patriarchal control and towards gender equality?

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